

One Bad Turn

A Murder Mystery Play in two acts

Setting

The setting is the resident's Lounge of the Greta Garbo Retirement Home for Theatrical Folk in the present or near past.

Dramatis Personae

- Ventriloquist looking for his dummy (Male)
- Illusionist (Male – but could be either)
- Singer (Female)
- Tiller Girl / Exotic dancer (Female)
- Ham Actor (Male)
- Comic (Male)
- Musical Saw act (Female)
- Carer – the duty carer for the evening (probably female, but either would do)
- Inspector (either gender) – only appears in the second act

Set

Set – requires arm chairs, a small table with a fruit bowl, with an apple in it. Additionally, there could be a ventriloquist's dummy, tea cups, a disinfectant bottle and a vodka bottle. Melvin may walk with a posh cane.

Introduction of characters:

Malcolm: I am Malcolm Eversley, and I am a carer doing the evening shift here at the Greta Garbo Retirement Home for Theatrical Folk. They are a mixed bunch here, mostly still a bit star-struck, but very pleasant, if a bit eccentric. Well, all of them except that Harry Wagg, the old comedian. He's a very unpleasant old man.

Alfred: My name is Alfred Preston, known on stage as 'The Great Alfredo'. I was an illusionist, and used to top the bill. When Variety went into decline I tried television, but I never earned much and once you've done your act, you have to think of something new. I was reduced to the club circuit and then appearing at children's parties. But then the arthritis stopped even that work. That is why I had to retire here.

Vera: I am Vera Sangster, and you probably know me as a judge from the 'New Talent' show that went out in the nineteen seventies. But before that I was a singer, in a duo who appeared on the Eurovision Song Contest, with my ex-husband, Barry Thomas. What made me most money was co-writing that famous song 'My Cuddly Teddy Bear'. But I lost most of my money trying to revive my career. That's why I'm here, me and my pussy-cat, Susie.

Ray: My name is Ray Spangler, also known as Uncle Ray. I am a ventriloquist, and my dummy, Little Jimmy is at least as famous as me. I appeared at all the variety halls for many years, and I had a radio series, Little Jimmy's Jaunts. But I always did variety, and the northern clubs after that. Never stopped working, but never made the top of the bill. Sometimes I think that Little Jimmy has taken me over.

Mavis: You can call me Mavis Crumm, but I used to perform as Miranda Grosvenor, and I had a speciality act, playing the musical saw, and the glass harmonium. I really did have a proper musical education. Just as I was making it to the top of the bill something happened, and I went off the main circuit, but I was never short of work. As for the incident that blighted my career, well, I really don't want to talk about that.

Melvin: I am called Melvin le Fromagier, classical actor. I have appeared on the greatest stages in the world, with the greatest actors, and in some of the greatest roles. The stage is my life, and I will not condescend to appear on the electric television. But I must admit that I appeared in quite a few British films, usually playing the stuffy colonel who disapproves of the dangerous scheme. My talent is as great as ever, and I am still registered at the agency but the work hardly ever comes in now.

Lulu: Hello, everyone calls me Lulu, Lulu Jenkins. I used to be a dancer, mostly in the chorus, but I did other work. I was a Tiller Girl, and I appeared at the Moulin Rouge. I always had a good body, and I never minded showing it. Well, if you've got it, flaunt it is my motto. Anyhow, I'm sure the other girls are jealous of me. I always got the attention of the men. Never short of men, me, and I even married a few of them. I'm a great housekeeper: three divorces and three houses kept.

Harry: Hello, hello, are you enjoying yourselves? Why, what are you up to? Heh heh. Harry Wragg here, cheeky chappy and darling of the halls. I used to be right up there with Max Miller at the variety theatres. I was resident at 'The Windmill', and I would have done more radio and tele, if my act hadn't been considered too risqué. You ask anyone, they all know Harry Wragg. Mind you, it's a bit boring living here, so I try to ginger things up a bit, heh-heh!

Act 1

Mavis and Vera are sitting on armchairs, talking at each other and reminiscing.

Vera: My agent booked us on this tour of the Northern clubs, Barry and me. We'd just started the second part of the act when everyone in the audience just wandered off. We were left all alone on the stage, so we stopped after a few bars. Well, the manager of the club came over, and I asked him if we'd done anything wrong; and he said, 'Nay lass, it's just that the hot meat pies have arrived!' Well the audience started drifting back after a while, but it was difficult to concentrate after that.

