

# Pour, Oh Pour The Pirate Sherry (By Robert Bee)

The moonlight shimmered on the ruined chapel, revealing snatches of gothic windows and tombstones. For a tantalising moment it seemed so real until, with a wave of the conductor's baton, it all returned to cardboard and paper-mache wizardry and the second act of "The Pirates of Penzance" had begun. A pensive General Stanley was surrounded by his bevy of not-so-beautiful daughters while the beautiful Mabel tried to tend her father's melancholy mood.

For a full dress rehearsal, the performance by the South Brighton Gilbert & Sullivan Society was going exceptionally well. There had been no fluffed lines, sets and props had performed beyond expectations and the orchestra of fifteen had outdone themselves. It almost sent alarm bells ringing about the unlikelihood of a repeat of this standard at the coming opening night.

Jack Hobden, the production's Director, surveyed the small theatre with pride. While intimate in size, with worn yet comfortable seats for only one hundred patrons, it exuded character and, in conjunction with the superb sets and props, captured the essence of the 19th century drama, if that's how one might describe a G&S musical, unfolding on the stage.

Jack sank into his center back row seat to enjoy his favourite song from the play. The oboe grunted out the rhythmic march and onto the stage, resplendent in blue uniforms, bobby hats and black fibre-glass batons plodded the troupe of ten policemen, lead by their gallant and extravagantly mutton-chopped sergeant.

Marking time in straight formation, they broke into the chorus:

*"When the foeman bares his steel, Tarantara, tarantara!"*

The harmony of tenors and basses was glorious and then Mabel and Edith joined in with the foreboding:

*"Go, ye heroes, go to glory..."*

On it went, a most rousing and boisterous chorus of danger, bravery and glory. Jack leaned his head back and closed his eyes to enjoy the performance, picturing every choreographed movement they would make. In such a small theatre, the acoustics were striking and Jack could feel himself being lifted from his seat with the emotion of it all. For a moment, his stomach seemed to twist inside-out and as the final tarantara faded, he felt a small emotional jolt as he seemed to settle back into his seat's cushion.

"Bloody well done..." he started to shout, then suddenly realized Steven Crowe, playing Frederic, hadn't come in on cue with his line "Now the pirate's lair..." The first missed cue for the evening. He opened his eyes and was puzzled by what he saw on stage. Everyone was still in position, some even in half-stride but all were looking off-stage into the audience area with what could, at its kindest, be described as maniacal stares. Very maniacal stares. A few were rubbing their stomachs as Jack had a strange urge to do. Leanne Scott, playing Edith, looked, if Jack didn't know better, as if she was about to scream. Jack was wrong. Edith did scream. Piercingly. Then she fainted into Frederic's arms.

"What the hell is going on here?" Jack shouted as he stood, then stopped abruptly, aware for the first time that he was not alone in the audience seats. All the seats were occupied, and all the occupants had turned their gaze upon him.

Jack found himself the subject of 99 pairs of eyes – no, make that 297 eyes as Jack's nervous examination of the occupant of the seat directly in front of him revealed that that... person... like all the others, had three eyes.

It was hard to know which eye or eyes to meet, the two adjacent green egg shaped eyes, or the red semi-circular eye above them, the one that kept blinking at him.

"Look," said Jack to the red eye beside him, "how did you get in here? This is a closed rehearsal." It was the only rational question he could think of at that insane moment.

The owner of the red eye stood and turned to fully face Jack. Jack wished that it hadn't. "To whom are you addressing that question?" it asked in a voice like the sound of the tumbling balls in the Lotto barrel.

"To whom? To whom?" Jack was so taken aback with the precise grammar, that he almost failed to notice the appearance of the questioner below the eye. Almost, but not quite. The two metre tall body, the long six fingered gorilla-like arms, the blue-gray plated skin bearing numerous green scars, a pulsating bellows-like orifice in the center of the chest and a necklace of mango sized skulls hanging from what Jack assumed was its neck. It was hard not to notice. Oh, and a wicked ray-gun type weapon attached to its modesty belt. Jack wondered why a creature so large and threatening in appearance worried about modesty and didn't carry two weapons, then realized it did. The second was in the creature's hand, aimed at the point between his eyes.

