



TWO OLD QUEENS

by **John Senczuk**
with the music of
Sir Noel Coward

Two Old Queens was first performed in a production by Mirage Makers, in association with The Blue Room, at the Blue Room Studio, Perth, on Thursday 11 October, 2007. It was directed by John Senczuk with the following cast:

Noel Coward The Queen Mother	John Michael Swinbank Edgar Metcalfe
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Musical Director	Tim Cunniffe
Design	John Senczuk
Choreography	Paul McKay

Poster and production photography by Nigel Etherington

Characters

HRH, The Queen Mother
Noël Coward

Setting

The foyer of London's Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, 1998

Song List

Play, Orchestra, Play
I've Been To a Marvelous Party
The Stately Homes of England
Poor Little Rich Girl
The Merry Wives of Windsor
There Are Bad Times Just Around the Corner
Mad About the Boy
Mad Dogs and Englishmen
I'll See You Again

You're the Top

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Act One

(The QUEEN MOTHER enters the foyer accompanied by her Equerry [Snd: Trumpet Voluntary (Prince of Denmark's March) by Jeremiah Clarke]; she shakes hands with two or three of the 'guests' before taking her place on the dais, standing next to a 'statue' of a seated Noel Coward, at this stage, covered with a cloth.)

QUEEN MOTHER (*Consulting notes*). Culture Secretary, Mr Smith, members of the theatrical community, it gives me very great pleasure to be with you this afternoon to celebrate the life and achievement of my dear friend, Sir Noël Coward, by the unveiling of a statue in his honour in the lead up to the centenary of his birth next year, 1999. I have even greater pleasure knowing that I shall always be younger than he.

This marvelous theatre – the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane - has been called one of the world's most haunted theatres. The appearance of any one of the handful of ghosts that are said to frequent the theatre signals good luck for an actor or production.

The most famous ghost is the "Man in Grey," who appears dressed as a nobleman of the late 18th century. Legend has it that he is the ghost of a man stabbed in the back – by a critic perhaps ... or a co star! - whose skeletal remains were found within a walled-up back passage in 1848 ... a back walled-up passage.

Composer and performer Ivor Novello, immensely popular in my youth though little-remembered today, presented his musicals here from 1931 until the theatre was closed in 1939, not because of his productions but because of the War. It was during that horrid time that the theatre served as the headquarters for the Entertainments National Service Association, ENSA; or as it was called back at the Palace: Every Night Something Awful! The Theatre also sustained some minor bomb damage. The theatre reopened with Noël Coward's musical, *Pacific 1860* in 1946. Sadly, before the show opened, he fell out with his leading lady, Mary Martin, the Lane proved to be inhospitable and freezing cold ... and the show was a major flop with audiences and critics alike.

(There is a rustle under the cloth.)

"The play is devoid of wit and humour, and there is not a single melody vivid enough to haunt the memory afterwards," ... said one of the critics. The theatre today is owned and managed by Really Useful Theatres, a division of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group. I wonder what Noël would make of its current production, *Miss Saigon*? ... Not as useful as it should be, I dare say! But I loved the helicopter, and I travel everywhere these days in a helicopter. The 'chopper, has changed my life as conclusively as that of Anne Boleyn.

I first met Noël, with my husband – Bertie - and the two princesses, on the set of his war-time film *In Which We Serve* in 1942. He recited the Dunkirk speech for us as the ship rolled and the wind machine roared. The Princesses were thrilled and were beautifully behaved; as was I ... thrilled, I mean.

Noël and I met many times during our lives, and I was very fortunate to have lunched with him during an official visit to Jamaica - where he then

lived - in 1965. Noël served a curry in coconuts for mains; a lovely rum cream pie for pudding; ... but his fish mousse, for starters, continues to haunt me; it had the consistency of a Slazenger tennis ball.

(Another rustle under the cloth.)

COWARD *(From under the cloth)*. That bloody lobster mousse.

QUEEN MOTHER. I was, of course, a guest at his memorial service the year he died.

COWARD *(Muffled; ethereal)*. That was in 1973; twenty-five fucking years ago.

QUEEN MOTHER *(Oblivious)*. Next year, he will also be remembered with a series of events including a season of BBC Radio programs, theatre revivals of his plays and reissues of some of his works in print. I am informed that Birmingham University will host an academic conference on his works in the winter term. I can imagine what Noël might have thought of that!

Also planned is a charity album called *Twentieth Century Blues* – suggested, I am told, by a Pet Shop Boy - which will feature Robbie Williams alongside something called ‘Sting’, and other celebrities ... singing Noël’s songs. The memory of Noël Coward, his brilliance with words ...

COWARD *(Still hidden)*. Jesus, fucking, Christ!

QUEEN MOTHER. ... his brilliant composing and playwriting gave immense pleasure to so many people all over the world. But I think we Brits, as we are now known, are fortunate to be the legatees of his lovely music and his light-hearted fun. And in his own words he did indeed make music for the people.

COWARD *(Removing the cover sheet)*. There is a Blue Plaque at 131 Waldegrave Road, Teddington where I was born.

QUEEN MOTHER *(Shaken by the revelation)*. Noël, is that you?

COWARD. Madame Arcarti couldn’t have done a worse job at raising spirits from the dead.

QUEEN MOTHER. I think I need a spirit of another flavour entirely!

COWARD. And I’ve got another plaque at Westminster Abbey, in Poet’s Corner.

QUEEN MOTHER. Is it blue?

COWARD. The colour is immaterial.

QUEEN MOTHER. What are you doing here?

COWARD. I’ve had to wait twenty-five fucking years for a bronze statue!

QUEEN MOTHER. You really should have waited until I unveiled you, Noël; punctuality may be the courtesy of Kings, but even an old Queen would hesitate to arrive too early - You always were too impulsive, Noël -

COWARD. Too much, too soon.

QUEEN MOTHER. ... and indiscreet!

COWARD. Still not lost any of your salad days charm, I see ...

QUEEN MOTHER. I thought that you’d gone ... ‘upstairs’?

COWARD. I tried to die with some dignity a quarter of a century ago ...

QUEEN MOTHER. My ancestors, the Strathmores, were one of the last aristocratic families to employ a private jester. So I’m not easily awed. ...

COWARD. I kept an open mind, but what surprised me was St Peter tapping me on the shoulder and saying: “This way, Mr Coward, come up and try your hand on the harp.” I am no harpist!

Underscore: *Play, Orchestra, Play* (Tonight at 8.30: *Shadow Play*)

QUEEN MOTHER. *Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!*

Bird thou never wert –

That from Heaven or near it

Pourest thy full heart

in profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Song: *Play, Orchestra, Play*

COWARD. *Listen to the strain*

It plays once more for us,

QUEEN MOTHER. *There it is again,*

The past in store for us,

COWARD. *Wake*

In memory some forgotten song,

To break

This rhythm – driving us along

And make

Harmony again a last encore for us ...

Play, Orchestra, play,

Play something light and sweet and gay,

For we must have music

QUEEN MOTHER. *We must have music*

BOTH. *To drive our fears away.*

COWARD. *While our illusions swiftly fade for us*

Let’s have an orchestra score

In the confusions

The years have made for us,

Serenade for us,

Just once more.

QUEEN MOTHER. *Life needn’t be grey,*

Although it’s changing day by day,

BOTH. *Though these two old queens may decay,*

COWARD. *Play, orchestra ...*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Play, orchestra ...*

BOTH. *Play, orchestra, play.*

QUEEN MOTHER. I lived through two world wars, the great depression, and 1936 - the year of three kings and the abdication crisis. I witnessed history from the introduction of automobiles and space travel; and those dreadful mobile phones, with the operator sitting on satellites -

COWARD. You cheered your country’s subjects in their finest moments, Ma’am, and cheerfully supported them in their darkest hour.

QUEEN MOTHER. Yes, one did, didn’t one. When I was ten years old I was told by a palmist at a garden party, “You will be a queen when you grow up.”

COWARD. Our mothers must have employed the same palmist; I was given the exact same prediction!

(QUEEN MOTHER laughs.)

You look radiant.

QUEEN MOTHER. It was Queen Victoria’s edict that the royal face should never be ‘too earnest’ in company. I was the first royal to ever smile in public.

