

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA *or* THE PRICKWICK PAPERS



Yes, it's time for Nanny's Teddy Tales. In this tale (number five in the series), Doyle discovers that Bodie possesses some very interesting—and should we say 'sophisticated' and 'refined'?—tastes. The questions to be answered are: will Bodie ask Doyle to participate in his pursuits? Will Doyle want to share in Bodie's passions? And how will M. Fae bring teddy bears into it?

Bodie started guiltily, then covered it with a layer of his usual suave aplomb. “You never heard of knocking?”

“As in knocking shops?” Doyle answered, meandering into Bodie's bedroom, sharp eyes missing nothing as Bodie locked the metal box and put it back in the wardrobe. “Me? Nah. Never had to pay for it, have I? Women just can't resist my manly charms.”

“Yeh, well you shouldn't go flashing your bracelet round like that, one of your birds might half-inch it.”

Keeping up their patter, Doyle looked down at where his jeans swelled in carefully arranged fullness. “Half inch? You'd do better if you measured it in feet, mate.”

Bodie, feeding Doyle's naturally suspicious nature, let him away with that one, not a single disparaging remark about Doyle's size and not so much as a raised eyebrow at Bodie's own generous endowment. Interrestingk, as they said on the telly, verry interrestingk. Mind you, he was even more interested in the fact that Bodie was blushing as he stuffed the metal box ever so casually behind a pile of bits and pieces on the top shelf of the wardrobe. Everyone in the world would have been convinced by the Academy Award performance of insouciance Bodie was putting on as he interred that mysterious box. Which meant, Doyle thought, curiosity twitching, the need to know beginning to chew on him, that Bodie was hiding something.

Which meant that there was more in that military box than bank balances and safety deposit keys, both of which Doyle had managed to uncover weeks before. And it couldn't be his Christmas present: Bodie hadn't bought that yet, according to the letter from the motorbike parts supplier that had landed so conveniently at Doyle's feet and had equally conveniently fallen open.

"You're a bit on the early side," Bodie was saying, shrugging his jacket on, absently picking up loose change and keys, stuffing them into pockets. Which was another interesting thing, to Doyle's way of looking at things. Bodie never willingly put keys and money in his jacket pocket for the very simple fact that they would either a) rip the pocket lining or b) weigh his jacket down by a minute fraction of a second when he went for his gun, and even though this was going to be a social occasion, old habits died hard. So what was in that box that had Bodie so distracted then, eh? That's what Doyle wanted to know.

Being a surreptitious little bastard, however, he made sure that his expression remained blank and nothing at all betrayed just how consumed he was by the most prurient of curiosities. "Thought we could have a pint before we picked the girls up," he said, handing Bodie the slim black notecase from the chest of drawers.

Bodie's eyes crinkled in the smallest of smiles. "Dutch courage, eh?"

"What d'you think? If we're going to sit through an entire evening of fucking Wagner, I'll need all the help I can get."

"No class, that's your problem, Doyle. I dunno, where would you be without me?"

"At 'ome watching *Pot Black* on the telly with a takeaway from the Indian place and very 'appy, thanks very much."

"Oh, touchy tonight, are we?" Bodie was smirking now, every inch the Romantic Hero in his dinner jacket and black silk cummerbund. Beside him, Doyle felt positively scruffy, despite the fact that he'd gone to the extreme length of wearing a bow tie and his jacket even matched his trousers.

"Never mind, sunshine," Bodie said as he cupped Doyle's groin so swiftly his hand was gone before Ray had a chance to really experience it, "I'm sure Sarah will make sure there's not a twitch in you by the end of the night."

"Chance'd be a fine thing," Doyle muttered as he followed Bodie out into the living room, busy appreciating the way the centre light gleamed on dark hair and annoyed at the way the dinner jacket hid the lush lines of Bodie's bum.

"Isn't she coming across?" Bodie glanced sharply over his shoulder, almost catching a look of tomcat lust on Doyle's face. There was genuine concern there in Bodie: despite his very best intentions, Bodie had been appalled one day to discover that he actually liked his sod of a partner.

"Not much, no."

"Ray my old son," Bodie slung a fatherly arm around Doyle's shoulders then slid it down and patted his bum, "I don't know how to break this to you, but coming across is like being pregnant. You can't do it piecemeal."

"You'd best have a word with Sarah then!"

Into the car, on their way, tyres shushing over wet roads, and Bodie brought the subject up again. "She being a pricktease, then?"

"That's one way of putting it. Here, you're f'ing interested in my sex life all of a sudden, mate." Doyle made sure he sounded suitably offended, waiting for Bodie to get that hunted, guilty look of which Ray was so very fond. "Be fair, Bodie. I'll tell you about Sarah, if you tell me about Beatrix."