Mavis: I was playing my saw once when there was a kerfuffle at the bar. This was in Sunderland. There was such a lot of disturbance. It turned out that someone was robbing the bar of all its takings. I just carried on with my act, regardless. The police came in after a while, but most of the audience claimed they were just listening to my act, and hadn't seen or heard anything!

Vera: Yes, but you try to tell the kids these days what it was like then, how tough it was. They won't believe you.

Mavis: You know, I heard that song of yours on the radio a couple of days ago. It was being used on a trailer for some programme. You ought to get in touch with your agent and make sure you're getting your royalties.

Vera: Oh, I will do, don't you worry. Trouble is, half the money goes to Barry, because he smart enough to get his name on the label as co-writer, even though he had almost nothing to do with it. Let's hope someone wants to buy it. Who knows, but it might get onto one of those download sites. You never know, I might have a hit all over again.

[Malcolm comes in with Ray – SL]

Malcolm: Have you seen Little Jimmy? He's gone missing, and Ray is getting a bit upset.

Mavis: Never you mind, Ray. We'll find Little Jimmy for you. Have you any idea where you might have left him?

Ray: I can't find Little Jimmy. I think someone's stolen him.

Vera: We'll have a good look for you. Have you had a really good look in your room, dear?

Ray: I always keep him in the box by my bed. You see, I have to read him a bedtime story. He won't go to sleep without having a story read to him. He wasn't in the box when I looked.

[All except Ray start looking around the room. He stands looking bereft]

Malcolm: Don't be silly, Ray, he's just a ventriloquist's dummy, not a real boy. Anyway, he's definitely not in Ray's room, I looked everywhere. All I found was a little present left by your cat, Vera. I nearly trod in it.

Vera: Oh, no. She's getting worse. I'm really sorry, Ray. I'll go and clear it up in a minute. I feel a bit guilty because Lulu keeps clearing up after Susie. She seems to care for that cat as much as I do. You know, Ray, despite all the worry, I think I prefer a real cat to an imaginary boy.

Ray: He's real to me, Little Jimmy is. I've lived with him for fifty years. I don't know what I'd do if I ever really lost him.

Mavis: Well, he's certainly not here. I'll bet that horrible Harry's taken him. Just like him to pick on Ray. He probably thinks he's being funny. If you don't find Little Jimmy soon I'll go and ask him. While I'm there I'll ask him about my musical saw. That disappeared a couple of days ago. If he's taken it I'll punch his lights out.

Malcolm: He's not worth it, and you know he'll only upset you.

Mavis: One of these days someone's going to sort Harry out properly.

Vera: They'll probably have to form a queue. Anyhow, I'd better go and sort out the mess my pussy made in Ray's room. I'll just get some disinfectant, if that's OK, Malcolm.

Malcolm: Come on, Ray. Let's go and look in the kitchens. [Malcolm and Ray exit SR]

[Melvin enters SL]

Melvin: Hail and well met on this fair evening, good madam

Vera: Hello, Melvin. How are you today?

Melvin: Ah, what can one say? Here am I the King Lear of the Greta Garbo home for retired entertainment folk. My agent no longer returns my calls. I must bear my burthens with resolution and patience. What more can an old man do?

Vera: Oh, good, and I'm very well too. Now do pay attention, there's a dear man. Have you seen Ray's Little Jimmy?

Melvin: Are you referring to the ventriloquist's dummy of our dear colleague, Raymond. Has his homunculus deserted him for pastures new? Ah, how very inconsiderate. I have often observed that Raymond is only half a man without his prop. In many ways Little Jimmy is the more lively and lifelike of the two. It would be a tragedy indeed if Raymond were have to live without his dummy.

Vera: So you haven't seen him, then.

Melvin: Alas, dear lady, I have not!

Vera: Oh dear! Well Malcolm's helping Ray to look for him. If you do happen to see him you will let me know, wont you?

Melvin: Of course I shall. But has anyone considered the possibility that this aforementioned dummy may have been kidnapped by our very own practical joker, Harold Wragg. I have observed that Harold will stoop to any depths to perform his wretched jokes, and the purloining of a ventriloquist's dummy would cause him no moral qualms, despite the effect that such an action would have on our own dear Raymond.