Clearly, the cast on stage and the orchestra noted the same features in the other ninety eight audience members as they snapped from their fugue and initiated a screaming exit stage left, right and through the backdrop in the middle, Frederic and the police sergeant chivalrously carrying the still fainted Edith between them. Jack's immediate impulse to follow them was tempered only by the 99 hulking bodies between him and the stage and the ray gun, or whatever it was, pointed at his head by a very steady six fingered hand.

His disappointment was short lived, however. Before Jack could frame his next question to his blue-gray neighbour, the entire cast came staggering back on stage, some looking slightly greener than when they had left. Peter McIntyre, the Pirate King, was looking very unregal, his tears competing with his sweat to run down his greasepaint makeup and drip from his chin. "There's nothing there, Jack," he croaked. "Nothing."

Not taking his eye off the muzzle of the weapon, Jack said "What do you mean nothing, Peter. Nothing where?"

"Outside, dammit" snapped Peter. "We opened the back stage door, and there was nothing. Just blackness."

"Actually," drawled Ken Burton, the police sergeant, "that's not quite correct. There were stars. Lots of stars."

"For God's sake, Ken, how can you be so calm about this?" snarled Peter.

"Easy. This is all just a dream, and I shall awake from it soon, so what's to get excited about?" Ken sat down on the stage, rolled over into the fetal position, placed his thumb in his mouth and started to suck, silently.

Jack forced his attention from the hysterics and human chaos on stage and turned to the weapon bearer. "Ah, I believe I was addressing that question to you." He forced himself to sit down, slowly. "And allow me to rephrase it. Who the hell are you, and where in blazes are we?"

"How nobly put," the Lotto balls burbled. The creature holstered its weapon and sat beside Jack, the theatre seat groaning under its weight. "Where the blazes you are in, or more accurately under, our valiant ship Incandescent Conflagration."

"Incandescent Conflagration? What kind of name is that for a ship? Do you have a death wish?" Jack said.

"Probably lost something in the translation", said the creature. "And the hell we are the Zzurags, elite warriors from Zzenda. They call me Zzlugg."

"Zzlugg?"

"No, Zzlugg. Two zeds, one el", corrected Zzlugg.

Jack glanced across at Ken Burton, blissfully sucking his thumb on stage. Maybe he's...

"No, you're not dreaming Mr. Hobden", Zzlugg said. "This is very real. As real as Tarantara."

"I beg your pardon?" said Jack. "Look here, what is it you want from us?"

"Oh, rapture unexampled! A simple question at last." Zzlugg turned all three eyes upon Jack, the red eye blazing more intensely than before. "You and your troops..."

"That's troupe" interjected Jack.

"Spare me the singulars and plurals", said Zzlugg. "You are going to win us a war."

The voyage to the Zzurags' home world, Zzenda, was without cause for great discomfort, particularly after the consequences of the Zzurags' offered food had been sorted out, or more accurately flushed down. During the relativistically short trip, Zzlugg had explained to Jack the nature of the war that the G&S Society was expected to win for them.

The sworn enemies of Zzenda were the occupants of the sister planet Tzenda, the Tzing. "For reasons long lost in history, Jack", Zzlugg tumbled, "but assuredly good and sound reasons, our two planets have waged continuous war for over three centuries. It has been terrible. The price too heavy, so we, the Zzurags, have taken this action to end it, to subdue the Tzing and enforce peace."

"Three centuries", said Jack, feeling a grudging sympathy for his captors. So far, being a prisoner of Zzenda hadn't been too hard. Except for the food... and the nausea from the warp-drive... and the unexpected and disconcerting attention of a pink-orificed Zzurag named Zzuzy. "Your people must have suffered many casualties in that time."

"Casualties?" Zzurag raised his blue-eye brows.

"Yes, you know, killed in the war."

"Killed? You mean, life-ended? What a horrendous thought. Why on Zzenda would there be?" Zzlugg's red eye blinked furiously at Jack. His rumbling voice clearly distressed, Zzlugg drew his weapon and placed it in his chest orifice, his finger finding the trigger.

"Wait," yelled Jack, shocked, but he was too late. Zzlugg pulled the trigger twice while Jack squeezed his eyes shut. Nothing happened. Jack opened one eye to see Zzlugg reholster his weapon.