COWARD. And still combing your hair with a Bunsen burner I see?
 QUEEN MOTHER. It matches the outfit. You must have seen this dress before.
 COWARD. Of course I have Ma'am, and the hat ... many, many times; but I've grown very fond of it.
 QUEEN MOTHER. I owe it all to dear Norman Hartnell. I've been wearing the same frock for forty years ... I cringe every time I see a magazine photograph of me at the races ... the horse usually comes off having more fashion sense!
(They sit; COWARD back on his pedestal.)
 Do you approve of your statue? So life-like, the bronze; matches your complexion!
 COWARD. Quite apart from the horrid patina, they've cast me sitting down ... like Wilde – at the same level. No need to look up to me.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Confirming what critics have been saying about you for years, dear.
 COWARD. But ... I'm seated while Shakespeare stands above us ... pointing down with his quill ... at a manuscript. Why am I always expected to wear a dressing-gown, smoke cigarettes in a long holder and say "Darling, how wonderful?"
 QUEEN MOTHER. I expect you saw life quite differently from ordinary people – I mean, being world famous and having people making a fuss of you all the time ...
 COWARD. They occasionally let up.
 QUEEN MOTHER. I'm afraid you must find this unveiling very dull.
 COWARD. Not at all. I'm enjoying it immensely. I had hoped to have enjoyed it much sooner than this?
 QUEEN MOTHER. Oh, Noël ... royalty has become extremely complicated and time consuming since your ... demise.
 COWARD. I've managed to keep up with most of the gossip; they've been a couple of Royals passed over ... Diana arrived the same week as Mother Theresa!
 QUEEN MOTHER. Protestants One; Catholics One.
 COWARD. And Vercacci's serving the half-time drinks!
 QUEEN MOTHER. Vercacci?
 COWARD. The celebrity fashion designer.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Oh yes, didn't Elton sing at his funeral?
 COWARD. Elton sings at everyone's funeral.
(A moment of reflection.)
 QUEEN MOTHER. You know, I have a dreadful confession to make.
 COWARD. Confession?
 QUEEN MOTHER. You'll probably think me absolutely awful, but I just can't bear false pretences and playing up to people; it's just not in my nature.
 COWARD. Very commendable.
 QUEEN MOTHER. And anyhow, you're so brilliant and successful ... or you were, that what I say couldn't matter to you one way or the other, could it?
 COWARD. That depends on what it is.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Well, it's this – I've read all your plays, and frankly, I didn't care for them.
 COWARD. Did you buy them or get them from the library?

QUEEN MOTHER. I had people give them to me, of course.
 COWARD. Well, that's all right then, isn't it?
 QUEEN MOTHER. Honestly, I don't think they're worthy of you.
 COWARD. How do you know?
 QUEEN MOTHER. Do you – really and truly – like them yourself?
 COWARD. Tremendously. I just can't put them down.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Of course, I know they're frightfully clever and all that, but you must admit they didn't 'contribute' very much, did they?
 COWARD. They contributed a hell of a lot to me.
 QUEEN MOTHER. I wasn't speaking commercially.
 COWARD. I was. If I weren't dead, I could be living off my Royalties now.
 QUEEN MOTHER. You lived off Royalty for years, dear. But, with the world in its present state there are so many really important things you could have written about.
 COWARD. Name three.
 QUEEN MOTHER *(A pause)*. I know I'm not very good at expressing myself - but a man with your insights and your experience of the world and people, don't you think you had a sort of responsibility, a sort of duty, to the public?
 COWARD. In what way?
 QUEEN MOTHER. You could have done so much to help.
 COWARD. Who?
 QUEEN MOTHER. All sorts of people.
 COWARD. How?
 QUEEN MOTHER. I see it's no use saying any more. You're just deliberately misunderstanding me. I should have thought a man in your position would be big enough to be able to take a little honest criticism.
 COWARD. Why?
 QUEEN MOTHER. But I see I was wrong.
 COWARD. Then you're making giant strides.
 QUEEN MOTHER *(Pause)*. Have a good flight down?
 COWARD. From the aeronautical point of view, yes. Socially, it left a good deal to be desired.
 QUEEN MOTHER. What can I expect of Heaven?
 COWARD. All that opulence is terribly exotic, but it is not me. Still, I rise above it. After Clarence House, you'll feel right at home -
 QUEEN MOTHER. Oh ...
 COWARD. When the time comes.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Quite.
 COWARD. I believe wholeheartedly in pleasure. Even in death, I am still very light-minded and extremely serious.

Song: *I've Been To a Marvellous Party*
Quite for no reason
I'm (t)here for the Season
And high as a kite,
Living in Heaven
With Maudie from Devon

*Which couldn't be right.
Everyone's (t)here and frightfully gay,
Nobody cares what people say,
Though the Pearly Riviera
Seems really much queerer
Than Rome at its height,
Saturday night.*

*I've been to a marvelous party
With Zsa Zsa and Chicko and Mel,
It was in the fresh air
And we went as we were
And we stayed as we were
Which was Hell.
Gracie Fields started singing at midnight
And didn't stop shrieking till four;
We knew the fun was bound to begin
When Gertie got blind on Dubonnet and gin
And scratched her veneer with a Cartier pin,
I couldn't have liked it more.*

*I've been to a marvelous party,
I must say the fun was intense,
We all had to do
What the people we knew
Would be doing a hundred years hence.
Dear Cecil arrived wearing armour,
Some shells and a black feather boa,
Poor Vivien wore a surrealist comb
Made of bits of mosaic from St Peter's in Rome,
But the weight was so great Larry made her go home,
I couldn't have liked it more!*

*People's behaviour
Away from Australia
Would make you aghast,
So much variety
Watching Society
Scampering past,
If you have any mind at all
Gibbon's too-too divine Decline and Fall
Seems pretty flimsy,
No more than a whimsy,
By way of contrast
On Saturday last –*

*I've been to a marvelous party,
We didn't start dinner till ten*

*And Heddy Lamar
Did a stunt at the bar
With a lot of extraordinary men;
Dear Moira arrived with a turtle
Which shattered us all to the core,
Ginger Rogers was dancing a foxtrot with me
When suddenly she screamed Fiddledidee
And ripped off her knickers for all to see,
I couldn't have liked it more.*

*I've been to a marvelous party,
Elise made an entrance with May,
You'd never have guessed
From her fisherman's vest
That her bust had been whittled away.
Poor Gladys got fried on Chianti
And talked about esprit de corps.
Ivor made a couple of passes at Gus
And Bobbie, who hates any kind of a fuss,
Did half the Big Apple and twisted his truss,
I couldn't have liked it more.*

*I've been to a celestial party,
We played the most wonderful game,
St Joan disappeared
And came back in a beard
And we all had to guess at her name!
We talked about growing old gracefully
And Dame Sybil's who's ninety-four
Said, 'A, it's a question of being sincere,
And B, if you're supple you've got nothing to fear.'
Then she swung upside down from a glass chandelier,
I couldn't have liked it more.*

QUEEN MOTHER. If you are having so much fun up there - and one is pleased that you are 'up there!' - why have you come back?

COWARD. It's a matter of timing; mine has always been impeccable. I passed over in 1973 and, it appears, I have been passed over by everyone ever since. The only loyalty I can expect is from the boring amateurs ... and a few affected 'tulips' desperate to be stylish.

QUEEN MOTHER. "Nobody is boring," my mother would often say, "and if you find somebody or something a bore, the fault lies in you."

COWARD. The best I can hope for now is some trick queens in Notting Hill naming their poodles Eliot and Amanda! My friends appear to have forgotten me!

QUEEN MOTHER. You really must consider if they were true friends in the first place. You're too successful to be forgotten, Noël; you're just ... temporarily off the social register!

COWARD. Success altered the face of London for me. Just a little, the atmosphere

felt lighter. I'm not sure whether or not the people who passed me in the street appeared to be more smiling and gay than they had been hitherto, but I expect they did. I do know that life began to feel overcrowded. Every minute of the day was occupied, and I relaxed, rather indiscriminately, into a welter of publicity.

QUEEN MOTHER. In my experience success brings worry; but one learns to endure it. Since you left, the Firm has had a few ups and downs.

COWARD. No Press interviewer, photographer, or gossip writer had to fight in order to see me, I was wide open to them all; smiling and burbling bright witticisms, giving my views on this and that: whether or not the modern girl would make a good mother, or what would be my ideal in a wife.

QUEEN MOTHER. I made it a hard and fast rule; I deliberately declined to do any public interviews at all. Never complain; never explain.

COWARD. As I got older I noticed that my opinion was asked for, and given, on current books and plays. I made a few adequately witty jokes which were immediately misquoted or twisted round the wrong way, thereby denuding them of any humour they might originally have had.

QUEEN MOTHER. Is it just me or are pensioners getting younger these days? Would you like a drink, Noël? (*Taking a small flask from her bag.*) It must be the Magic Hour somewhere in the world.

COWARD. I was photographed in every conceivable position. Not only was I photographed, but my dressing room was photographed, my car was photographed, my rooms in Ebury Street were photographed. It was only by an oversight, I am sure, that our lodgers escaped the camera.

QUEEN MOTHER (*Pouring two shots of gin*). The blasted paparazzi! They'll be the death of me ... oh, dear! I've tried to avoid mentioning Diana in public!

COWARD. Now there's a girl who's certainly brought glamour back to the afterlife; she was the first celebrity in years to push Grace Kelly off the cover of Elysium Weekly. Although I thought that Cecil's photograph of her wearing a steering wheel as a halo was in very poor taste.

QUEEN MOTHER. I'll give her that one concession, she was a clothes horse ... (*She rummages in her bag and pulls out a damp red-stained handkerchief.*)

COWARD. I took to wearing coloured turtle necked jerseys in my youth, actually more for comfort than effect, and soon I was informed by my evening paper that I had started a fashion. I believe that to a certain extent this was really true; at any rate, during the ensuing months I noticed more and more of our seedier West End chorus boys parading about London in them.

QUEEN MOTHER (*Offering him a glass*). You were always welcome at Clarence House, Noël.

COWARD. An invitation to lunch with the Queen Mother at Clarence House, with hovering footmen, congenial company and the summer sunlight glinting off your vast diamonds, was considered by many to be one of London's greatest private pleasures.