Vera: The trouble is that if anyone asks him, he'll not only deny it, but he'll regard it as an even better joke. It only encourages him.

Melvin: Worry not, madam. I, Melvin le Fromagier shall beard the beast in his den and force him to confess his crimes.

Vera: I shouldn't bother, dear. He'll only get enjoyment from the attention. Tell you what, you sit right down, and I'll make you a cup of tea, just the way you like it. I've got to go to the kitchen, anyway.

Melvin: I shall be infinitely grateful for such a kindness, dearest lady, but you shall not delay my quest long. I shall seek out the truth, like a true knight.

[Melvin sits down and Vera gets up and exits SL. Lulu comes in SR]

Melvin: Ah, it is the lovely Lulu, famed for her acts of Terpsichore whilst in a most interesting state of dishabille. I trust that I shall be seeing more of you very shortly.

Lulu: Oh, you are a one, Melvin. [she giggles coquettishly] I always proud of my body, and if you want a little private show, I'll come to your room sometime. The old magic's still there, you know. I may not be quite so young, but I'm still quite a woman. I'm still fit and strong and still supple enough to do a dance. And you can see as much of me as you want.

Melvin: Alas, dear lady, I'm afraid that time has rendered the flesh feeble; and besides, we've all seen what you have to offer many times. To be perfectly frank, I might find it more arousing if you were to keep decently dressed.

Lulu: Well just don't say I didn't offer.

Melvin: And the offer was sincerely appreciated. Were I a few years younger I may have taken you up on the offer. But it does make me think, do you not find it strange that we are all here together? In the legitimate theatre one gets so little opportunity to mingle with the troupers from other parts of the entertainment profession.

Lulu: Well, we all trod the same sort of boards, didn't we. You may be a resting old actor and me a retired exotic dancer, but we were both in the entertainment business, weren't we?

Melvin: Indeed, my dear. I am no snob, and you surely brought as much pleasure to your audience as I did to mine; maybe much, much more. In the early days I did perform in other areas of entertainment, so I do know of about Music Hall. One man in his time plays many parts. But I do not like to dwell on those early days, or my origins, which were, indeed, most humble.

Lulu: And I wasn't always a dancer, you know. Sometimes I was a magician's assistant. And I did a bit of modelling and some filming. Some of my photos and films are collector's items these days.

Melvin: For persons of exquisite taste, do doubt. With such a career as you described, you will, no doubt have known some others of our little community as we criss-crossed the country to the places of entertainment.

Lulu: Well, I met a few of them. I met the great Alfredo a few times, I knew him because I worked for a while with another magician. Ray was always around the circuit, and I met Mavis on a couple of occasions. They were all quite sweet in their own ways. Harry was resident at the Windmill when I

was working there. He was really horrible, acting like the big star and trying to seduce all the women on promises of promoting their careers. Makes you laugh, doesn't it. Harry's never done a favour for anyone in his life.

[Alfred enters – SL]

Alfred: Hello, you two, how's tricks?

Melvin: Ah, Tricks are more your line of business than mine, dear boy. But I thank you for your question. I am in fine health.

Alfred: No more tricks for me I'm afraid. This arthritis has put paid to any of the tricks I used to do. Close-up stuff, prestidigitation, all that kind of stuff. You can't be a magician if you can't shuffle the cards. Still, I had a good shot at it, and a good career.

Lulu: Well, so long as you achieved most of what you set out to do, eh?

Alfred: Sadly, not everything. There was a piece of equipment I invented for a trick. I had just perfected it, but before I could use it before an audience I found someone had pinched it from me and performed it. It wouldn't have been so bad, but it was stolen by my most bitter professional rival.

Melvin: We have all heard your story many times, dear boy, and we all have had our little disappointments. One must just bear up, I'm afraid. The show must go on.

Alfred: I still have most of the equipment. I was looking for some young magician to give it to, but the profession seems largely to have died out. It would be good to pass the knowledge to a young performer, but they don't seem to be interested. For some reason Harry wanted to borrow one of my cabinets. No doubt he has one of his jokes planned. I had no use for it, anyway.