Bodie shrugged, his jacket whispering silkenly. "Not much to tell. I make a move, she giggles, I make another move, she's on me like a rutting bull. End of story. What about your Sarah?"

"My Sarah," Doyle began expansively, settling down to make Bodie feel suitably sorry for him, "wiggles it in front of me, makes lewd and libidinous remarks, your Honour, leans forward so's I can see down her dress, and then, just when I'm positive I'm going to burst out at the seams, she goes all prim and proper on me and says she's not that kind of a girl. End of story."

"Aw, da shame, poor 'ittle diddums." A quick frown of distraction, then the lorry was overtaken and the road ahead was relatively clear. "So why're you still going out with her then?"

"Because, you stupid bastard, you came up with the brilliant idea of the four of us going on this double date to get out of spending Christmas at Sarah's house in the country, that's why!"

“Oh, yeh, right,” Bodie muttered, wincing at the thought of Sarah’s parents, very much a part of the horsey set. In fact, Sarah’s mum bore a fairly strong resemblance to the winner of the Grand National, the rank outsider he’d lost a fortune because of. And, he was loathe to admit, it had been *his* big mouth that had roped them into going to the country in the first place, and Wagner hadn’t seemed to high a price to pay to get out of it. Well, not for him, anyway. Unlike Doyle, he not only liked opera, he even liked Wagner. Torture, for his philistine partner.

“Anyway, we’d already paid for the tickets before I realised that she wasn’t just playing hard to get, but what’s the point of creating a fuss at this stage? Easier this way, in the long run.”

“Money’s going to charity,” Bodie said, as if that were going to make skinflint Doyle feel any better.

“Oh, cheers, mate, thanks, that makes it all sunshine and roses.”

When Doyle got that tone of voice, Bodie usually had the sense to keep very, very quiet. Which was just as well, because Doyle wasn’t paying attention to him any more. All thought of the soon-to-be-dismissed Sarah gone from his mind, he was too busy speculating on what the hell Bodie had in that box. Not that he would ask: Bodie would only lie to him by joking about it and then race home to hide the incriminating evidence. One elegantly shod foot propped up on the dashboard in his usual urchinesque sprawl, Doyle spent a happy twenty minutes chewing the problem over, methodically working through the possibilities of what could be so terribly incriminating that Bodie would keep it locked away and hidden—but not so dangerous that Bodie could risk keeping it within easy access at home, instead of in one of those rather severely private banks the ex-merc frequented.

“Yoo-hoo, anyone home?”

“Oh, yeh, right,” he said, clambering out the car, not noticing that he’d got melting slush onto his polished shoes and round the hem of his good trousers. So, he was thinking, following Bodie blindly into the pub, it was something Bodie needed to be able to get at readily, but it wasn’t cash, because Doyle knew all about the fake book where Bodie kept his cash, so—

“Doyle! Christ, you’re a dozy bastard tonight, aren’t you. Here, wrap yourself around this, give yourself an excuse for acting as if you’re sloshed.”

Doyle blinked, finally noticing that Bodie had come back from the bar and had a pint sitting in front of him. The juke box was blasting away with the third in what was threatening to be an endless stream of past and present Christmas hits. At least they hadn’t had to endure a Cliff Richard one yet, so he ought to be grateful for small mercies, although Bing Crosby and David Bowie together was sick enough for anyone. “Ta, mate,” he said absently, eyeing Bodie with a speculative gaze that made the other man singularly uncomfortable. He may have missed coming into the pub and all the rest of it, but Doyle noticed every minute change of expression on Bodie’s supposedly blank face, and was even more determined to find out what it was that could make Bodie, of all people, look guilty.

Never one to waste time when on an investigation, even if it were fuelled by base nosiness and not the safety of the realm, Doyle brushed a droplet of beer off Bodie’s lapel. “Best take that off if you don’t want it smelling like a brewer’s cart, mate,” he said, mocking as usual, nothing to show that he was up to anything but making fun of Bodie’s infamous sartorial pickiness.

Bodie, too concerned with the unnerving way Doyle was looking at him—there were certain secrets he wasn’t quite ready for his ferret of a partner to uncover yet—took the jacket off, draping it carefully across the back of his chair. He jumped as a coin landed in his lap. “This’ll never cover the cost of a pint,” he said, holding the silver coin up to the light.

“Not meant to—first round’s always yours. That’s for the jukebox. If we’ve got to listen to fucking Christmas hits, then at least it can be something I like. Stick ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ on for me, there’s a good mate.”

