

Ian Brotherhood

Tales of The Great Unwashed

—We're all to be on the telly, says Joe.

I get behind the bar and dump my bags at the foot of the stairs. We've been on the go twenty-four hours what with the flights being rearranged at the Turkey end of things. I'm that way I know I won't sleep, and I want to catch up with the news anyroad. When we were away I only called back the once and Diane assured me all was well and not to call again.

—So what's this then?

—It's a programme about the writers and them, and the telly's coming to see this fella doing his research and that's when he's mixing with the likes of us. And it's drinks on the house.

I look hard into the bilious bag-bound eyes of Joe Doghead and wonder what strange new fever of mind makes him think he will ever get another drink on me after his behaviour at the New Year.

Within the minute I've Diane in the office, and instead of giving her the doll I bought her, it's a dressing-down she's getting.

—I don't care if it's the telly. What's this about free drinks?

—Technically free as far as the customers are concerned, but all covered if you submit an accountant's statement for the best Wednesday you've had in the past year and there's twenty-per-cent on top for inconvenience plus a flat five hundred cash for you. All they require is three hours, access to power, a maximum of ten genuine regular customers who should ideally be unemployed or retired manual labourers, and your signature on these.

She's got the forms, it's all worked out. They'll be arriving before tea-time. I tell her not to do it again, then give her the doll.

—Who's this writer guy anyway, I ask.

She's looking at the doll, which is a wee girl dressed in the Turkish national costume. She attempts to remove the hat and the head comes off.

—Bill Mantovani, she says as she puts the head in her pocket.

—Am I supposed to know him or what?

She gives me one of those knowing wee smirks that drives me mad. It's like when I've forgotten the soft drinks order and she has to remind me, or when she's got the evening off and it turns out I okayed it when I was pished, so have to pay her treble time to stay on.

—I'm very surprised you are unaware of this author. Mr Mantovani has created some wonderful Scottish characters, all drawn from real life but possessed of a dignity which allows them to transcend poverty, rise above the class-ridden mores of...

—Aye, alright. So is he famous or what?

—Moderately. His most recent work is set in a fictional bar called The Waiting Room. The characters have colourful names and enjoy sophisticated discussions on topical matters. It seems that he is nominated for the Harrison-Bland award. That is why they are making this short film. It is for the programme during which the winner will be announced next month. He is the favourite.

So I hit the sack and try to kip. I don't need this. I wanted to get in, have a decent bath, then go down and have a few jars, a chinwag and an early night. But that's a good deal right enough, five ton cash, so I'd best try and look sharp and be about my wits.

I get up, have a shower, put on the good white shirt that's for funerals and weddings and the like, and the autographed Tommy Gemmell tie. It's a nice dark-

green silk and the writing's with one of those silver pens. It actually says 'kissmyjarlers' on it, but the writing's so squiggly no-one can tell. Seventy notes for that too. Then on with old faithful, the tweed suit I got in Slater's back in seventy-two. Cost a packet back then but worth every bob. I even get a bit of pomade in the old crowning glory, and that's the first time for years, but it kills the white and lets me get it combed back a bit, so no harm. Got to look the part if there's cameras and that.

Going down the stairs, fierce blue light is streaming through the gaps about the closed door leading into the bar, and when I open it it's like I've walked right into Close Encounters and I screw my eyes shut and have to grope for the gantry. The silhouette of Joe Doghead slowly assumes features as my eyes adjust. The whole bar is swarming with folk, wires everywhere, and great big black boxes stacked here and there. I recognise no more than a dozen folk, all regulars, and even they look strange in the glare from the big lamps stood all over, and curtains of dust hanging about making the place look a lot dirtier than it really is.

—You must be Mr Doodlehoo, says this fellow who's appeared beside Joe.

—Doohihan, I say, and the young bearded fellow bites his bottom lip and says sorry, makes a note on the clipboard then tears off a bit of paper and sticks it on the bar afront me.

I'm almost finished writing my signature when the fellow screams.

—That's him! Oh my God! he says and then he's off towards the door.

The little figure advancing towards the bar is maybe four feet tall, and it's impossible to guess his age. He might be fifty, he might be ninety three. Under the huge faded Black Watch flat cap, his straight fairish hair is tufted above his ears, and his short trimmed beard is dense and looks soft, like fuzzy felt. He walks slowly, with shoulders back, and from the noise of his boots on the floorboards I guess he's got segs nailed in the soles. He's wearing a wee dark suit of fifties style, a collarless shirt, perhaps once white, and the waistline of the brecks hovers about his rib-cage, suspended by the button-on braces. So this must be him. Bill Mantovani, Scotland's foremost man of letters.