Lulu: Well, I don't suppose you'll ever get it back. And I dread to think what he's going to do with it.

Melvin: No doubt we shall all find out shortly.

Alfred: Let's just hope he disappears in it, eh!

Lulu: Ooh, let's hope so.

Alfred: You're looking as lovely as you ever did, Lulu. What a shame that we never managed to work together. You were so slim and supple.

Lulu: You flatterer, Alfred. I'm still quite supple, you know, but I don't think I could fit in any of your boxes anymore. You know, I used to work as a magician's assistant myself. And I got to know the business quite well. I mean, you have to know how the trick works to take part in it.

Alfred: Yes, the assistant often knows as much as the magician. Anyway, my fingers don't work anymore, so I won't try to saw you in half. Even if I could do the trick, I've lost the trick saw. I think I lost it on my last tour.

Lulu: Mind you, I suppose one of the benefits of not touring is that we don't have to stay in those terrible digs anymore.

Alfred: Yes, most of them were terrible, but some weren't too bad.

Melvin: I always used to look for the letters 'LDO' in the visitor's book. It made my day if I found it there.

Lulu: LDO - What's that mean?

Melvin: Landladies daughter obliges. Ah, happy days, happy days indeed.

[Enter Harry SL]

Harry: What are you lot talking about?

Alfred: We were just talking about some of the digs we stayed in, not gossiping about you.

Harry: It's funny, that. I'm sure I could feel my ears burning. As soon as I made it big I made sure I stayed in the best hotels. It was a part of my contract. No good hotel, no booking. I wouldn't have wanted to hang around with a load of losers, like you. When you're top of the bill you've got to act like a star, it's expected. I'd never share top billing, and I made sure that if someone was doing too well, I'd back sure that they were removed from the show. It's only what a proper star would do.

Alfred: Well, I don't want to talk to you. Not after what you did to me. (He exits SL).

Melvin: My motto was always be nice to the people when you are on the way up; because you're almost bound to meet them again on the way back down.

Harry: Well, that's the difference between us, matey. Some people, a very few people, are stars, and all the rest are just losers like you.

Melvin: I've had my name at the top of the posters many times. Being in the legitimate theatre, one must always work as part of the group. The cast of any play are like family to me. I'm always happy if any of them makes it big. I'm not jealous or small minded, like some are.

Harry: Mind you, you are either a liar or self-deluded. You see, I know someone who knew you when you started out. You were in a song and dance act, and a pretty terrible one. It was called The Wonder Boys, and you were called Bert Cheesewright then. Not much respectable or legitimate about that act. And I heard some stories about you. Then there those adverts you did for suppositories.

Melvin: (flustered) No, no, that wasn't me. I don't know where you get your information from, but it isn't anything to do with me.

Harry: So I don't suppose you'd want me telling everyone those stories, would you, Bert?

Melvin: It's Melvin. Melvin le Fromagier, classical actor, and don't you forget it you, you low comedian, you foul-mouthed lout, with your cruel pranks and your vicious tongue. One day you will go too far, and someone will settle your hash for good.

Harry: Well, you're not exactly causing me to quake in my boots. I played the Glasgow Empire, and survived to tell the tale. As for you, you'd probably cry if anyone booed, and you couldn't punch your way out of a wet paper bag! Mind you, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about; you know, I've always preferred your room to mine. It's much nicer, got a better view, and it's bigger. Perhaps I could be persuaded to keep quiet if you agreed to swap rooms.

[Malcolm comes in - SL]

Malcolm: Sorry for the delay with making the tea. Mavis told me the milk's gone off. I'll have to go to the little supermarket round the corner. I hope no-one needs anything in the next few minutes.

Lulu: Don't you worry, Malcolm, if there is an emergency, I'm sure we can deal with it. And I know the combination of the cupboard if anyone needs anything in a hurry.

[Malcolm leaves SR]

Lulu: Oh, Malcolm, wait a tick, there's something I want from the shop. A chocolate bar, just a little one. Anyone mind if I take an apple? [She takes an apple from the bowl and follows Malcolm off]

[Mavis enters SR]

Mavis: Well, I found Little Jimmy in the Laundry room, where you put him, Harry. I suppose it was your idea of a joke to write that ransom note. Pretty stupid to put your name on it, though. Ray was really upset when he found out. I've never seen him angry before.