Bodie was getting to his feet even as he was muttering about some people being lazy bastards.

By the time the closest thing to opera that Ray Doyle liked was spilling through the pub, Bodie was back in his seat, drinking his bitter, blissfully unaware that his wickedly funny friend had already gone through his pocket and palmed

the key to the one box that Bodie had no desire at all for Ray Doyle to unlock. Laughing at yet another pithy comment about the man propping up the bar, Bodie slung his jacket on and was out of the pub without even realising that not only had he managed to buy three rounds and all Doyle had done was give him ten pence for the jukebox, but that he'd also had his pocket picked. Ignorance, as the saying goes, is bliss, because Bodie was happy, all the way to the flat Beatrix and Sarah shared, where they discovered that Beatrix had come down with gastroenteritis and was a very indelicate shade of green. Which left Bodie, Doyle and the simpering Sarah.

"Listen," Bodie whispered into an ear inundated by curls, "I'll slope off, and you can have the Divine Sarah all to yourself, okay?"

Doyle grabbed Bodie by the cummerbund, hauling him in close. "Not a fucking chance, sunshine," he whispered viciously, refusing to allow his rather clever little plan to be spoiled by Bodie's idea of either romanticism or cruelty, whichever had inspired this latest bout of self-sacrificing. "I don't even like fucking Wagner, and you and her do, so if I have to sit through that crap, then you can sit there and enjoy yourself—and keep Sarah off me."

"Thought you said she wasn't coming across?" Bodie hissed as Sarah settled herself in the back seat of the car, ignoring the annoyed look of disapproval she gave them.

"She's not, but she likes to pretend that she's going to, and by the time I realise that this time is the same as all the other times, she's got my balls in knots and a happy little grin on her face. So you can distract her for me, all right? Seeing as how tonight was your idea in the first fucking place."

Smiling sweetly, he plonked himself down in the passenger seat, made some inane comment to Sarah, and then drifted off into his own speculative world, leaving Bodie to cover for him.

By the time they'd got to the concert hall, Sarah was fuming at him, enchanted with Bodie, and Doyle had got as far as wondering if maybe it was something really embarrassing, like an old teddy bear or something else really pathetic that Bodie had locked away.

By the time the first act was half over, Doyle had managed to outrage everyone for five rows

with his endless fidgeting, shifting, coughing and sneezing—all of it falsified evidence of course.

"Will you shut up?" Bodie hissed. "We're at a good bit!"

"Never!" Doyle said in totally unfeigned amazement. It all sounded the same to him, the only difference in whether the cats being tortured were male or female. Not, he thought, looking at a blonde behemoth and a pretty tenor, that it was all that easy to tell sometimes. With a final scratch at his bum, he gave the *coup de grâce*: an enormous sneeze that ruffled not only the young man in front of him, but the man's hair as well. "Sorry!" he whispered remarkably loudly, earning him foul looks from all around and a murderous glare from Bodie.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" his partner demanded, too furious to remain silent.

"Allergic," Doyle said.

"Since when've you been fucking allergic?" Bodie hissed at him.

"Since you dragged me to the fucking opera!" Doyle hissed right back.

"Will you *please* be quiet!" a blue rinsed matron pealed from behind them, hitting a hapless Doyle over the head with her beaded evening bag which, judging by the resounding thump it made, was filled with several bricks.

"Quiet?" Doyle shouted, drowning out both orchestra and two of the finest stars in the operatic world. "Quiet? I'll do you for assault and battery! Grievous bodily harm—"

"I'll grievous bodily harm *you*, if you don't shut up and sit—" a hefty tug and Doyle sat, not comfortably, "—down. No, don't say anything, you, just keep your trap shut." Bodie turned, smiled sweetly enough to cause instant tooth decay, and charmed the bosomy lady behind them. "I'm so terribly sorry," he apologised in his best Belgravian, "but I'm afraid he's just come back from a tour of duty." He winked and popped a few more marbles into his mouth, continued with a conspiratorial, "One of those dreadfully hush-hush little numbers out in one of the colonies, you know."

"Oh," the dame replied, subsiding amidst a mountain of taffeta and lace and clouds of cloying perfume. "Oh, well, in that case, I suppose one really must forgive him?"

She didn't sound too sure about that, and

Bodie wished he could sit on Doyle to shut his partner up before Doyle could land them both flat out cold from the swinging evening bag.

“Hmm, yes,” he said, eyeing his partner warningly, lowering his voice to the merest whisper of sound. “I’m sure he’ll be quiet now. He usually is once the worst of the fit has passed.”