QUEEN MOTHER. Still is, dear!

COWARD. It was all very merry and agreeable, but there was always, for me, a tiny pall of "best behavior" overlaying the proceedings. I am not

complaining about this, I think it is right and proper, but I was constantly aware of it. It isn't that I had a basic urge to tell disgusting jokes and say "fuck" every five minutes, but I was conscious of a faint resentment that I couldn't if I wanted to.

QUEEN MOTHER. Was it my company you sought, Noël; or my company?

COWARD. Your privileges, Ma'am.

QUEEN MOTHER. You had a dreadful wandering eye; I never used to trust you with the footmen, Noël; I'd always had the Butler count them after you'd left. (*She laughs.*)

COWARD. I noticed that a Tory Minister has strongly advised you not to employ homosexuals at Clarence House.

QUEEN MOTHER. What a nonsense, without them we'd have to go self-service.

COWARD. I recognized the moment I met you that you possessed a genius for living.

QUEEN MOTHER. These days I can't live with out television ...

COWARD. Death has convinced me of one thing: television is for appearing on, not for looking at.

QUEEN MOTHER. I'm addicted to Keeping Up Appearance!

COWARD. Television, of course, like radar and atomic energy are so far beyond my comprehension that my brain shudders at the thought of them and scurries for cover like a primitive tribesman confronted for the first time with a *Dunhill* cigarette lighter.

QUEEN MOTHER. Nowadays, I've no other hobbies apart from my gee-gees ... and, of course, I've also become a devoted drinker.

COWARD. The only other acceptable diversion.

QUEEN MOTHER. "When one of you old queens has finished can you bring this old queen a drink?" I never said that, you know. (*Offering him the handkerchief.*) Will you do the honours?

COWARD. Martini still?

QUEEN MOTHER. It was Pia Zadora who circulated the best recipe ...

COWARD. One part gin to two parts *Dubonnet*?

QUEEN MOTHER. Three parts gin – and wave a *Dubonnet* soaked hanky over the glass!
(*He does as suggested.*)

COWARD. Apparently *Dubonnet* was the preferred beverage of the French Foreign Legion.
(*She toasts him.*)

QUEEN MOTHER. *Viva la France!* Of course, we don't really like the French, do we, Noël? They are a funny lot. And don't get me started on de Gaulle or the EEC.

COWARD. There's always something fishy about the French.

QUEEN MOTHER. Anyway, for whatever reason, welcome back, Noël; but you really must try not to be so sensitive.

COWARD. I'll take it on the ... (*He toasts her.*) "Chin-Chin!"
(*They drink.*)

QUEEN MOTHER. You know, I once had to admonish my daughter, the Queen, not to have a second glass of wine at lunch. "Is that wise darling?" I said, "Remember you have to reign all afternoon." (*She laughs.*)

COWARD. Is it still champagne with dinner at Clarence House?

QUEEN MOTHER. Naturally, I insist on *Veuve Clicquot*.

COWARD. "The Widow."

QUEEN MOTHER. Sometimes known as "The Merry Widow." But I make it a rule never to have more than two glasses; I leave the rest of the bottle to be collected and finished off by the staff backstairs.

COWARD. Always thinking of the working class, Ma'am.

QUEEN MOTHER. I like to stay in touch with the common people.

COWARD. I've always considered you to be the great illusionist; able, against all logic and evidence, to sustain the notion that royalty exists for the benefit of common folk. All that signifies is ... well, not much, beyond the chameleon quality bestowed by money, canniness ... and extreme old age.

QUEEN MOTHER. I attribute my longevity to my Scottish genes, and I'm a Leo.

COWARD. I don't believe in astrology. The only stars I can blame for my failures are those that walk about the stage.

QUEEN MOTHER. Our family crest includes the gold lion of Lyons, a rose motif and the green thistle.

COWARD (*Kneels*). I am at your feet, Ma'am.

QUEEN MOTHER (*She 'Knights' him with her walking stick*). Your work is the rent you pay for the room you occupy on earth.

COWARD (*He is going to raise a topic, but thinks better of it*). Indeed, Ma'am, you are gloriously unstoppable.

QUEEN MOTHER (*Refilling her glass*). I'm like a friggin' *Duracell* battery, dear ~ I just keep on going.

COWARD. I understand that you are officially the seventh largest consumer of gin in the world ... after Canada.

QUEEN MOTHER. One does what one can for the Common-wealth.

COWARD. Anyone who can drink like you and stay upright, is to be greatly admired.

QUEEN MOTHER (*Pouring him another drink*). You were always welcome at Clarence House!

COWARD (*Drinks*). You were one of the enduring friendships of my life, Ma'am. If only a similar good will had been extended to me by the Critics ... and the British Tax Man!

QUEEN MOTHER. People do have short memories. ... In the end, they'll rally for a centenary. All flaws will fall away after 100 years!

COWARD. Flaws?

QUEEN MOTHER. I was talking about me, dear! Unlike you, I was born into a life of privilege in 1900. I lived an Edwardian childhood of the storybook kind between my family homes of Glamis Castle, St Paul's, Waldenbury, and St James in London.

COWARD. The Stately Homes ...

QUEEN MOTHER. Glamis was our fourteenth century ancestral castle: it had ghosts, romance and secret stone staircases.

COWARD. Is it true that Macbeth murdered King Duncan at Glamis?

QUEEN MOTHER. The blood on the stones can never be washed away.

COWARD. We were all expecting to see you 'upstairs' much sooner than this?

QUEEN MOTHER. Our family motto is: "In thee O Lord, have I put my trust" ... but He appears to have taken his eye off the ball. I may have retreated to Clarence House, Windsor and the Castle of Mey ... but we're now a Firm, not a family, and how could I leave Lilibet with the Firm in such a bloody mess?

COWARD. Once the cat is completely out of the bag, there is rarely any possibility of stuffing him back in again ... so why not let the menagerie look after itself?

QUEEN MOTHER. But you see, while I'm still here I can be useful: nothing helps distract from a frightful headline more than wheeling out a dowager queen ... especially with a new hip! My brother David pushed me out of an apple tree when I was a child ...

COWARD. Even from up there, one can see that the royal family has changed –

QUEEN MOTHER. Changed from pompous exemplars of family values to a soup of haphazard relationships.

COWARD. A menu of disastrous encounters!

QUEEN MOTHER. I loath the changes to the Monarchy, and to the rest of the country: removing hereditary peers from the House of Lords; the proposed ban on fox hunting ... worst of all is the fast disappearing British Empire.

COWARD. One of the worst aspects of modern English life is that so many of one's friends have to work ... and they're so bad at it.

QUEEN MOTHER. If my wish-list had applied, Charles and Diana's marriage - COWARD. Arranged with your blessing –

QUEEN MOTHER. Never-the-less, it should never have foundered; and he would never have resumed his relationship with Camilla ...and he might not have insisted that coffee enemas were a treatment for cancer; Fergie might have resisted those *Weight Watchers'* commercials; young Andrew might have avoided topless shipmates; and as for Edward –

COWARD. Barbara Windsor?

QUEEN MOTHER. ... such a drama queen -

COWARD. I used to throw a scene now and then to impress people, to make them understand right at the start that I'm a man with whom they can't take liberties. It's not temperament. It's organization.

QUEEN MOTHER. Perhaps, Noël, it was your 'organisation' that so irritated the establishment. On the other hand, one is becoming so irritated by the Establishment.

COWARD. Perhaps you should retreat to the cosy sanctuary of the Palace.

QUEEN MOTHER. There's nothing 'cosy' about Buckingham Palace. It's busier than Piccadilly Circus. If I had my way I'd get rid of most of the parasites.

COWARD. Who?

QUEEN MOTHER. Well, the Queen's butler, for a start.

COWARD. And Lord Wimsey, he could go.

QUEEN MOTHER. Off with his Head. Lady Elderley ...

COWARD. And her dreadful husband ...

Song: *The Stately Homes of England* (Operette)

COWARD. ***Lord Elderley ... Lord Borrowmere,
Lord Sickert and Lord Camp***

*With every virtue, every grace,
Ah what avails the sceptred race,
There you see – the score of them,
And there are so many more of them
Eldest sons that must succeed.
We know how Caesar conquered Gaul
And how to whack a cricket ball;
Apart from this, our education
Lacks coordination.
Though we're young and tentative
And rather rip-representative,
Scions of a noble breed,
We are the products of those homes serene and stately
Which only lately
Seem to have run to seed!*

*The Stately Homes of England,
How beautiful they stand,
To prove the upper classes
Have still the upper hand;
Though the fact that they have to be rebuilt
And frequently mortgaged to the hilt
Is inclined to take the gilt
Off the gingerbread,
And certainly damps the fun
Of the eldest son –
But still we won't be beaten,
We'll scrimp and scrape and save,
The playing fields of Eton
Have made us frightfully brave –
And though if the Van Dycks have to go
And we pawn the Bechstein Grand,
We'll stand
By the Stately Homes of England.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Here you see
The pick of us,
You may be heartily sick of us,
Still with sense
We're still imbued.
Our homes command extensive views
And with assistance from the Jews
We have been able to dispose of
Rows and rows and rows of
Gainsboroughs and Lawrence's,
Some sporting prints of Aunt Florence's,
Some of which were rather rude.
Although we sometimes flaunt our family conventions,*

*Our good intentions
Mustn't be misconstrued.*

*The Stately Homes of England
We proudly represent,
We only keep them up for
Americans to rent.
Though the pipes that supply the bathroom burst
And the lavatory makes you fear the worst,
It was used by Charles the First
Quite informally,*

COWARD. *And later by George the Fourth
On a journey north.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *The Windsor Castle keeps its
Historical renown,
It's wiser not to sleep there
In case it tumbles down;
But if it catches fire again
Which, with any luck, it might
We'll fight*

For the Stately Homes of England.

