

# THE DAY THAT KENNEDY DIED

By Ian Brown

I got up on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. November, 1963, feeling every bit of seventeen years old. I was in a study now. I'd put O levels behind me. I was full-back for the 2<sup>nd</sup>. XV. I felt older, more responsible and more mature.

Birthdays were not a big deal at Sedbergh. There was brief acknowledgement but no presents or cakes except for those received from parents or relatives. The day passed uneventfully. It was a Friday, which meant a full day of classes. This was not so good but the fact that it was Friday, filled me with a T.G.I.F. sense of relief.

Later that evening there was a concert in Powell Hall to look forward to, and the next day there was an away match against Skipton Grammar School. That evening after a supper of Shepherd's Pie and some indescribable and unnameable dessert, I set off up School Hill with David and Mark to attend the concert in Powell Hall. Although we did get to see the occasional film, the major form of entertainment provided by the school was a steady stream of concerts. These concerts were always of the classical music variety and were often presented by top performers such as Julian Bream, John Ogden and Gerald Moore. On one memorable occasion, the school was treated to a performance of Dvorak's 'New World' Symphony, given by the complete Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. How they managed to squeeze the complete orchestra onto the modestly sized stage, no-one knew.

The audience settled and became quiet. The concert was to be given by a Scottish Company called 'Opera for All', and the opera to be performed was 'The Barber of Seville' by Rossini. Opera was one form of music I found extremely hard to digest. It seemed so stiff and melodramatic and unreal. At least in a play (Brecht notwithstanding), it was easy to be pulled through the illusion, to the point of feeling that what you were watching was real. But in an opera, with its cast of barrel-chested men, and heaving-breasted women strutting around like marionettes, the only direction in which I found myself being pulled, was towards uncontrollable mirth. As far as I was concerned, and I was not alone, an opera became a comic spectacle, a hilariously funny unintended exercise in the theatre of the absurd. I think it was the emotional excess of it all that made it so funny. To go from the stoic Sedbergh world, with its tight emotional constraints, into a world where grown people warbled passionately at each other, as they fell in love, lied, cheated and killed each, was the ultimate contradiction, and one which allowed for a worthwhile release. The singers were usually funniest when they were taking themselves and the action the most seriously. In a comic opera such as the 'Barber of Seville', there was the added benefit of seeing the singers getting all puffed up when at the appropriate spots, when WE knew that they were totally unaware that we were laughing *at* them not *with* them. THAT was the real birthday present, 2 hours of anticipated hysteria. By the end of the first act, my expectations had been met, if not surpassed. My stomach was aching from laughter.

In the interval, three of us decided to go outside and take a brief walk over to The Cloisters. We noticed a small group of boys talking animatedly. As we passed them, I heard one of them say, it's true, I'm not having you on, he's been shot and they say he's dead. Kennedy's dead." Immediately, I felt a sense of shock and disbelief run through me.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Mark Hudson.

"What?"

"I heard that fellow saying that President Kennedy's been shot and that he's dead."

Mark's eyes widened. "Good Lord! It can't be true."

The bell sounded for the end of the interval. It was time to go back in. By the time we had returned to our seats, the hall was buzzing with rumours. I could hear confused whispering coming from all sides.

“It’s not true. I heard the news and there was nothing about Kennedy.”

“Apparently, there were three of them. Cuban terrorists.”

“Was Jackie killed too?”

“It’s impossible. He’s too well guarded. Besides he’s got a bullet-proof car.”

“Where did you say it was supposed to have happened? Dallas? Where’s that?”

The whispering was suddenly drowned by a flourish of music introducing the second act. As the singers came onto the stage there was a sense of extreme agitation amongst the audience. The whole atmosphere had changed radically. Before we had been willing captives to our seats, now it was as if we were chained to them. It felt all wrong to be watching this frivolous entertainment, when an event of such magnitude was in question. There was only one thought in people’s minds: ‘was it true or wasn’t it?’

The next hour seemed to drag on interminably. The spectacle that had been so hilarious before was now not even remotely funny. The soprano who previously had furnished us with such delightful fantasies of our matron was now merely irritating as she trilled her way through one aria after another. At last, to everyone’s enormous relief, the opera climaxed and came to an end. There was the obligatory applause and then it was almost as if a starter's gun was fired. The hall emptied in seconds, as people rushed out.

When we arrived back at Powell House, we were met by John Spedding who immediately informed us that it was true. Kennedy had been shot and killed.

Back in study 4, we tried to come to terms with what had happened.

“Well that certainly is terrible,” said Mark, who always had something immediate to say about everything. “Dreadful in fact. He was a good man, the best President the U.S. has had for a long time. But in a way I’m not surprised he ended up getting shot. I mean, what with his support for the civil rights movement and the whole Bay of Pigs thing, he must have made quite a few enemies.”

Why was it that Mark always seemed to know so much, I thought to myself as I tried to catch the gist of what he was saying. I didn’t know enough to discuss with Mark on this level. Besides, I was more aware of my feelings at what had happened than I was of any thoughts about who or what Kennedy had been or done. I looked at David. He had not said a word since we first heard the news. He seemed completely introspective and appeared to have been deeply affected by what had happened. He must have sensed that I was looking at him, for at that moment, he raised his head.

“Why is it the good people are the ones that always get killed?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s just not right.” This effectively echoed my sentiments. I sensed also that David, like me, felt it somehow inappropriate to get into a discussion about President Kennedy at that moment.

Mark began to rattle on again about how the U.S. was a jungle and how that kind of assassination could never happen in Britain. To my relief, he was interrupted after a few minutes by the sound of the bell announcing evening prayers in the dining room.

I lay in bed, a kaleidoscope of thoughts and feelings flashing around in my mind. Kennedy was dead. In some way, it was as if the Queen had been shot. Not much ‘outside’ news permeated the shell of the Sedbergh microcosm but this had swept in like a tidal wave. The man had such stature. He was tall and good-looking with a dazzling smile and an even more dazzling wife. He had that youthfulness and vitality that for some inexplicable reason seemed to be the preserve of American politicians. I mean how could you compare Sir Alec Douglas-Hume, the British Prime-Minister, with Kennedy. You couldn’t, it would be too embarrassing. British politicians, from my limited viewpoint always seemed old and decrepit, to say nothing of boring and pompous. And then there was what they stood for. Yes, maybe Kennedy had made enemies because he supported causes like the Civil Rights movement, as Mark had said, but at least he stood for something. Why couldn’t some handsome, charismatic British politician magically appear on the scene, stand up in the House of Commons, and say, ‘this is not the fair land, the bejewelled isle that we would

have it be .... it is rather a land scarred and turned ugly by inequality and injustice, an isle besmirched by an unnatural and unholy caste system that results in, amongst other things, public school boys seeing anyone other than a public school boy as being somehow sub-human, uncultured, unintelligent, ignorant, unfit to belong to the same rank or even the same species ..... listen to me, my people, I too have a dream .... .’

My reverie concluded with the thought that it was hard to find heroes in Britain. They all seemed to be the other side of the Atlantic. But I was also left with some angry and confused feelings, a hornet’s nest had been stirred up. There WAS inequality and injustice in Britain, so why were we always going on about our ‘decency’ and ‘fair play’ and wonderful system of justice, bla bla bla? What was that thing I had been reading in Orwell’s Animal Farm a year ago? Oh yes.... ‘All Animals Are Equal, but Some Are More Equal Than Others.’ That just about summed it up.

Kennedy was dead. The world seemed a smaller place in which my world of Sedbergh had almost shrunk off the map, and my seventeenth birthday didn’t seem so important any more.