“Fit?” Doyle was snarling into his ear before he had time to turn round fully. “Fit? The only fit going on here is me fitting you for a fucking grave! Fit?”

And the penny finally dropped. Bodie faced his partner, going up close enough that he could breathe the heady, sexy scent that always seemed to cling to Doyle. “Listen, Ray,” he murmured, getting closer than was strictly necessary, lips a millimetre from Doyle’s ear, “if you hate it that much, then why don’t you just bugger off home and leave those of us with good taste here to enjoy the opera in peace?”

“Thought you’d never ask!” Whispering again, but this time Doyle was actually being quiet, for now that his goal was achieved, he could afford to be generous. “Right. See you tomorrow then?”

“Christmas Eve? Don’t you have other stuff arranged?”

“What other stuff? Oh, you mean family and the like? Course I have, but not till later, and they wouldn’t mind if I brought you with me.” He caught the moment of unguarded delight then, saw honest pleasure blossom in Bodie’s eyes. Course, he thought, Bodie’s family all buggered off to Rhodesia when he was thirteen... “In fact,” Doyle added, making it up as he went along, but knowing that his gregarious family would simply open their arms and welcome a new member, “my mum and dad both said they were expecting you to come and eat them out of house and home.”

“You never said—”

Doyle wasn’t about to tell him it was because his parents didn’t know yet, not when Bodie looked so shyly flattered. “Haven’t had time, have I? Anyway, I’ll come round tomorrow about eleven and pick you up then, shall I?” A nod, barely visible in the near dark, and then Doyle was on his feet, beginning the satisfying task of disturbing everyone in their row as he left, careful to tread on as many uppercrust or highbrow toes as he could. Down the stairs,

across the lobby with its contingent of liveried lackeys, and he was flagging down a taxi. As the amber light approached through the light drizzle, he realised that he had completely forgotten about Sarah. Oh, well, he decided, climbing into the big black car with its redolence of leather, cigarettes and damp coats, Bodie would take care of her.

“Oi!”

Startled, Doyle looked up at the driver, who was glowering at him through the glass partition.

“I said, where to, guv?”

Doyle leant back in the seat, and confident of Bodie’s entrapment for a good few hours to come, he grinned and then gave the driver Bodie’s address. Bow tie unfurled, drooping ends nibbled on by white teeth as his mind chewed on something else, Doyle had a lovely trip over to Bodie’s house, trying to deduce what the hell was in that metal box. Not drugs—Bodie was contemptuous of drugs and only kept a few uppers on hand for when the job demanded them, and those were in the flour cannister in the kitchen. Couldn’t be dirty magazines, because most of them were on permanent loan over at Doyle’s flat. Secrets from the past? Not many of those, most of the family photos and such like back on the farm in Rhodesia. Zimbabwe, he corrected himself abstractedly, not really paying much attention, because now he was wondering if all the gen on Bodie’s CI5 file was bunkum and the metal box held the truth... Nah, Bodie wasn’t close to his family, but there were three ‘Across the Miles at Christmastime’ cards on Bodie’s mantelpiece, and they’d been printed by some company with an African name. So it wasn’t that...

He suddenly sat bolt upright. It had to be something blackmailable, which meant that it was something that put Bodie at risk. Which meant, Doyle conceded, in a burst of loyalty and decency, that it was his sworn duty to help his mate—by finding out what the secret was and keeping his mouth shut about it. Problem shared is a problem halved, he told himself piously, hoping that whatever was in the box wasn’t truly blackmail material, but perhaps only something sentimental and silly, something that would make Bodie blush the way he had earlier on. Sighing over the mental image of a blushing Bodie, Doyle didn’t even mind that the driver

was taking him the scenic route to Bodie's flat: it was worth it. Especially since he'd played the latest round of one-upmanship and lifted a tenner from Bodie's wallet when he'd handed Bodie his jacket in the pub.

So if it wasn't something genuinely blackmailable—and he couldn't picture his partner being stupid enough not to destroy anything like that, not to mention the fact that he couldn't come up with anything worse than what was already in Bodie's file—then it had to be something embarrassing. Giggling as he went up the stairs and unlocked Bodie's door, Doyle was running down a list of bashful shamefulness, beginning with baby pictures and ending with teddy bears. Finally, he was inside Bodie's domain and, being Raymond Doyle, before he ransacked his best mate's secrets and skulked around using stolen keys, he turned on all the lights, the radiators and the stereo, yet more Christmas songs bleating forth. He dropped his jacket over the back of the bedroom chair, flexed his fingers with the air of a master cracksman, and got *The Box*. For a moment, he stopped what he was doing, resting his hands on the chill metal, weighing the consequences of his action against the lure of having his curiosity satisfied. There was, quite simply, no contest, Doyle being a self-confessed nosy bastard. As he was fond of asking rhetorically to disabuse idiots of the notion of Doylistic altruism, why the fuck else would a man like him join the police force, if not to poke his nose into all sorts of interesting secrets? Bigger gossip than his mum—and that was no mean feat.

