

JOURNEY 'ROUND MY BAMBER

CONSTANTINE CHERNENKO DIED AS WE SET OFF ON THE TRAIN, SO HE MISSED STIRLING'S UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE PERFORMANCE BY THIRTY-SIX HOURS.

Still, the five of us speeding to Granada's Manchester studios were healthy enough, at full cock in fact; young, gifted and hungry. Between us, we'd covered a fair intellectual sweep: we'd been plucked from the jaws of obscurity by student apathy and, finding ourselves stars, we were determined to shine in the firmament.

It's a strange sensation to know that every sway of the 125 takes one nearer to Bamber Gascoigne, nearer my Lord to thee. Everyone in the country has a view about him; Billy Connolly says he's a glove puppet, some insist he's a disease, and my Aunt Fanny says he's a genius. In fact, he's in his early fifties after twenty-three years on the prog., he drinks halves of lager and has his own hair, but more of that later. For the moment, it was enough to know that he was Bamber and it was good.

That evening, we were guests in the audience for the show 'Magdelene College vs Edinburgh', and a very valuable experience it was. The show has been completely revamped, and new pink decor surrounds the questionmaster. Shots of Bamber now include half-shots of the audience trying to look cool and clever. Throughout this show, which we later saw on video, we five, cool, clever people were shown in full whenever the camera went to Bamber. Aah, there's fame even in passivity. The set is arranged so that one team sits atop the other like Celebrity Squares, but in such a way that it's almost impossible either to pee or spit down, and the audience participation has a moronic beauty, a Thatcherite simplicity. When the Floor Manager's hands go up, you applaud; when they come down, you stop. So, we watched Magdelene getting its communal ass whupped by a magnificent Edinburgh team which even looked intelligent. Tumbling out the back door into the cold night, we knew that tomorrow Salford waited; four mean, tough mothers eager for a kill.

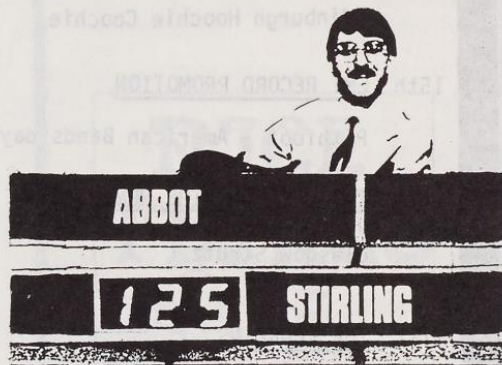
Some of us danced the night away, some slept, some took in a mid-day movie on the Tuesday, but all of us, to a man, pigged it up thoroughly on the free meals and accommodation. By early afternoon, we were back in Granadaland for the pre-show business, and I remembered my Aunt Fanny's advice - 'What'll happen'll happen and what won't won't'.

The four mean mothers turned out to be jellyfish, and just kind of sat and wobbled about while the Producer - a delightfully rotund person called Peter - chit-chatted in the conference room. Tea and coffee were served, but the jellyfish had eaten all the biscuits

before we arrived. It was the first indication that 12th March wasn't to be Stirling's day. I was a devil and had three cups of tea, and then the door opened - agonisingly slowly, at first, as if a reluctant albatross were about to be coaxed inside, but then more vigorously. Yes, it was Bamber. A six-footer with a mass of fair curls, face creased but untensed. He was very, very slim, and wore the faithful brownish sports-jacket and woven tie. There was no arrogance about him; he asked for tea, but mysteriously there was none left so a half cup of coffee was supplied, which he drank with great aplomb. Then, wishing us all luck, he left like Elizabeth I on her death bed, meekly as a lamb and easily as a ripe apple from a tree.

At 2.30 pm, we were ordered to a dress rehearsal, and out into the light of the dressing room came out gladrags, including my £2 Oxfam jacket, as white as the snow, with a red tie and matching handkerchief. I looked like the death of a baby seal. Malcolm Muggeridge maintains that all T.V. is a sham since nothing, including colours, is what it seems, and, in support, I can now reveal a secret. The colours you will see on screen are far too sharp and too loud to be true; and that is as much true for Bamber's make-up as for our gladrags.

The dress rehearsal went like a dream. We took an early lead, getting music bonuses and everything, winning the standard game and carrying the lead over into the new format 'head to head' show. Here, each member nominates a specialist subject and plays against one member of the other team. Two correct answers move a baton on to the next player. The final score of 220:230 showed us to be evenly matched. Then, in the make-up room, some of us were powdered by the very lady who had powdered Bet Lynch from Coronation Street. Humankind can only bear so much reality in a day, so off we went for another free meal. Eating was difficult, though we forced it down like heroes before the supporters - all 0.008% of the student population - arrived. 7.00pm approached. At last, it was the real thing.



Bamber has a ritual. At 6.59 and 40 seconds, he raises his glass of water and says, 'Good luck, teams'; to which we reply, 'Thanks, Bamber' at 6.59 and 42 seconds. The bearded man who yells out the titles and the names of the answerers sits in a large black box behind the cameras, like a Wimbledon umpire, and he prepared his voice for action with 10 seconds to go.

We were on top of the apparatus, and peering over the edge, it was possible to see that one of the jellyfish below had a neckline gone wild, and that hair had spread all over his neck like the trifids. I wanted to crunch his neck around and show the world, but it was

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6.59 and 57 seconds. The Floor Manager's hands were up, then down, 'Ding, Dong...', cheers, and Bamber came alive with, 'Here's your starter for ten'.

We took an early lead of fifty points, and somewhere in the middle got a picture bonus with the screen so dark we could have been looking at half a pound of mince and not realised the significance. It's funny, perched up there. You can have a quiet chat while the team

below are having their bonuses; it's like the top of a bus, vaguely listening for the conductor's bell.

'BONG!' There was a break between games one and two, and Bet Lynch's dresser reappeared to powder someone else's nose for a change. She stroked our olfactory orifices expertly, gently, and then moved on. La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Into Game Two, the head to head, and fearing the worst we went on. 'Good luck, teams.' 'Thanks, Bamber.' 'Ding..Dong..' We made up 100 points here, but to no avail, and the final score was 225:340 to Salford; no longer jellyfish but mean, tough mothers after all.

Fame is ethereal, and the lights aren't on long. It's hand in the dressing-room keys, slither along the back corridors and out the back door by the carpark. Later, in the Granada club, a sort of up-market 'Grange, Bamber asked about it all. 'Well, Mr Gascoigne, it's like this...' We wanted to ask him about the elixir of youth, how you keep skin soft at 53, and what's with the suede shoes? but were content with pleasantries. After all, what do you say to a national institution when the chips are down? Ovid had a phrase, however: 'Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor'* and Amen to that. You can see the thing for yourself on 30th April and 1st May at 3.00pm on both days.

* A loose translation is: 'I see the right thing to do but insist on doing the wrong'.

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