He is looking at me as he approaches, the gaggle of telly folk taking tiny steps behind him as he nears, and a couple of them have books that they must want signed and he does so without looking at either the folk or the books, moving forward all the time. When he reaches the bar he goes out of sight, and I'm leaning forward to check if he's still there when the bunnet bobs and shifts upwards and he grunts, climbs up the bar stool, and perches himself on it.

—Fitlike, hunestworthy loonie 'E'en a muckle body wid craw aw the nicht whin the barley-fever drouth taks haud. Huv ye a hauf a' yon ale, Samson's Auld Arsecracker, an' a when o' Sot 'n Veenaygir billscrapins, if ye huv them mind.

He smiles. I don't. I've no idea what he's on about. A girl appears behind Mantovani, and even with him atop the stool he has to look up when she whispers to him. She's a right nice looking lass, not much older than my Mary, maybe twenty or something.

—Lovely. Now, just be natural Bill. We want to capture the essence of how earthy your world is, how symbiotic the relationship between you and your

people. I know this isn't your regular hostelry, but we've made sure that these men are, to use one of your inimitable phrases, ambassadors for the dispossessed. Natural, natural, natural.

I catch Joe Doghead's eye, which is like a trapped shark's. Mantovani removes his bunnet, and I watch Joe staring at the shiny beige wig, which is almost the same shape as the cap, but smaller, and from the way the fringe has been cut it seems a fair bet that Mantovani has been trimming it to compensate for the shrinkage of his ageing skull. He licks his tiny forefinger and smooths down his eyebrows, which are like strips of rusty brillo pad. He stares at me again, and the voice is quieter.

—Half heavy and a glass of low-flyer with water squire, he says.

This I understand, so I set about the Grouse and Diane gets the beer. The mirrors behind the gantry look smeared and dusty in the light, and the reflection of activity in the area behind the spotlight Mantovani is shadowed and warped.

—Tape running! shouts someone.

I turn with the whisky, set it on the bar, then slide the water jug across. Mantovani's little hand holds a crisp fifty note, and the hologram shines like a wee dish of rainbows in the light. I reach out to take it. I feel strange and stiff, like my body is drunk, or just awake, and I've the note between my fingers when I remember our rule about no fifties. Even twenties are dodgy these days, the fakes are that good.

—Sorry my friend, but maybe you didn't see the notice, I say, and the wee man's eyes widen.

—Cut! Cut! shouts the lassie, and there's a hubbub of chat and laughter.

Mantovani snatches back the note, stuffs it inside his jacket, then rakes about in his wee pocket and there's jangling of change as he mutters and fires me dirty looks. The lassie comes over and wags her pen at me, and for all that she's smiling, and a nice smile it is too, you can tell she's not the most patient of creatures.

—This time we'll just take whatever Bill gives you and we'll ring it up as normal. The cash isn't really important right now.

I smooth down my tie. KISSMYJARLERS gleams silver upside-down in the light.

Three hours later, and I don't care about the five ton any more. My eyeballs are knocking together like coconuts in a sock. I want these folk out of my place. It took an hour to get the shot of Mantovani at the bar done, and all he did was sink one short after another, a double malt for every one of the six takes, a different malt every time. I've made sure Diane keeps a right close tally. Of course, Joe, trying to keep up, is cataleptic, and only the fact that the drink is free is keeping him going.

Sippy Pat and her Mum, Bobby Elbow and his fiance have been in the alcove by the puggy, and from the bar they can barely be seen through the cloud of fag smoke. The fags are free as well, handed out for every take, and Diane has had to empty the ashtrays three times already, a task made easier by the bearded assistant director fellow, who gets her to just empty them onto the floor for added grittiness. By the toilet door, directly beneath the wall-mounted gas heater, Halfpint Henderson and his three sixty-something sons are gleaming with sweat, devouring pints as fast as Diane can pour them in an effort to replace the fluids being sapped by the powerful beams. It's take-

ten of their domino game because Jerso, Halfpint's youngest, keeps laughing, and this is ruining the grimness of the set piece.