COWARD. *The Stately Homes of England,
Though rather in the lurch,
Provide a lot of chances
For Psychological Research –*

QUEEN MOTHER. *There's the ghost of a crazy younger son
Who murdered, in thirteen fifty-one,
An extremely rowdy Nun*

COWARD. *Who resented it,
And people who come to call
Meet her in the hall.*

*The baby in the guest wing,
Who crouches by the grate,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Was walled up in the west wing
In fourteen twenty-eight.*

BOTH. *If anyone spots
The Queen of Scots
In a hand-embroidered shroud
We're proud
Of the Stately Homes of England.*

COWARD. *The Stately Homes of England,
Although a trifle bleak,
Historically speaking,
Are more or less unique,
We've a cousin who won the Golden Fleece
And a very peculiar fowling-piece
Which was sent to Cromwell's niece,
Who detested it,*

*And rapidly sent it back
With a dirty crack.
A note we have from Chaucer
Contains a bawdy joke.
We also have a saucer
That Bloody Mary broke.
We've two pairs of tights
King Arthur's Knights
Had completely worn away.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Sing Hey!*

BOTH. *For the Stately Homes of England!*

QUEEN MOTHER. I've known no other life. Bertie and I didn't even leave the country for our honeymoon; we spent the first weeks of our marriage at Polesden Lacey - a manor house in Surrey - and Glamis Castle.

COWARD. Bertie was a marvelous looking man ... not a spare bit of flesh to be seen when he was in swimming trunks.

QUEEN MOTHER. Perhaps you're mistaking that particular fantasy with a picture of my brother-in-law.

COWARD. Gorgeous George? That other loose brick in the foundation of the House of Windsor!

QUEEN MOTHER (*Moving on*). I knew Bertie virtually all my life. I met him when I was five ... at a children's party given by Lady Leicester. I offered him a glacé cherry from a piece of iced sponge cake.

COWARD. What a delightful revelation ... and what a cradle snatcher: he must have been twice your age at the time!

QUEEN MOTHER. We didn't meet again until 1920 at a Derby Day dance in Mayfair, given by Lord and Lady Farquhar. We shimmied to the Missouri Walk, Jog Trot and Twinkle, and we smiled at each other when Jack Hylton and his band struck up "Ma, He's Making Eyes at Me."

COWARD. One wonders if he was offered a glacé cherry that night! With or without the sponge cake?

QUEEN MOTHER. He courted me for three years, and I turned him down twice.

COWARD. The Duke of Kent's preposterous idea of courting was holding hands in a boat ... while punting!

QUEEN MOTHER. It was very peculiar that Bertie proposed through intermediaries -

COWARD. That ridiculous British propensity for aristocratic protocol strikes again.

QUEEN MOTHER. When he finally declared he would marry no other, Queen Mary, visited Glamis to see at first hand the woman who had stolen her son's heart.

COWARD. Is it true that she was ... a kleptomaniac?

QUEEN MOTHER. Oh, absolutely. "I'm caressing it with my eyes," she would say if she spied something she fancied ... and if they weren't presented to her as a gift -

COWARD. She would steal them?

QUEEN MOTHER. Extraordinary woman! ... You know she also taught all of the Royal children, girls and boys, how to do needlework.

COWARD. That explains a great deal.

QUEEN MOTHER. On his third attempt, Bertie finally ignored protocol and asked me directly; I accepted. He proposed in the rose garden at St Paul's Walden Bury on a Sunday, when Mama was at church.

COWARD. On her knees, presumably, praying for a m-m-m-m-miracle?

QUEEN MOTHER. We married at Westminster Abbey in the same year and I became Duchess of York.

COWARD. We share one great attribute: the great determination to travel through life first class.

QUEEN MOTHER. The following were years of domestic happiness tempered only with the performance of duty. One of the first things I did was to arrange for an Australian voice therapist to cure his stutter. Bertie referred to me as his 'helpmeet and his joy.'

COWARD. That has to be one of the most saccharine tales I've encountered in a long while; frankly, Ma'am, I should bury it in a drawer and put a lily on it!

Song: *Poor Little Rich Girl* (*On with the Dance*)

You're ...

A baby,

You're lonely,

And maybe

Some day soon you'll know

The tears

You are tasting

Are years

You are wasting,

Life's a bitter foe,

With fate it's no use competing,

Youth is so terribly fleeting;

By dancing

Much faster,

You're chancing

Disaster,

Time alone will show.

Poor little rich girl,

You're a bewitched girl,

Better beware

Laughing at danger,

Virtue a stranger,

Better take care!

The life you lead sets all your nerves a jangle,

Your love affairs are in a hopeless tangle,

Though you're a child, dear,

Your life's a wild typhoon,

In lives of leisure

The craze for pleasure

Steadily grows.

Cocktails and laughter,

*But what comes after?
Nobody knows.
You're weaving love into a mad jazz pattern
Ruled by Pantaloon.
Poor little rich girl, don't drop a stitch too soon.
(COWARD offers his hand to the QUEEN MOTHER; they waltz.)
The role you are acting,
The toll is exacting,
Soon you'll have to pay.
The music of living,
You lose in the giving,
False things soon decay.
These words from me may surprise you,
I've got no right to advise you,
I've known life too well, dear,
Your own life must tell, dear,
Please don't turn away.*

*Poor little rich girl,
You're a bewitched girl,
Better beware
Laughing at danger,
Virtue a stranger,
Better take care!
The life you lead sets all your nerves a jangle,
Your love affairs are in a hopeless tangle,
Though you're a child, dear,
Your life's a wild typhoon,
In lives of leisure
The craze for pleasure
Steadily grows.
Cocktails and laughter,
But what comes after?
Nobody knows.
You're weaving love into a mad jazz pattern
Ruled by Pantaloon.
Poor little rich girl, don't drop a stitch too soon.*

QUEEN MOTHER. You think I am a nice person, everybody does. I am not a nice person.

COWARD. Like anyone in public life, your role demanded a degree of toughness.

QUEEN MOTHER. A courtier once said that I was like "an up market Alf Garnet."

COWARD. Your affinity with the East End, Ma'am; you looked them in the eye -

QUEEN MOTHER. But they still smelt like shit!

COWARD. "I can take any amount of criticism ... so long as it is unqualified praise."

QUEEN MOTHER. George V died of influenza in 1936, and Bertie's brother became king. The clouds started to gather the day when Wallis blew in from Baltimore.

COWARD. *Who's this coming down the street?*

Mrs Simpson with her smelly feet,

QUEEN MOTHER. She was the lowest of the low ...

COWARD. *She's been married twice before,*

Now she's knocking at Edward's door.

QUEEN MOTHER. Wallace was common and vulgar -

COWARD. Don't hold back -

QUEEN MOTHER. Her first words as a baby were not "Ma-ma" but "Me-Me."

COWARD. You didn't like her?

QUEEN MOTHER. I detested her. *(Pause.)* Anyway, she was far too old for Edward, and she went about using sex as a sort of shrimping net. Queen Mary shared my view that the woman was a predator.

COWARD. Few, very few women ever dream that they haven't got sex-appeal. As a matter of fact, some extraordinarily unlikely women do have it.

QUEEN MOTHER. Once we were invited to Balmoral for dinner; Wallis was acting as hostess. I walked straight past without looking her in the eye: "I have come to dine with the King" I said, and sat to the right of him throughout proceedings as usual. I'm told, she referred to me as the "Dowdy Duchess."

COWARD. "The Monster of Glamis!" in fact. - I sat next to the Duke and Duchess at a charity ball at the Waldorf-Astoria. Are you surprised?

QUEEN MOTHER. I am not at all surprised. I believe they went in a great deal for that sort of thing. Was it just a friendly drink?

COWARD. Have you ever heard of people taking unfriendly drinks?

QUEEN MOTHER. I hope you didn't get too friendly with her, dear, she would have made a nest in your hair. Did you have unpleasant words during the evening?

COWARD. Only five: "Garçon, bring me the bill."

QUEEN MOTHER. Noël, you are such a snob!

COWARD. If I'm a snob at all, I'm a celebrity snob, and by celebrity I don't mean Brigitte Bardot, but people of achievement like Somerset Maugham. I know people of all kinds and they don't have to wear coronets to fascinate me.

QUEEN MOTHER. Achievement? Wallis Simpson's singular contribution to the traditional grandeur of Balmoral was the introduction of the triple-decker sandwich ... as a late supper item ... after the movies.

COWARD. Cecil Beaton thought Wallis had the pale beauty of a magnolia. Soignée in her messenger boy suits.