Harry: I was only trying to jolly things up a bit. Everyone's been looking so glum recently.

Mavis: That's only when you come in the room. I don't think there's anybody here, residents or staff, who can stand your company. And while you're here, will you please tell me what you did with my saw. It may have been used to play on, and not to cut with, but it's made of the best steel. It wouldn't sound good otherwise, and it's razor sharp.

Harry: Well, maybe I had a piece of wood to cut, eh! To tell the truth, I took it to stop you making that awful noise. Can't for the life of me work out why you want to practice. You'll never work again!

Mavis: I do it because I still can. Unlike you, I had a genuine talent, I didn't just steal other peoples jokes. There wasn't an instrument I couldn't play, with just a little practice. I was classically trained.

Harry: I remember you alright. And I remember that night in Bradford when you made the mistake of crossing me.

Mavis: That girl was only sixteen, and you were a filthy old lecher. What you did to me after I stopped you was unforgiveable. You shouted out filthy comments while I was trying to do my act. You'd sabotaged the bow I used to play my saw and you got me taken off the bill. And this all happened when my career was just taking off. You're a vile, vindictive little man.

Melvin: You know, Harry, I don't believe she's a fan of yours.

Harry: There's nothing little about me. I was a big star. It's only the business which got small.

Mavis: Nothing small about you? (She gives a sharp laugh) That isn't what Vera says. Remember her? You had an affair with her, so she knows what she's talking about. Then you went and told her husband and the press and you deliberately ruined that marriage. She got almost nothing from the divorce, so you also ruined her financially.

Harry: What can I say? I needed the publicity. No such thing as bad publicity. If you're a star, you've got to stay in the public eye, you know.

Mavis: And the last insult is that you've been trying to poison her cat with your sleeping pills.

Harry: Best thing for it. It's a mangy old fur-ball and leaves piles of steaming do-dah's everywhere.

Mavis: It only does that since you kicked it. You've made her all nervous. Mind you, she did chose to do it in your slipper. She's had her revenge. The rest of us haven't worked out what we're going to do.

Harry: Have you finished with this 'we all hate Harry' campaign?

Mavis: Believe me, I've hardly started.

[Lulu enters, SR]

Harry: Well, you'll have to continue without me.

Lulu: I'll see you a little later, Harry. I've got a little present for you. Shall I drop it off later? I know how much you like a little drink.

[Harry storms out SL]

Mavis: Why on earth were you offering him a drink? You know he gets even nastier when he's drunk.

Lulu: Actually, I've laced it with laxative. He'll be running to the lavvy all night. It's not much, but it's a little bit of revenge. You've always looked after me, Mavis. It's about time that I did something for you.

Mavis: Oh, well, thank you, I suppose. Just so long as he doesn't keep me awake all night, on his way to the lavvy.

Melvin: I'd invest in some ear-plugs, if I were you. Now tell me more, how is dear Ray, now that he has Little Jimmy back?

Mavis: He's hardly saying a word, but little Jimmy is swearing like a trouper, saying how he is going to get bloody revenge on Harry. I've never heard Ray swear before.

Melvin: Poor Ray, he was always such a dear, dear man.

Lulu: Remember that show he had? What was it called, now?

Mavis: It was called Little Jimmy's Jaunts. Funny idea though, putting a ventriloquist on the radio.

Melvin: If I recall correctly, it was performed before a live audience. Lots of other entertainers started out on that show. And I believe you could never see Ray's lips moving, except when Little Jimmy was speaking.

Lulu: I'll just go and get that bottle for Harry. See you! [She exits SR]

Mavis: Sorry if I was getting a bit hot under the collar.

Melvin: No need to apologise, dear lady. Harry is completely odious. You would need the patience of a saint to put up with the man.

[Alfred enters SL]

Alfred: Hello there, what's all the fuss about?

Melvin: Mavis here has just been shouting at poor little Harry, our very own viper in our bosom. I have just learned that the aforementioned Harry behaved as badly towards Mavis as he has to many of us. It seems that most of us have some reason to dislike him. Perhaps we two are the exceptions.