"What kind of race are you?" demanded Zzlugg. "To kill in a war. What foul falsehood."

Jack dragged his eyes from the weapon in Zzlugg's holster and raised them to his still intact torso. "Um... why... how... did you do that?"

"Do what?" blinked Zzlugg.

"Never mind", said Jack. "If you don't... kill each other, how do you and the Tzing wage war?"

"With resolution manly", trumbled Zzlugg. "And trade blockades, bans on cultural exchanges, jamming of all communications and entertainment channels and other dastardly privations."

"You don't fight? Have battles – physical battles?"

Zzlugg tumbled a low sigh. "We are the Zzurag. We are incapable of such uncivilized behaviour. We could no more do that than zzzliggic a quakzzanger."

"What ..?"

"Sorry, that doesn't translate to Earth-speak. Believe me, we just can't do it", said Zzlugg.

"But you have weapons." Jack pointed to Zzlugg's twin ray-guns. "You weren't shy at threatening me with that."

"Threaten?" Zzlugg drew a weapon and aimed it at Jack's head and pulled the trigger. "I was offering you a drink, a gesture of peace." A syrupy blue stream jetted into Jack's open mouth. "These are our fluid dispenser's for field trips."

Jack snapped his mouth shut to stop the flow of foul liquid... Foul? He cautiously moved his tongue amongst the entrapped substance. Sweet, tingly... was that a hint of peppermint, lychee perhaps? Definitely mulberry and peaches. He swallowed. Aaaaah! Smooth. Nice aftertaste on the upper pallet. Suggestion of alcohol. "Could you refresh me again?" he asked Zzlugg.

While savouring his second mouthful, which certainly put a new spin on 'a shot of alcohol', Jack contemplated what he had been told about the war between Zzenda and Tzenda. It was weird, he concluded. If the Tzing were anything physically like the Zzurag, and he had no information to suggest they were, and if there had been no physical casualties during this three-century war, then the Tzing were also incapable of fighting, or to translate Zzlugg's phrase, tzluggicing a quaktzanger.

Jack looked across the theatre at his troupe of players. They had calmed down after the initial shock, but they remained huddled together on the stage. They had found food in the backstage dressing rooms. Now they simply could be described as nervous, wary and scared shitless. But otherwise they were holding up alright.

Then Jack remembered Zzlugg's earlier pronouncement – "you are going to win us a war." Oh no. Oooooohhh nooooo....

"Wait one moment. Where do we come in on all this?" Jack asked. "We aren't going to do your killing for you. The last time we killed anyone was the audience at our disastrous Spring production of Ruddigore."

Zzlugg's chest orifice went into a paroxysm of flapping and smacking. "Oh calamity, your suggestion nauseates me." He quickly shot himself in the chest. "A Zzenda-Tzenda show-down has been arranged, to settle this war once-and-for-all. And yes, you will fight for us, but with a most devastating weapon which we Zzurags and Tzings don't possess. Your weapon. A weapon that will not kill but

drive our enemies to their knees, cowering, begging for mercy, screaming for permission to surrender. Then we will have peace... on Zzenda's terms."

Jack stared at Zzlogg. Our weapon? What on earth did he have in mind? "Ah, Zzlogg, my friend. Shoot me again and explain."

The battle was to take place on a neutral moon of the system's third planet, an uninhabitable gas giant. The moon possessed a life supporting atmosphere but nothing else. The South Brighton Gilbert & Sullivan Society and their orchestra, accompanied by Zzlogg and the entire Zzurag force, were transported to a flat rise on the surface. This would give them a strategic position from which to do battle.

The orchestra members tuned their instruments, while the troupe limbered up their vocal chords. Ken Burton had been persuaded to extract his digit and assume an upright position, fully resplendent in his police sergeant uniform. Peter McIntyre brushed the feathers in his Pirate King hat while Graham Turner buffed his Major-General helmet. Then they practiced the weapon they would use on the enemy, the Tzing.

They didn't have to wait long. On a similar rise, only one hundred meters away, an alien landing craft did what it did best. Landed. From the craft poured a phalanx of creatures which, apart from scale colouring, were similar to the Zzurags, right down to a necklace of ancestral skulls. They formed up in ranks, and made rude gestures, or so Jack Hobden assumed, at the Zzurags.