It's almost ten. They're well over the agreed time. I get my jacket off, and I know there's big dark stains at my armpits and the pomade has long since been boiled off my hairs. I want my bed. The director lass is chatting to the beardy fellow. I get my bad boss face on.

—Excuse me dear.

—Jack? she says, all surprised like maybe we had a love affair once and she's seeing me for the first time in years, and it's like she pulls the smile out of a bag and sticks it on faster than the eye can detect.

—If I'm not much mistaken, the agreement was three hours. You've had near enough four. I'd like my pub back now, if that's alright with you.

She glances at Beardy, and he looks for something imaginary hovering above his forehead.

—Jack, you've been an absolute dream. We couldn't have managed without you, she says. We just need to get the interview done and we'll be off, promise.

—Interview? I say, and it's like God himself is having a wee joke with me cos her eyes go to the front door and Beardy's follow, and I turn to see this character come strolling in like it's him, not me, that owns the place.

He's a big lad, maybe heights with myself, and very portly too, to be nice about it. But not heavy in a fit way this one—it's like puppy fat he's not managed to lose, even with him being maybe thirty or so, and his cheeks are as rosy and smooth as a baby's fundament. He's wearing a kilt and one of those dress jackets that has a huge big frilly shirt sticking out of the front. His hair is crewed to a number three or thereabouts, and it's silvery white. He pauses, hands on hips, sporrán swinging, scans the bar, and makes like a berserker when he sees Priscilla approach.

She gets an arm about his big waist and guides him over to the corner by the fag machine where Mantovani is smoking his pipe and dozing. I catch Beardy looking at me before he scuttles off to join in the hoo-haa over this new arrival—he looks at me as if I'm getting in the road. The temper sparks and catches. But I can't lose it. I take a deep breath, and the influx of real and artificial smoke sparks a fit of coughing that leaves me doubled and gagging. That's it. Enough's enough.

I get to the table just as Mantovani stands up, and they turn as one towards me. Priscilla gushes at me again,

—Jack, I want you to meet Peter Princely, presenter of this year's Harrison-Bland Awards programme. Peter, this is Jack Doughy-hand, he's the manager here.

Peter Princely offers his hand and smiles at me with teeth so bright I want to retreat. I shake it as I stare at him, and make a point of holding it firm.

—What an unusual name, says Peter, and his grip is so strong that I hear a whimper coming from myself.

—Yes it is, I say in much higher voice than my own.

Priscilla accompanies me back to the bar, filling me in. My hand feels like the udder of a knackered cow. She wants Mantovani back on his seat at the bar. Peter will ask the questions. Mantovani has already seen them, and will rattle off his answers. Little, if any, of the material will be used unless Mantovani actually wins the award. It's a one-take job, no problem. Three hundred extra, off the record. Ten minutes set-up, done within the half-hour, and if they're a minute over I'll be due another three ton. Fine. I stick the cash in my shirt pocket, keep my trap shut, and rub the blood back into my fingers as I work out who to call first.

The telly bodies are milling, moving their gear, nipping outside for a breather, the two agency lads checking passes as the crew move in and out.

They're big and healthy enough, these chaps they have by way of security, but nothing special.

There's a mobile phone on the bar. Maybe Priscilla's, maybe Beardy's. I slip it in my back pocket, then move across to say a quick hello to Joe Doghead, who is still upright and breathing. He looks at me. The whites of his eyes are mother-of-pearl. I have never seen him like this. He is beyond drunkenness. Perhaps it is the way the likes of your shamen and whirling dervishes get, or maybe the holy men who've been buried for months. He's barely breathing, but he must know how close he is to the end. This is the only state in which Joe Doghead Ryan could be called upon to defend the honour of the woman who loves him. Sippy Pat is still in the alcove with her mother, who is arm-wrestling Bobby Elbow. I mentally cross myself, cup Joe's head and draw him close and tell him what I have to tell him. There is a grunt to acknowledge that the information I have given him has been received, and only the further dilation of his pupils gives a clue as to the imaginings now coursing through his befuddled mind.

Priscilla is calling for positions. The artificial smoke machine starts up again. Beardy appears with another carton of fags and exhorts all those awake to partake. Peter Princely is having his make-up seen to while a couple of the young female crew members lift Mantovani onto his stool at the bar.