QUEEN MOTHER. These days, when ever I get depressed, I get them to open up Madame Tussaud's, and I spend an hour being cheered up by their hideous waxwork figure of Wallis in that frightful long magenta frock!

COWARD. I thought she wore strong colours well, especially scarlet.

QUEEN MOTHER. A scarlet woman, indeed! We were all aware that Wallis was in fact involved in other sexual relationships.

COWARD. A married car mechanic called Guy Trundle ... and Edward Fitzgerald, Duke of Leinster. She was always very candid on the subject.

QUEEN MOTHER. The FBI believed that Wallis was having a relationship with von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador to Britain -

COWARD. Impossible?!

QUEEN MOTHER. And, one suspects, the entire Third Reich.

COWARD. That arrives as a complete surprise! And was she was passing secret information to the Nazis?

QUEEN MOTHER. My dear, the woman was so piss-elegant she couldn't pass wind.

COWARD. But wasn't Winston her ally?

QUEEN MOTHER. The king and Wallis received political support from Winston Churchill. We all assumed that he was a staunch monarchist?

COWARD. His mother was American. Winston once confided to me at lunch: "Why shouldn't Edward marry his cutie?" I replied: "Because England doesn't want a Queen Cutie!"

QUEEN MOTHER. No, and they got me! But I see that you were taking each way bets in those days, Noël. So much for loyalty to the Crown.

COWARD. You were the century's great gift to the Nation and the Commonwealth. Did you enjoy being Empress of India?

QUEEN MOTHER. Very much ... while it lasted!

COWARD. Those last days before the Abdication must have been like sitting on the edge of a volcano.

QUEEN MOTHER. It was an ... uncomfortable Christmas that year. The King signed a document that stated that he had renounced the throne for himself and his descendants. A presumption that changed my life for ever. (COWARD appears to be 'channeling' a spirit from the other side ...) The following day he made a radio broadcast where he told the nation that he had abdicated because he found he could not "discharge the duties of king as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love."

COWARD (*Channeling the King*). "I now quit altogether public affairs, and I lay down my burden. It may be some time before I return to my native land, but I shall always follow the fortunes of the British race and Empire with profound interest, and if at any time in the future I can be found of service to Their Majestys in a private station I shall not fail."

QUEEN MOTHER (*Slapping his face*). Bastard!
(COWARD snaps out of it.)

COWARD (*Recovering*). What was that for?

QUEEN MOTHER. The last sixty years! (A pause.) After his speech that night, he had a pedicure for a troublesome corn, and embarked on the destroyer *Fury* and sailed for Bologne. Bertie, the new King, sobbed for an hour on his mother's shoulder at Marlborough House.

COWARD. It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit. I suggested at the time that statues of Wallis Simpson be erected throughout England for the blessing she had bestowed on the Country.

QUEEN MOTHER. The first thing she did after they were married was accept an invitation to luncheon with Hitler -

COWARD. She always had an eye for an opportunity.

QUEEN MOTHER. Hitler declared that Wallis would make a good Queen!

COWARD. In Edward's eyes, that made the Fuehrer "not such a bad chap after all!"

QUEEN MOTHER. I couldn't stop Bertie from creating Edward Duke of Windsor, but I made damn sure that the slut would never be referred to as Your Royal Highness.

COWARD. Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs -

QUEEN MOTHER. And then they visited Hitler together, which further inflamed the Nazi's maniacal dreams of world power.

COWARD (*Refreshing their drinks*). You do blame Wallis for the abdication?

QUEEN MOTHER. That woman really didn't have a clue who was up who, or who was driving the bus. But most certainly ... I hold her fully responsible for the premature death of my husband!
(Pause.)

COWARD. Let's drink to you, then, and the spirit of gallantry and courage that made a strange Heaven out of an unbelievable Hell ...

QUEEN MOTHER. I'm not a heavy drinker, Noël; sometimes I can go for hours without touching a drop.

Song: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (*Sigh No More*)

COWARD. *Here are ladies
Set in tranquility
Living their lives
In a haze of gentility,
Charming ladies
Secretly yearning
To cherish a burning
Desire.
This decade's still
Fiercely Victorian,
Though it has charm
For the modern historian*

QUEEN MOTHER. *We despise it
For in our eyes it
Denies us the right to acquire
Full completeness.
In a life that is far too brief at best
All the sweetness,
As you've possibly guessed,
Makes us very repressed.
Though our trade is
Wifely devotion
We long for emotional thrill.
Someone some day
Might lead us astray
But probably nobody will.*

*Pity us – pity us – pity us, please,
We are living in a tedious age.*

COWARD. *The Queen Mother means
They're might-have-beens
Wilting in a gilded cage.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Nobody – nobody – nobody sees
How abominably bored we feel.*

COWARD. *The Queen Mother means
Their love routines
Are far too damned genteel.*

BOTH. *We're/They're the Merry Wives of Windsor,
Of Windsor – of Windsor,
In this grey town
Of fabulous renown
We/They all reside,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Though our poker's rather pseudo
We're adepts at ludo,
We sit and sew
And hardly ever go
Outside.*

COWARD. *As so many men have written sonnets on
Female charm and grace
They've popped their latest shawls and bonnets on
Just in case,
When they watch the soldiers drilling
It's thrilling – too thrilling,
They all assert
That virtue doesn't' always pay,
They say*

BOTH. *We're/They're the Merry Wives of Windsor
And if good luck comes our/there way
We/They shall all be merry Widows
One find day.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *We're the Merry wives of Windsor,
Of Windsor – of Windsor,
Domestic pets
Whose conjugal duets
Are just off key,
If our better halves, who bore us,
Should pass on before us
We'd like to know exactly when it's going to be,*

COWARD. *As they live enclosed by prunes and prudery,
Jaded, faded flowers,
They can't resist a little rudery
Out of hours,
They're extremely comme-il-faut here
But life is so slow here
That if they meet
A reasonably sweet – dragoon*

QUEEN MOTHER. *We swoon,*

BOTH. *We're/They're the Merry Wives of Windsor
And we ask of Fate one boon
That we'll/they'll all be Merry Widows
Fairly soon.*

QUEEN MOTHER. I was a widow far too soon, in fact.

COWARD. How does one deal with loss?

QUEEN MOTHER. It doesn't get any better, but you get better at it.

COWARD. Elizabeth's Coronation was lovely.

QUEEN MOTHER. Nowhere in the world but England could such Pomp and Circumstance and Pageantry be handled with such dignity ...

COWARD. I watched the procession on television in New York. My American guests were highly impressed by the smiling, massive personality of the Queen from Tonga –

QUEEN MOTHER. Queen Salote ... she was descended way back from cannibals.

COWARD. "She's wonderful," one of my guests enthused, "but who's the little guy sitting up front in her carriage?" "That," I replied -

QUEEN MOTHER. "Is her lunch?" Yes, Noël, we've all heard that one! (*She laughs.*) Soon after the Coronation, Winston persuaded me to get back into public life and I toured many countries around the Commonwealth ... Tonga, did extend me an invitation to join them for lunch – I chose to decline.

COWARD. Polynesia ... memory loss in parrots!

QUEEN MOTHER. The Commonwealth is my last little bit of Empire; my only link to the old world I knew with Bertie ... before the War.

COWARD. The House of Windsor since, under your leadership, is less an extended family than an extruded one.

QUEEN MOTHER. Mine is an old, innocent world and my approach to life is one, I fear, that is slowly dying out. I once was an avid reader of the *Daily Telegraph* –

COWARD. The *Torygraph*!

QUEEN MOTHER. But I read the newspapers less and less now - with all the Royal scandals making the headlines ... why should I wake up to bad news on my breakfast tray?

COWARD. You will know you're old when you cease to be amazed. Thousands of members of the public I believe seldom read further than the newspaper headlines, and so when they are confronted by large black lettered phrases such as "NOT THIS TIME, SIR LAURENCE!" or "NOËL FLOPS AGAIN!" they automatically follow their own instincts – and go out and book seats.

QUEEN MOTHER. I was dismayed, of course, by the unseemly divorces of three of my grandchildren ... but I was disgusted by the avalanche of trouble which followed the headlines.

COWARD. I've sometimes thought of marrying ... and then I've thought again.

QUEEN MOTHER. I just don't understand this new tabloid culture and the whole concept of modernizing the Monarchy. ... The only thing safe for me to read nowadays is the *Racing Post*.

COWARD. But the British public finds the Royal family so endlessly fascinating, and have done so for centuries ... it's inscribed in the Magna Carta; without you your subjects would be relegated the lesser pursuits of gardening and the theatre.

QUEEN MOTHER. The people are not so much fascinated but obsessed ... everywhere I go now there is still the ritual 'thrusting of babies' ... what are they expecting, mother's milk?



COWARD. Modern Royalty was invented, Ma'am, to keep the population in awe.
 QUEEN MOTHER. During one school visit I recall, the Headmistress had the impertinence to ask me if I wanted to visit the ladies room!? 'No' I replied, 'I didn't give in to the Nazis and I certainly won't give in to the bladder'.
 COWARD. One must be optimistic. Look for the Silver Lining ...
 QUEEN MOTHER. *Whene'er a cloud appears in the blue Remember somewhere the sun is shining -*
 Utter rubbish. We're subject to our subjects and betrayed - daily - by thirty pieces of silver ... lining the pockets of the gutter press.
 COWARD. They're feeding the ravenous dogs, I'm afraid; Royal gossip is the great panacea.