"Enough," bellowed Zzlogg, who clasped Jack on the shoulder, then dramatically pointed towards the Tzing. "Engage the enemy."

Jack looked at his troupe, caught the waiting eye of the orchestra conductor, shrugged fatefully, then nodded. The baton came down and the orchestra burst into music that launched itself across the gap. On cue, General Stanley, hurrumphed ferociously then started his patter, but at three times his normal volume.

*"I am the very model of a modern Major-General  
I've information vegetable, animal and mineral  
I know the kings of England and I quote the fights historical,  
From Waterloo to Marathon, in orders categorical..."*

And so it continued, for all three verses, with the full troupe providing vigorous choral support. The society had never given such a boisterous performance, nor had they ever received such a response from their audience. The Zzurags, with fore-knowledge of the weapon, had covered their aural orifices, but the Tzing were devastated. Howls of anguish and pleas for pity cascaded across the void between the two parties, and Jack saw many Tzing knees wobbling towards the ground.

Throwing aside his aural protectors, Zzlogg roared in victory. "Surrender, you Tzing, or suffer on. We've more musical jingoism where that came from." He turned a victorious red eye upon Jack.

His elation was premature.

"Incoming," shouted Zzuzy.

But it was too late to reach for their discarded aural protectors. The return salvo was already upon them.

*"Loudly let the trumpet bray! Tantantara, tantantara!  
Proudly bang the sounding brasses! Tzing ! Boom!..."*

All around Jack's troupe, the Zzurag were withering under the relentless fire of stirring Sullivan notes and Gilbertian lyrics. It was pathetic to watch, and more so to hear as the Zzurags moaned in Lotto balls chaos.

"That's the Procession of Peers", yelled Peter McIntyre over the din. "That could only be..."

But Jack didn't need to be told. He could see, behind the rows of chortling Tzings who'd donned their own aural protectors, an orchestra and massed chorus dressed in ornate gowns of the Peers of England. "Well, bugger me", he said. "It's Bert Grant and the North Blackpool G&S Society. They are doing Iolanthe this season. What are they doing..?" Jack chuckled softly. What's good for Zzenda, is good for Tzenda, he thought. Jack waved at his professional rival across the gap. Bert waved back, then raised both arms in an open handed shrug.

The warfare had reached an early impasse, it seemed. Each side had acquired Weapons of Gilbert & Sullivan, or WOGS, and so could only batter each other in turn with no final resolution, as neither of the G&S societies could keep singing forever. A case of Mutually Assured Gilbert and Sullivan.

The North Blackpool troupe finally ended the chorus. Within less than a minute, the Zzurags recovered and stared off their enemy across the gap. Zzlogg conferred with his warriors, keeping a cautious eye on the conductor of the opposing orchestra in case of another sneak attack.

Jack quickly called his major players together. "We have to end this farce," he told them.

"Which one?" Ken Burton asked. " 'The Pirates of Penzance' or the alien's war?"

"Quick, someone give me a sheet of paper" Jack said, ignoring Ken. "It seems the aliens are psychologically influenced by jingoistic music. The emotions in musical martial jingoism send them into fits of agony. Let's try something different. Help me here." They put their creative heads together, then wrote out some copies of their work.

"Zzlogg," Jack called, going over to the Zzurag leader. "I have an idea that will permanently end this war."

"With us the winners?" Zzlogg burred.

"Oh yes," said Jack, fingers crossed. "Definitely." He explained his idea.

"This seems quite unaccountable. You're sure it will augment our advantage?" Zzlogg said.

"Spare me your stern denials Zzlogg", chided Jack. "You'll thank me for this."

"Then be off on your dread adventure. And Jack..."

Jack turned. "Yes."

"Tarantara!", intoned Zzlogg.

"Amen to that," Jack murmured, as he called the entire South Brighton Gilbert & Sullivan Society and orchestra to follow him down the slope towards the Tzing.

Midway, they stopped. Jack called to the watching Tzing. "Oh fearsome Tzing, I call upon you to send your weapon out to meet us in single combat. If they, in their best endeavour, are greater than we and defeat us in battle, then so be it. Tantantara, Tzing Boom!"