Have to work fast now. Nip in the back, flip open the mobile—makes me feel like Captain Kirk under siege on the Enterprise. Fishy Maggie isn't home. Her and the girls are out working the hen-night down The Spring, so call there and by the racket when the phone's answered it seems they're there alright. The chargehand fetches her. Yeah, she can make it. She listens, laughs, is very interested. She can get The Carpet and his guys up as well. Fair enough. She's leaving now. The big lamps bang on again, and I can hear Beardy shouting. The blue fag smoke slips under the door. I'll be needed for pouring more drinks. Fast. Bang in the numbers, do it too fast, have to do it again. Big Polly can shift anything—he's home, and none too pleased at first what with girlish giggling in the background, but when I give him a rough description of the gear they've got you can hear the lassie's giggles becoming whines and complaints and you can tell he's getting his clobber on. I give him the instructions. He'll be there.

—Where's Mr Doodlehoo? shouts Beardy.

I sling the jacket on and quickly comb back the hair, and when I go out they're all waiting. Waiting for me. I take my time, whistling and smiling. Priscilla does not look at all happy, and neither does Beardy. Big Peter Princely draws daggers, and wee Mantovani's features are clouded with fatigue and impatience. I wink at the little man, turn to the gantry, pour myself a measure of rum, then take my place at the end of the bar. Joe has turned a shade of grey only ever seen on cadavers and is staring down at the top of Mantovani's head.

—Thanks for joining us Jack, says Priscilla. Right, final shot, interview with Peter and Bill, then it's a couple of Peter noddies and home. Run the tape. Let's go!

Peter Princely clears his throat, fiddles with his bright blue bow-tie.

—Bill Mantovani. The characters, the tradition, the sheer weight of history. The legends. You've become one of those legends, dare I say, a myth? says Peter Princely very softly, and with much gentle finger massaging of something unseen on the bar.

Mantovani rubs his beard, and a wee bit of salt and vinegar scratching falls from the rusty felt, plops into his large Black Bush. He downs the lot, wipes his hairy gob. His voice is strong and echoes about The Great Unwashed.

—History. Yes. Inscrutable. Long inertia, the steady dribble of hopelessness in a community of

souls where to commit poverty is to once again thread the needle of interminable, nay glacial, misery. Myriad personal anarchies need not be indefatigable, but the inevitable, unimaginably heroic defiances which are what we stand for, which delineate the boundaries of what we are, these cannot reasonably hope to successfully combat the underlying compliances demanded, if not wrested from us, by status quo.

Far off in the corner, Bobby Elbow and Sippy Pat start singing 'Down Down, Deeper and Down.' Priscilla's voice rings out.

—Carry on Peter! Keep going!

Peter Princely empties the last of his half-heavy-shandy. I top it up as he consults the wee card in his cupped hand. Another glass of cratur for Mantovani.

—The new work, says Peter, shaking his head with awe. The Waiting Room. Innovative. Authentic. Provocative. Dare I say, ground-breaking?

—The breaking of ground, yes. Dirt. Coal. Men in holes, digging their own cells. Elemental, fundamental of life. Water. Drink. Aesthetic preoccupations? The working class artist, seduced, luxuriates in the surreptitious undermining of establishment, unguenting conscience with the conviction, solidified through constant introspective repetition and the encouragement of his peers, that he is a foot soldier within that wooden horse sitting at the heart of that beast which is the enemy, whiling away the hours before the surprise attack by pondering the innumerable permutations which might lead to the decipherment of that most enigmatic of all codes, that infinitely inexplicable crossword puzzle we call life. But for my characters, for all of them, there is no life. There is only...reality.

Peter Princely starts to cry.

They chunter on for a while, Princely lobbing questions, Mantovani speaking in tongues. I glance at my watch. It is the time agreed. I look over to Sippy Pat, who is grimacing at me, waiting for the signal. I loosen my tie. She gets up and moves towards us despite the best efforts of the crew to return her to her seat. I lean against the door jamb, poise my thumb over the switch for the big Guinness sign outside. Peter Princely is closer to Mantovani, trying to whisper.

—This is the one in case you win it, he says, nodding, wide-eyed.

Mantovani shakes his head, smiling coyly, as if the possibility had not even occurred.

—Sorry I won't be able to make it for the dinner. It's just that it's been lined up for yonks Pete, know how it is. It's the timeshare you know, use it or lose it. And Magaluf's nice this time of year, says Mantovani.