Song: *There Are Bad Times Just Around the Corner*

*They're out of sort in Sunderland
 And terribly cross in Kent,
 They're dull in Hull
 And the Isle of Mull
 Is seething with discontent,
 They're nervous in Northumberland
 And Devon is down the drain,
 They're filled with wrath
 On the Firth of Forth
 And sullen on Salisbury Plain,
 In Dublin they're depressed, lads,
 Maybe because they're Celts,
 For Drake is going West, lads,
 And so is everyone else.
 Hurray - hurray - hurray!
 Misery's here to stay.*

*There are bad times just around the corner,
 There are dark clouds hurtling through the sky
 And it's no use whining
 About a silver lining
 For we know from experience that they won't roll by,
 With a scowl and a frown
 We'll keep our peckers down
 And prepare for depression and doom and dread,
 We're going to unpack our troubles from our old kit bag
 And wait until we drop down dead.*

*From Colwyn Bay to Kettering
 They're sobbing themselves to sleep,
 The shrieks and wails
 In the Yorkshire dales
 Have even depressed the sheep.
 In rather vulgar lettering
 A very disgruntled group*

*Have posted bills
On the Cotswold Hills
To prove that we're in the soup.
While begging Kipling's pardon
There's one thing we know for sure
If England is a garden
We ought to have more manure.
Hurray – hurray – hurray!
Suffering and dismay.*

*There are bad times just around the corner
And the outlook's absolutely vile
There are Home Fires smoking
From Windermere to Woking
And we're not going to tighten our belts and smile smile smile,
At the sound of a shot
We'd just as soon as not
Take a hot water bottle and go to bed,
We're going to untense our muscles till they sag sag sag
And wait until we drop down dead.*

*There are bad times just around the corner,
The horizon's gloomy as can be,
There are black birds over
The grayish cliffs of Dover
And the rats are preparing to leave the BBC.
We're an unhappy breed
And very bored indeed
When reminded of something that Nelson said.
While the press and the politicians nag nag nag
We'll wait until we drop down dead.*

*There are bad times just around the corner,
We can look forward to despair,
It's as clear as crystal
From Bridlington to Bristol -*

QUEEN MOTHER. Oh, for heaven's sake Noël, stop that awful racket. Depression is bad enough without you having to sing about it.

COWARD. Doesn't the eye of heaven mean anything to you?

QUEEN MOTHER. Only when it winks. "Never Flinch, Never Weary, Never Despair."

COWARD. Disraeli?

QUEEN MOTHER. Winston Churchill. It was his wartime battle cry ... and my philosophy of life.

COWARD. My motivation in life was always my pay packet on a Friday. I then just got on with it.

QUEEN MOTHER. I know, let's play charades! Eleanor Roosevelt taught me

when she was here in 1946. I remember Winston was terribly glum and just sat disdainfully and chomped on his cigar. ... You go first.

COWARD. Very well. (*He prepares himself, theatrically, then indicates that he has a word in mind by indicating 'quotation marks' in the air with his fingers.*)

QUEEN MOTHER. A quotation; jolly good. How many words?

(*COWARD holds up one finger.*)

One word!? How can a quotation have one word? How many syllables?

(*COWARD lays two fingers on his arm to suggest the number of syllables.*)

Two syllables. ...

(*COWARD strikes an elaborate pose.*)

"Knighthood?" Oh, really Noël, how tedious. I thought we discussed all that in 1962.

COWARD. We may have discussed it, but it took another eight years to happen ... and three years later I was pushin' up the tulips!!!

QUEEN MOTHER. I thought it was an elegant 70th birthday gesture.

COWARD. I was the last of my generation to become a theatrical knight.

QUEEN MOTHER. But you got dubbed eventually -

COWARD. Olivier got his in '47 ... he was fifty; I gave him his first starring role! Richardson got it in the same year ...

QUEEN MOTHER. One knight is just like any other ...

COWARD. Gielgud was knighted in the Coronation Honours!

QUEEN MOTHER. He had just had that enormous success in Julius Caesar -

COWARD. He'd also just been convicted of 'cruising' in a public lavatory ... in Liverpool!

QUEEN MOTHER. "The fault," dear Noël, "is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

COWARD. Even Redgrave and Guinness got theirs in '59 ... and they were children. Dickie Mountbatten wrote to me during the War suggesting that the King was considering giving me a Knighthood.

QUEEN MOTHER. Bertie took a personal interest your film -

COWARD. *In Which We Serve* -

QUEEN MOTHER. We showed it at Buckingham Palace. The party included the Prime Minister, Field Marshal Smuts and Eleanor Roosevelt. All present were genuinely moved and thrilled by the film.

COWARD. Of course.

QUEEN MOTHER. Churchill said he admired it ... even more having seen it for the second time - and Lord Mountbatten that he liked it as much the third time round.

COWARD. But I always wondered if Winston Churchill had been obstructive?

QUEEN MOTHER. You're always seeing conspiracies where they don't really exist. The King made it clear that he felt some kind of recognition was overdue and that he would give the proposal his personal support.

COWARD. Dickie - not me - suggested 'sabotage' had been at work.

QUEEN MOTHER. Our only worry at that time was that you might refuse because of the difficult times you were having with the Press.

COWARD. I sent a message to say that if it was the King's wish, I would of course be honoured to accept. (*A pause.*) Was it sabotage?

(*The QUEEN MOTHER makes the gesture to indicate that she wants*

COWARD to guess 'a phrase.')

A phrase!

(The QUEEN MOTHER indicates seven words.)

Seven word phrase.

(She wants him to guess the first word; she holds up one finger.)

First word.

(She indicates a 'little word'.)

Montgomery Clift.

(She mimes having a cup of tea.)

Cup? Saucer? Tea?

(She indicates 'yes' by touching her nose.)

Nose?

QUEEN MOTHER. Oh do play the game, Noël; that means you're correct.

COWARD. Tea?

(She tugs her ear, to represent 'sounds like'.)

Ear-Tea?

QUEEN MOTHER. Sounds like ...

COWARD. Tea? Me?

QUEEN MOTHER. It's 'the', Noël. 'The'. That's the only clue you're getting.

(She indicates 'second word; one syllable; 'sounds like' ... then mimes opening a door.)

COWARD. Come in? Door? Dianna Dors?

(She tugs her ear.)

Sounds like door? The ... score? Cricket? The ... whore? Oh, are we back on Mrs Simpson?

(She indicates that the letter is later in the alphabet.)

The ... War? Was it the War? It couldn't have been the First War ... I was pensioned off from the army ... I never left England.

QUEEN MOTHER. Noël, you faked the symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome!

COWARD. I had a strenuous youth!

QUEEN MOTHER. I suspect you had many.

COWARD. In the Second War I was considered a national hero. I was actually working for MI5 ... Intelligence.

QUEEN MOTHER. We all wondered what the hell you were up to?

COWARD. I hadn't the remotest idea. (Pause.) I was taught a code which consisted entirely of numbers which had to be subtracted and added and multiplied ... absurd, I'm totally incapable of adding up a Bezique score -

QUEEN MOTHER. Now Bezique is a game Winston would play - famous for it!

COWARD. The Gestapo could have tortured me for a fortnight without discovering anything.

QUEEN MOTHER. Hitler branded me the most dangerous woman in Europe -

COWARD. The Nazis had me on their death list ... My dear - the people I should have been seen dead with!

QUEEN MOTHER. Winston instructed me to remove my two young daughters from London during the Blitz. "The girls will not leave unless I do." I said.

"I will not leave unless the King does. And the King will never leave."

COWARD. The fact that you only remained there for nine days before returning to Balmoral suggests that bravery was balanced with a practicality ... that's an example to us all.

QUEEN MOTHER. Unlike you, the King had no intention of abandoning Britain. We would have seen it out to the bitter end. You do not abandon your country.

COWARD. I left Britain? Is that it?

(The QUEEN MOTHER indicates 'third word' and points to her hat.)

Hat.

(Touch her nose.)

The Wart Hat.

(Frantically touching her nose. Then chopping at her palm.)

The War ...t ... hat - The War That?

(She points to her hat.)

The straw hat?

(She indicates that the word is longer; he doesn't get it so she 'wipes it all away'.)

Get rid of it? A-band-on your hat? Abandon. (Counting out the words.)

"You do no abandon your hat." Me abandoning, Britain; was that it?

QUEEN MOTHER. You're not very good at this game, are you Noël?

COWARD. My decision to live outside England caused such a fuss - it was like picking your nose in public! I had nothing to do with patriotism.

QUEEN MOTHER. It was seen as unpatriotic.

COWARD. That view seems to have arisen from the belief that the great British public made me. In fact, I have made most of my money in the United States. I had my reasons for leaving England -

QUEEN MOTHER. Name three?

COWARD. The climate! ... that other national affliction, English food

QUEEN MOTHER. And the third?

COWARD. Income Tax.

QUEEN MOTHER. Well, even I have to pay it now, Noel.