Alfred: Speak for yourself, Melvin. A couple of years ago I learned that Harry had stolen the plans for my cabinet to my rival. It all happened when we were in Panto. I was playing the demon king, and it wasn't a big part, so I used my spare time to perfect the cabinet. Harry seemed very friendly and interested in my work. Then, one evening near the end of the run, I found that the plans I had drawn up for the stage version were missing. I always assumed that my rival had stolen them, but, when he knew he was dying he told me that Harry had stolen the plans and sold them to him. He always felt guilty about that, and he wanted to confess it before he died. So, admit it now, what has Harry done to you?

Melvin: It's not what he's done, it's about what he's threatening to do. You see, when I started out in the business I was not an actor. I was in fact a chorus boy. Let's just say that there was a youthful indiscretion concerning an act which was then against the law. This only happened once, but we were observed. I grew out of that sort of behaviour. Anyway, Harry seems to have found out, and I think he is threatening to try to blackmail me in some way, or at the very least to make my life miserable by telling a distorted version of the story.

Mavis: Oh, I'm so sorry, Melvin. You don't deserve that. You've always been kind and thoughtful. And it's nothing to be ashamed of, these days.

Alfred: Well, that means that we all have reasons to want Harry out of here, except young Malcolm.

Mavis: The argument I first had with Harry was about a girl in the chorus. She was only sixteen. I stopped him seducing her. Well, it was more like attempted rape, really. Harry won't have remembered her, she was just another conquest, but I did. Her name was Doris Eversley. A couple of weeks ago, I found out that Malcolm is her son. He's not Harry's son, though, he was born years after this happened.

Melvin: I suppose we ought to include Little Jimmy and Vera's cat, Susie in the list, of those who hate Harry. Look, I must get ready. I'm expecting a visit from an admirer of my work. He wishes to interview me and I must prepare myself. Farewell, parting is such sweet sorrow!

[Melvin exits SR]

Mavis: Please don't say anything to Malcolm, will you? I'm sure he wouldn't want the others to know, especially Harry.

Alfred: Of course not. You can rely on me not to tell him anything.

[Ray enters SL]

Ray: Tell who, tell him what?

Mavis: Oh, nothing really, Ray. It's just that I've told someone's secret, and maybe I shouldn't have.

Ray: That's alright, I won't ask anymore.

Alfred: How are you now, Ray?

Ray: Oh, I'm fine, now that I've got my little Jimmy back. I know it's a bit strange, but I can't really manage without him. He was calling Harry all sorts of names, and I didn't know he knew those kinds of words. I think must be getting old and peculiar.

Mavis: I think you are just the same as all of us. We all need something to cling onto.

[Malcolm enters SR carrying a carton of milk and a chocolate bar]

Malcolm: Hello, everyone. I can make us all a nice cup of tea now. I'll just go and put the kettle on.

[He exits SL]

Mavis: That must be Lulu's chocolate bar. I should have asked for one too.

Alfred: I'm sure you're sweet enough already.

Mavis: Oh, Alfred, you shouldn't flatter me so.

Alfred: It's no more than you deserve. I always admired you from afar. It started back in the old days. It always made me glad when I saw your name on the same bill as mine. Somehow I never got the courage to get to know you better.

Mavis: Well, maybe you can make up for lost time now.

Alfred: When I found out what Harry had done to get you off the bill I was so angry with him. He hasn't changed at all, he's still completely selfish and spiteful.

Mavis: That's all in the past. No good raking over all that stuff again. Let's just enjoy each other's company, while we still can.

[Malcolm enters SL, obviously upset]

Alfred: Whatever's the matter, Malcolm?

Malcolm: Please keep guard of the fort, will you. I've got to phone the police. Harry's dead.

Mavis: It can't have been a heart attack. He didn't have a heart.

Malcolm: Don't joke about that. He's been murdered.

Alfred: Murdered?

Mavis: Oh, no. What happened?

Malcolm: I went into his room to ask if he wanted a cup of tea. There was blood everywhere. He was in that cabinet of yours, Alfred. You know, the one you used to saw the lady in half. He was there, in the middle of the cabinet. Harry's been cut in half with a real saw. What made it more gruesome was that an apple had been stuck in his mouth. He seems to have been drinking, and I think it was surgical alcohol put in a vodka bottle. It was half full and on the floor. Oh, it was terrible. Now, I really have to call the Police.

End Act 1