Sippy Pat has got as far as Beardy, and is staring at Mantovani with raw lust. Joe notices her, and half-shuts his lids, as if making sure that she really is there. Princely smiles over at Priscilla, who nods.

—Bill Mantovani, winner of this year's Harrison Bland Award for Scottish Literature, congratulations.

—Yes. Thank you. I'm sorry I can't be with you all tonight to...

Sippy Pat advances, brushing Beardy aside. Princely, turning to see the Afghan-clad figure bearing down upon him, shrieks and hops back from the bar.

—Mister Mantovani! cries Pat as she embraces him.

Mantovani momentarily disappears from sight as he is engulfed in the nicotine-stained coat, and when she does release him his wee wig is swinging from the topmost of her fat imitation-bone buttons. I sense Joe shift. I told him that Mantovani had already made some very indiscrete enquiries as to Sippy Pat's bill of fare, convinced she is a lady of the night. A low growl confirms Joe's growing displeasure.

—I just love your stuff so I do, says Pat. That Pink Panther, that was the best. I used to always watch that with the weans, Jesus, I was near enough

a wean myself. That car was pure gallus by the way. Were you ever in it? Eh? You're wee enough anyway aren't you? Eh?

—Do you mind! shouts Mantovani. This happens to be a very important...

—Bet you I can remember it. Right, here we go, shouts Pat.

—Is it money you want? says Mantovani, and from his pocket he pulls the crumpled fifty.

At the sight of the money, Joe looks at me like a man about to be shot, then drains his glass and stands. I flick the Guinness light switch off, then back on right away. The front and side doors burst open simultaneously, Fishy Maggie and her dozen or so girls streaming in the front while The Carpet, Big Polly and ten or so of the Spring lads rush in the side, all wearing see-you-Jimmy bunnets with red hairy sidelocks by way of disguise. Mantovani whimpers. Peter Princely runs towards Priscilla, who is heading for the toilet with her colleagues.

—Right, here we go now! If you don't know it, clap!

Pat has her hands on hips, head back, eyes shut.

—Think of all the animals you ever hear about, like rhinoceros and tigers laddy-da, I can never get that bit, never mind, oh-ho there's lots of funny animals in all the world, but...

—Take this! Please! shouts Mantovani as he waves the fifty in front of Pat, but she's away, sent.

Fishy Maggie has clearly come to some kind of understanding with Big Polly and the Spring boys—the ladies head straight for the bar and the fag machine while the lads concentrate on shifting the crew's hardware, carefully removing plugs but otherwise working fast. The two minders brought by the crew flee for the Gents, manhandling smaller colleagues out of the way.

—Think! A panther that is positively pink! Oh here he is...

Joe lifts Mantovani from the seat by the scruff of his jacket, gets the other hand under the wee man's arse, lifts him up high like he's offering a new-born son to the gods, then releases a howl which seems to freeze everyone.

—And he's a gentleman a scholar he's an...

Joe hurls Mantovani the full length of the bar, and the wee body bounces off the shiny surface and straight into the wall of crisps and other boxed snacks stacked at the far end, causing an explosion of small multicoloured bags. The raid resumes, and I lift the bar phone. Fishy Maggie looks at me, looks at the till, raises an eyebrow. I nod. She opens it and takes out the whole tray. I throw the mobile phone to her. She'll get rid of that. The boys have almost finished wheeling out the large black boxes of sound and light gear, and have started on the bar furniture. Maggie's girls have all but cleared the gantry, and have managed to remove the fag machine from the wall.

—Yes, my bar's being looted. The Great Unwashed. Doohihan. No. Doohihan.

—Yes he's the one and only truly original, Panther Pink Panther from head to toe-hoe! Dumpity-dumpity dum!

I applaud, as does Joe and Sippy Pat's Mum.

Everyone else has gone. The telly crew are all in the Ladies, and will probably stay there until the cops arrive. The sirens are getting nearer. The only sign of Mantovani is a tiny clenched fist defiantly thrust from the carnage, and in it is clutched the crumpled fifty note. Pat gets on the stool beside Joe and puts an arm about him. He'll succumb tonight, that's for sure.

Pat shrieks and flicks Mantovani's tiny wig off her coat. It lands on the bar.

—It's a rat! she screams.

Joe's mighty fist batters down on the hairy scrap, and I remove it quickly. Pat sighs and pulls her hero closer, and he acknowledges her attention with a toothless grin.