The Tzing leader, resplendent in his green scales, consulted with Bert Grant, who nodded furiously, presumably indicating he could beat these South Brighton upstarts in any fair G&S eisteddfod.

The North Blackpool troupe and orchestra paraded down to meet their South Brighton opponents. Jack quickly explained his plan to Bert, handing him some spare copies of paper, while the two troupes mumbled ‘rhoubarb rhoubarb’ in threatening tones to each other. They had decided that shaking fists at each other was a bit over the top.

“You have to be joking, Jack” exclaimed Bert on reading his piece of paper. “This will never work.”

“It will if we can catch them all with their earplugs off and maintain the volume and diction at all times”, said Jack.

“But with no rehearsal?” Bert protested.

“You want to see Earth again, Bert?”

“Bloody oath, I do.”

“Then read it, pass it on, and get it right first time. Five minutes to curtain”, Jack said. “Oh, and Bert, before we start, you need to go back to your Tzing leader...”

“No way...”

“You have to Bert. Listen. Tell him that during our combat, your music will embolden the Tzing while it cowers the Zzurags into submission, so he needs to keep his ear plugs off.”

“He won’t swallow that”, Bert said.

“My Zzurag did. Please, just do it.”

When Bert had returned from his animated conversation with the Tzing, he gave Jack a quick wink, then joined his troupe.

The two orchestras made ready, their conductors watching each other closely. Jack whispered loud enough for Brighton and Blackpool troupes to hear. “Remember everyone, diction. Oh, and break a leg.” Then he yelled at the top of his voice, “Take this, North Blackpool scum. One, two, three, and...”

Both orchestras struck up in time, and on the second beat both troupes, in chorus, sang out to the rollicking tune of “I am a Pirate King”. But the words were different.

***“For Zzurags are like the Tzing  
(for they have that common ring)  
So one is blue, the other green  
But colour’s not the thing;  
For Zzurags are like the Tzing  
(it’s time you stopped this stupid war thing)  
So shake your hands and shoot a drink  
Give peace a jolly good fling.  
Hoorah, hoorah for the common ring,  
The Zzurag and the Tzing.”***

For good measure, they sang it all the way through again, but it wasn’t necessary. Midway through the second verse, both the Zzurags and the Tzing had moved towards each other, chest orifices flapping, even blubbering. There was much embracing of erstwhile enemies and much shooting with fluid guns. Jack Hobden’s only concern was being able to find a Zzurag or Tzing sober enough to fly them back to Earth.

The South Brighton G&S Theatre settled gently onto its foundations. The society’s troupe burst out of the doors to breath good old English smog again. By agreement, they would not speak of their adventure to anyone. After all, who would believe them?

Jack Hobden waited till all the others had left, then turned to the ship’s pilot. “Thanks for the lift back Zzuzy. It was...fun, I suppose.” He felt a little nervous, with Zzuzy so close and breathing heavily. “Is Zzlugg still angry with me?”

Zzuzy tumbled a tinkling laugh. “No, he knows your deception was for the best. The Zzurag and Tzing are of common ancestry, blood brothers, and the war is best over with no winner. But he asked me to pass this message to you. I believe it is from your show:

***“Away to the cheating earth go you  
where pirates are all well-to-do,  
But I’ll be true to the song you sing  
And live and die a Zzurag-Tzing.”***

“Close enough. A Zzurag-Tzing, I like that”, said Jack.

“So did the rest of Zzenda and Tzenda”, burred Zzuzy, “which is why we were pleased to return you to Earth.”

“Ha,” said Jack. “What else could they do? Dump is in the vacuum of space?”

“If they were feeling merciful, yes”, said Zzuzy.

Jack’s stomach experienced the lurch similar to when they came out of space-warp. “Huh? But, they couldn’t. It would be like zzziggicing a quuakzzanger.”

“Oh no,” said Zzuzy, fingering her necklace of skulls. “That only applies to Zzurags and Tzings. We’ve slaughtered plenty of aliens in the past.” Her chest orifice curved into what was probably a seductive smile as she moved a step closer. “Tell me, Jack. Do you like my sparkling eyes and ruby lips?”

If they had still been in space, you wouldn’t have heard Jack scream.

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