COWARD. I decided that I could not afford to live in a society which was determined to succour the mediocre at the expense of the exceptional. I had nothing to show for a lifetime of astonishing success and unremitting industry ... apart from a little property, my health ... and my talents.

QUEEN MOTHER. Your work, despite whatever shortcomings I might have mentioned earlier, still continues to be popular.

COWARD. If that is truly so, I cannot feel that my obdurate refusal to pay taxes which I consider to be both exorbitant and unjust, need in any way prevent me being of value to my country whether I decided to live in Switzerland, Swaziland ... or Kathmandu.

QUEEN MOTHER. But Fleet Street did not see it that way.

COWARD. I was never an alien citizen and kept on being as British as I could be in two British colonies.

QUEEN MOTHER. The newspapers believed you abandoned England ... with taxes outstanding.

COWARD. I settled all my debts with the Inland Revenue after my extremely popular season at Las Vegas.

QUEEN MOTHER. You may have been popular with the Yanks, Noël, but your reputation at home was shockin'.

COWARD. Unpopularity had its compensations. In 1959, I was saving £30,000 per annum by being domiciled abroad.

(The QUEEN MOTHER ploughs on with the Game and moves on to the fourth word by holding up four fingers.)

Fourth word.

(She mimes opening up her purse and finding no money in it.)

Handbag? Empty handbag? No money? Poor? ...

(She wipes that away; mimes a cup of tea, and drops it ... pointing to the broken pieces.)

Dropped cup? Broken cup?

(She points to her nose; indicates 'shorter word'.)

Br-o-k-e... Broke? Broke!

(The QUEEN MOTHER, exhausted, sits down.)

I was once so broke in New York that I considered turning one of my plays into a short story for \$500. For \$700 I would have turned *War and Peace* into a music-hall sketch.

QUEEN MOTHER. So you did keep a bank account in America?

COWARD. I was told about the emergency currency regulations but -

QUEEN MOTHER. You spent the money?

COWARD. Quite innocently.

QUEEN MOTHER. Innocent ... extravagance.

COWARD. Even so, I was served with three summonses for violating that law.

QUEEN MOTHER. It was well known that the Treasury was looking for a celebrity offender.

COWARD. So they picked on me? Presumably the real obstruction to the KBE was, in fact, my 'technical breach' of currency regulations? Was it Churchill ... or Beaverbrook?

(The QUEEN MOTHER indicates she now wants to tackle the last word and holds up seven fingers. She walks with a hobble and holds her back; she indicates her back.)

Back. *(He's now on a roll.)* Maybe it was 'the Queen Cutie joke' that backfired. Maybe Churchill didn't care for my jokes?

QUEEN MOTHER. You're too sharp my half, Noël – one day you were bound to cut yourself.

(She then holds up six fingers to indicates she'll now look at the penultimate word; 'two syllables'.)

COWARD. "Some-thing Back"? The War that broke some-thing back?

(Indicates whole word. She touches her shoulder and walks as if she has a hump.)

Sore Back?

(She indicates crown, then points at her shoulder.)

Tiara ... Crown? Richard III? Olivier? ... humpback? Shoulder ... chip on shoulder ...?

QUEEN MOTHER. It's you that has the chip on your shoulder, Noël –

(She makes a 'humping' motion, then points to her shoulder.)

COWARD. Humping ... from the rear? ... You're not suggesting that it was my sexual orientation? You smutty little minx! *(Pensively.)* George V made it known that he wouldn't "knight buggers" –

QUEEN MOTHERS. "Fellows like that should shoot themselves," he'd often say. It's the Germans you see ... all that Teutonic formality.

COWARD. "We sailors never smile on duty ..."

QUEEN MOTHER. Worsley didn't do you any favours either when he published his memoirs.

COWARD. As a critic he was one great stampede from nose to navel.

QUEEN MOTHER. It was unseemly: for the first time in popular print there was a graphic description of rampant homosexuality.

COWARD. He was a member of the Carrick Club ... and the MCC.

QUEEN MOTHER. The great British public really couldn't give a toss if T C Worsley had sexual relations with mice.

COWARD. Mice ... tricky.

QUEEN MOTHER. But, about you, they cared.

COWARD. Queen Victoria thought that sex between women was impossible.

QUEEN MOTHER. And it's very unsettling to imagine two men ... *(They contemplate the image!)* However, I despise moral attitudes. I believe that life is for living.

COWARD. How idiotic people are when they are in love.

QUEEN MOTHER. It's an age-old devastating disease.

COWARD. To me, passionate love has always been like a tight shoe rubbing blisters on my Achille's heel. I resent it and love it and wallow ...

I am not good at love.

When my easy heart I yield,

Wild words come tumbling from my mouth

Which should have stayed concealed

And my jealousy turns a bed of bliss

Into a battlefield.

QUEEN MOTHER. In Edwardian's time, homosexuality was the love that dare not speak its name ... now it won't keep its trap shut!

COWARD. It's difficult to know what else one could do with it?

QUEEN MOTHER. Be discrete!

COWARD. If we're now dragging up poor George -

QUEEN MOTHER. The Duke of Kent knew of his father's opinions on the subject.

COWARD. But appears not to have taken any notice; George practiced his bisexuality with all the constraint of a Russian shot-putter. If, however, you're suggesting that my knighthood was denied because of my 'little dalliance' with the King's youngest son ...

QUEEN MOTHER. And my brother-in-law –

COWARD. We were virtually teenagers -

QUEEN MOTHER. It wasn't so much the liaison at the time, Noël, but your relationship with his wife –

COWARD. The Princess Marina –

QUEEN MOTHER. It was your fawning over her ... after George's death that raised so many eyebrows at Whitehall.

COWARD. It was a beastly tragedy. I felt so deeply sorry for the poor Duchess ...

QUEEN MOTHER. Your behaviour was demonstrably indiscreet.

COWARD. George was my first real lover ...

Song: Mad About the Boy (Words and Music)

*Mad about the boy,
I know it's stupid to be mad about the boy,
I'm so ashamed of it
But must admit
The sleepless nights I've had about the boy.
Walking down the street
His eyes look out at me from people that I meet.
Although I'm quite aware
That here and there
Are traces of the cad about the boy,
Lord knows I'm not a fool, dear,
I really shouldn't care,
Lord knows I'm not old-school queer
In the flurry of his first affair.
Will it ever cloy?
This odd diversity of misery and joy,
I'm feeling quite insane
And young again
And all because I was mad about the boy ...*

QUEEN MOTHER. Oh Bertie ...

BOTH. *Mad about the boy*

COWARD. *It's pretty funny, but I'm mad about the boy*

*He has a gay appeal
That makes me feel
There's maybe something sad about the boy
Walking down the street
His eyes look out at me from people that I meet
I can't believe it's true
But when I'm blue
In some strange way
I'm glad about the boy.*

BOTH. *I'm hardly sentimental*

Love isn't so sublime

QUEEN MOTHER. *I have to pay the rental*

And I can't afford to waste much time.

BOTH. *If I could employ a little magic that would finally destroy*

*This dream that pains me
And enchains me
But I can't*

COWARD. *because ...*

I'm mad about the boy ...

QUEEN MOTHER. *Mad about the boy ...*

BOTH. *Mad about the boy.*

COWARD. I tried hard not to cry at his funeral, but it was useless. The Duchess came into the Chapel, and I broke up a bit; but when the coffin passed with flowers from the garden at *Coppin's* ... with George's cap on it I gave up all pretence and just stood with tears splashing down my face.

QUEEN MOTHER. You behaved like the grieving widow, Noël. That sort of public display was unnecessary.

COWARD. Margot Oxford came up to me after the funeral and said, 'Very well done, wasn't it?' as though she had been at a successful first night. I thought that offensive and unforgivable. I did love him.

(The QUEEN MOTHER goes back to charades: insistently "Seventh word; first syllable:" she mimes driving.)

Driving ... Coach ... Car!

(She touches her nose; then extends the word – indicating her arm.)

Cars – arm – arms – carm?

(She points to her nose; "second syllable:" he mimes throwing up.)

Vomit ... sick ... ill?

(She indicates plural.)

Ills. Carm-ills – Carmillas ... Camilla's

(She now indicates "the whole word.")

"The War That Broke Camilla's Back." "The bore that broke Camilla's Back." ... Prince Charles.

(She mimes sipping her drink through a straw; indicates the straw.)

"The 'Straw' That Broke ... Camilla's Back."

(She attempts to mime the whole phrase.)

QUEEN MOTHER. For God's sake, Noël, this is more difficult than getting Margaret to keep her knickers on. "The straw that broke the camel's back."

COWARD. What? ... That my affair with George, or at least my relationship with his widow, was the straw that broke the camel's back as far as my knighthood was concerned?

QUEEN MOTHER. Not at all, Noël; the problem is that in all these years you've wanted someone, anyone to give you a reason why ... to name the actual 'straw' ...

COWARD. I deserved to know?

QUEEN MOTHER. The fact is, no one can really tell you why - except to say that many straws may have contributed to a whole century of camels ... or nothing at all. It's all too late to worry about it -

COWARD. So much for my fabulous timing? And what about Justice?

QUEEN. Justice in this world, my dear friend, I'm afraid to say ... is an illusion .

COWARD. My frustration was that I could only find one little frustration in my life.