So he lay *The Box* more securely in the middle of the bed, took up the key, and with a sigh of profoundest pleasure, he opened it.

And found teddy bears.

But of a very different sort.

Foot-sore and very, very weary, Sarah having proved to be a witty and demanding conversationalist over two cups of coffee and chocolate gâteau, Bodie trudged up to his flat at an hour far later than it had any right to be. He was, he conceded, verging on the depressed, the evening being nothing that he expected. So much for his plans of a night at the opera, brandy and champagne afterwards, and then a hot and sexy foursome back at his flat. He'd even changed the

sheets in anticipation, hoping that he'd get lucky tonight, and that things would progress that next bit. Last time he and Ray had gone out on a double date, they'd got as far as shirts off and trousers at half mast before Bodie's girlfriend had gone coy on him, but that was better than the time before, and that was better than the time before that, all the way back to his very first carefully offhand suggestion that they go out in a foursome. He sighed heavily, slowly putting his key in the lock. He'd really had high hopes for tonight, actually thinking that he might get to see Ray naked and aroused. Christ, he thought that if he were really lucky, he might be able to 'accidentally' brush against Ray in the heat of passion with his girl. And what had he got? Doyle's sharp-tongued and intelligent girlfriend who was oblivious to her own sexiness until some poor sod tried to take her up on it. Then he smiled, thinking that he had one really good thing from this evening: the promise of Christmas Eve with Ray—at his home, even, with food concocted by the woman who had taught Ray to cook all those incredible dishes. So tonight hadn't been a complete loss and—

He stopped dead, hand snaking inside his jacket pocket, a curse muttered under his breath as he remembered that he didn't usually go armed to the opera. Cautiously, he inched open the door that he had left double locked and which had opened on the bottom lock alone. The hall was dark, but enough light was coming in from the landing for Bodie to see... One of his magazines, right there in the middle of the floor, propped up on a tin of beans, a grinning man and ardent cock limned by the outside light.

He seriously considered shutting the door, locking it, walking away and never coming back. But that wouldn't help, and at least Doyle—it had to be Ray, who else would have either the balls or the casual assumption of a right-to-know but Ray?—wasn't standing behind the door with a meat cleaver. Silently, he eased himself inside, shutting the door carefully, wincing as the locks clicked into place with an unfortunate excess of noise. No chance of Doyle missing that sound, for all that it was relatively quiet. Moving cautiously—there was also no chance that Ray would be satisfied with just one boobytrap at the front door—Bodie started along his hall, gathering up the damning evidence one

item at a time, blushing occasionally as the situation warranted, which was about once every three feet. The trail led off up the stairs to the bedroom, a long line of hard cocks signposting the way and Bodie gave up picking up all the little morsels Doyle had left out for him, now quite convinced that Doyle had emptied his box in its entirety.

Top of the stairs, more naked men, but now they had graduated to the magazines of couples and threesomes. Top landing and now they were at the hardcore fucking and sucking pictures, and then, worst of all, there, propped on a lurid can of Coke, and in the line of light escaping from under the closed bedroom door, was his diary. Oh no, Bodie groaned to himself, stooping to pick up the closely-written book. Oh, no, not that...

Oh, yes, that. It was there, in his own minute script, all of it, every last bit of it, all his helpless lust and desire and undeclared emotion, from that day he'd seen Doyle pull sweat-stained overalls off to reveal a hairy chest, and then gorgeous back and—

And he'd already put all of that down in his big black book, right on the page that Doyle had it opened at. Now he really did want to just creep quietly away. But—it suddenly dawned on him. Doyle had been in his box, had seen all his male magazines, had read that pæan to Ray's hairy chest and glorious body—and had chosen to leave a trail leading right to his bedroom door.

Heart in his mouth, Bodie opened the door of his bedroom, and stepped inside. Only to stop in utter, ecstatic delight. Ray was there already, lying sprawled on the bed, absolutely stark bollock naked, nothing on him but a smile. And there, propped between his widespread legs, Bodie's favourite magazine. *Teddy-Bears On Parade! 30 Hairy Men Get It On—For You!*

He was already naked by the time he got to the bed and Doyle tossed the magazine aside, opened his arms wide and said, "Time for beddie-byes!"

And that was how Bodie never did manage to give up sleeping with a teddy bear.