QUEEN MOTHER. Did you ever consult a psychoanalyst? –

COWARD. Why endure months of expensive humiliation only to be told that at the age of four I was in love with my rocking-horse.

QUEEN MOTHER. Be content then, that you got what you were after ... in the end!

COWARD. Yes ... but why is it that most of my gift horses seemed to have bad teeth.

QUEEN MOTHER. I'll now retire to my reputation of being a Mad English-ma'am ... with a couple of corgis!! There's another gift, Noël – I've thrown you a bone!

Song: Mad Dogs and Englishmen

COWARD. In tropical climes there are certain times of day

When all the citizens retire
To tear their clothes off and perspire.
It's one of those rules that the greatest fools obey,
Because the sun is much too sultry
And one must avoid its ultry-violet ray.

QUEEN MOTHER. *Papalaka papalaka papalaka boo,
Papalaka papalaka papalaka boo,
Digariga digariga digariga doo,
Digariga digariga digariga doo.*

COWARD. *The native grieve when the white men leave their huts,
Because they're obviously definitely nuts!
Mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun,
The Japanese don't care to,
The Chinese wouldn't dare to,
Hindus and Argentines sleep firmly from twelve to one.
But Englishmen detest a siesta.
In the Philippines
There are lovely screens
To protect you from the glare.
In the Malay States
There are hats like plates
Which the Britishers won't wear.
At twelve noon
The natives swoon
And no further work is done.
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.*

*It's such a surprise for the Eastern eyes to see
That though the English are effete,
They're quite impervious to heat,
When the white man rides every native hides in glee,
Because the simple creatures hope he
Will impale his solar toupee on a tree.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *Bolyboly bolyboly bolyboly baa,
Bolyboly bolyboly bolyboly baa,
Habaninny habaninny habaninny haa,
Habaninny habaninny habaninny haa.*

COWARD. *It seems such a shame
When the English claim
The earth
That they give rise to such hilarity and mirth.
Mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.*

*The toughest Burmese bandit
Can never understand it.
In Rangoon the heat of noon
Is just what the natives shun.
They put their Scotch and dry down
And lie down.
In a jungle town
Where the sun beats down
To the rage of man and beast
The English garb
Of the English sahib
Merely gets a bit more creased.
In Bangkok
At twelve o'clock
They foam at the mouth and run,
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.*

*Mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.
The smallest Malay rabbit
Deplores this foolish habit.
In Hong Kong
They strike a gong
And fire off a noonday gun
To reprimand each inmate
Who's in late.
In the mangrove swamps
Where the python romps
There is peace from twelve till two.
Even caribous
Lie around and snooze;
For there's nothing else to do.
In Bengal
To move at all
Is seldom, if ever done.
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun*

QUEEN MOTHER. A young Scotsman in Australia once said that I "shine and warm like sunlight."

COWARD. Another way of saying, the sun shines out of your arse, Ma'am.

QUEEN MOTHER. Did the sun shine all the time in Jamaica?

COWARD. Never at night.

QUEEN MOTHER. Your tan is very becoming.

COWARD. I'm grateful that it is even - one must be careful not to look like a mixed grill.

QUEEN MOTHER. I did so enjoy my trip to your home.

COWARD. The island was very excited by your visit?
 QUEEN MOTHER. It was an excellent lunch, my dear; I congratulate you.
 COWARD. The lobster mouse wasn't quite right.
 QUEEN MOTHER. It looked a bit hysterical, but it tasted delicious.
 COWARD. It was such a beautiful day; and you wore blue and yellow ...
 QUEEN MOTHER. I matched your table setting I recall. You have such lovely locals.
 COWARD. The natives' claim to fame is they are very tall, have the longest penises in the world and dye their hair with urine.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Doubtless, cause and effect.
 COWARD. It was such a pity that you could only spend one day with us?
 QUEEN MOTHER. I had to attend a family funeral at home.
 COWARD. Oh, how sad for you. I'm so sorry.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Please do not be sorry. It was splendid fun. There were drinks afterwards.
(She indicates to COWARD to refresh her glass.)
 COWARD. Not a very close relative, I gather?
 QUEEN MOTHER. No. Only a first cousin once and for all removed.
 COWARD *(Handing her the glass)*. That strange feeling we had in the War ... have you found anything in your life since to equal it in strength?
(She shakes her head.)
 A sort of splendid carelessness it was, holding us together.
 QUEEN MOTHER. I still love life. That's the secret. It is the exhilaration of others that keeps me going. Sometimes I feel drained, you do at my age, but excitement is good for me.
 COWARD. My body has certainly wandered a good deal, but I have an uneasy suspicion that my mind did not wandered enough.
 QUEEN MOTHER. These days, I spend a lot of time napping.
 COWARD. Never mind, dear, we're all made the same, though some more than others.
 QUEEN MOTHER. Indeed ... I had that uncanny ability to handle a shovel which was so very helpful for all those tree planting ceremonies.
 COWARD. I did have a talent to amuse.
 QUEEN MOTHER. I think perhaps one of the things to be desired in old age is the power to acquire new interests.
 COWARD. I've over-educated myself in all the things I shouldn't have known at all.
 QUEEN MOTHER. The frank revelations of my grandsons' voluble, disgruntled wives about life in the royal family was, to me, disloyal and distasteful.
 COWARD. We are told again that Charles "is not fit to be king."
 QUEEN MOTHER. Of course he isn't. Which of his male ancestors were?
 COWARD. Edward VIII?
 QUEEN MOTHER. George V -
 COWARD. A martinet who loved stamps and killing wildlife? George VI, who hated the job?
 QUEEN MOTHER *(Pause)*. Of the few monarchs who've been any good at the job, almost all have been women - Victoria and the two Elizabeths.
 COWARD *(Pointedly)*. The three Elizabeths.

QUEEN MOTHER. The men have more or less been hopeless. I felt it my duty to marry Bertie, and fell in love with him afterwards. He was the first prince of the royal blood since Richard II to become engaged to a commoner.
 COWARD. I knew, in my teens, that the world was full of hatred, envy, malice, cruelty, jealousy, unrequited love, murder, despair and destruction. I also knew, at the same time, that it was full of kindness, joy, pleasure, requited love, generosity, fun, excitement, laughter and friends. Nothing that has happened to me over the years has caused me to re-adjust in my mind the balance of these observed phenomena.
 QUEEN MOTHER. "All is well, all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." We have no reliable guarantee that the afterlife will be any less exasperating than this one, have we?
 COWARD. Ah ... but we do!
 QUEEN MOTHER. One day, quite soon I will be down there ... *(Pointing down.)* gone, quite gawn.

Underscore: *I'll See You Again* (Bitter Sweet)

COWARD. You have an utterly irresistible mischievousness of spirit ~ most of it gin!
 QUEEN MOTHER. I'm sick of these insults now Noël – shouldn't you be getting home?
 COWARD. There's nothing I should like better – I've always believed in cutting my losses. That's why I died.
(They dance together.)
 QUEEN MOTHER. I've danced with Fred Astaire ...
 COWARD. So did I.
 QUEEN MOTHER. He was quite a good dancer, you know ...

Song: *I'll See You Again* (Bitter Sweet)

COWARD. *I'll see you again,
 Whenever Spring breaks through again;
 Time may lie heavy between,
 But what has been
 Is past forgetting.*
 QUEEN MOTHER. *This sweet memory,
 Across the years will come to me;
 Though my world may go awry,
 In my heart will ever lie
 Just the echo of a sigh,
 ...*
 BOTH. *I'll see you again,
 I live each moment through again.
 Time has lain heavy between,
 But what has been
 Can leave me never;
 Your dear memory
 Throughout my life has guided me.
 Though my world has gone awry,*

*Though the years my tears may dry
I shall love you till I die,*

...

(COWARD disappears.)

QUEEN MOTHER. *Though my world has gone awry,
Though the end is drawing nigh,
I shall love you till I die,
Goodbye!*

(The End.)

Curtain Call: You're the Top [Cole Porter]

COWARD. *At words poetic, I'm so pathetic
That I always have found it best,
Instead of getting 'em off my chest,
To let 'em rest unexpressed,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *I hate parading my serenading
So I'll probably miss a bar -*

COWARD. *But if this ditty is not so pretty
At least it'll tell you
How great you are.
You're the top!
You're the Coliseum.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're the top!
You're the Louvre Museum.*

COWARD. *You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're a Bendel bonnet,*

COWARD. *A Shakespeare sonnet,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're Mickey Mouse.*

COWARD. *You're the Nile,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're the Tower of Pisa,*

COWARD. *You're the smile on the Mona Lisa*

QUEEN MOTHER. *I'm a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop,*

BOTH. *But if, baby, I'm the bottom you're the top!*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're the top!*

You're Mahatma Gandhi.

COWARD. *You're the top!*

You're Napoleon Brandy.

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're the purple light*

Of a summer night in Spain,

COWARD. *You're the National Gallery*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're Garbo's salary,*

COWARD. *You're cellophane.*

QUEEN MOTHER. *You're sublime,*

You're a turkey dinner,

COWARD. *You're the time of a Derby winner,*

QUEEN MOTHER. *I'm a toy balloon that's fated soon to pop*

BOTH. *But if, baby, I'm the bottom,*

You're the top!