

Hitchcock and Uncle Cyril

DURING 1999, the centenary year of Alfred Hitchcock's birth, the master's *oeuvre* was examined yet again, and movie aficionados, expert in deconstruction techniques, competed with each other in searching his films for clues, links and hints that would lead them deeper into the hermetic world of Hitchcock studies.

A recent television series devoted to the man and his work included brief excerpts from his early home movies. Suddenly there flashed on the screen the image of my husband's Uncle Cyril Ritchard doing the Charleston in the Hitchcock garden. Everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time with a lot of clowning and laughter, and I was reminded of a family album photo of Cyril taken about the same period.



Cyril is utterly dashing in a well-cut suit with generous lapels, high-waisted trousers under a double breasted waistcoat, striking a nonchalant pose, hand in pocket, fedora tipped to just the right angle over the studied, world-weary gaze—a handsome young actor who could be relied upon to fill any bill, from romantic lead to sardonic villain. In this same sartorial splendour Cyril appeared in the 1929 Hitchcock thriller, *Blackmail*, the first British talkie.

Hitchcock made two versions of *Blackmail*, silent and sound. With the sound version, of which the first eight minutes are silent, he encountered a problem. The talented silent actress, Anny Ondra, who played Alice, the daughter of a London newsagent, was hampered by her Czechoslovakian accent. Hitchcock decided her voice must be dubbed. The result is some irritatingly stilted dialogue, soon forgiven when the eye begins to delight in early intimations of the classic Hitchcock play with light and shadow, the visual puns and of course the fleeting appearance of the man himself, as a portly 30-year-old passenger being tormented by a small boy on a London underground.

The pert, attractive Alice contrives a quarrel with her boyfriend Frank, a Scotland Yard detective (John Longden), so she can keep an appointment with a handsome young Artist who has given her the glad eye. The Artist, played by Uncle Cyril, uses his sophisticated charm to entice Alice to 'come up and see my Studio'—the sort of invitation that girls of enquiring mind have always found hard to resist.

Lured by the attraction of doing what she knows to be unwise, Alice climbs the stairs with the Artist—a marvellous shot with the pair arm-in-arm, slowly processing up three long flights as if to a sacrificial altar. The bed to which the innocent girl is dragged by the charming stranger is decently concealed by drawn curtains which billow and toss in time to her cries of 'No, No ...' Her frantic hand appears through the curtains, reaches towards the bedside table and grasps a bread knife left next to a conveniently placed loaf of bread. The curtains bulge and the shadow of the struggling pair is seen on the wall, then silence and stillness. Cyril's very dead hand (still neatly shirt-cuffed and suited) extends out of the curtain as the shocked girl emerges and realises the awful mess she has landed herself in when she could have been enjoying a good movie with her honest cop.

When Scotland Yard and unsuspecting boyfriend Frank inspect the scene of the

crime next morning there is a fleeting glimpse of the dead Cyril on the bed, with only his collar twisted and his tie somewhat loose. But Hitchcock's camera has such power of suggestion we know we have witnessed a violent and bloody killing. And that, after just 40 minutes, was the end of Cyril, at least in that film.

It continues on for another thrilling 45 minutes with the blackmailer (who saw Alice on the fateful night) being chased over rooftops by the faithful Frank, and



finally crashing to his death through the glass dome of the Reading Room of the British Museum.

In *Blackmail*, directed primarily as a silent film, Hitchcock uses hands, as well as eyes, to portray emotion and emphasise points in the story, increasing the tension with shots of hands moving, pointing, twisting or eerily static. We feel Alice's panic as her hand gropes for the knife and share her horror when Cyril's hand flops, lifeless, through the bed curtains. When Hitchcock's lens lingers on her chemise-clad figure, we watch with fascination as, paralysed with shock, she slowly faces the magnitude of what she has done. As she hurries from the death scene, the painting of a life-size Rigoletto points an accusing finger directly at her.

Thereafter, hands haunt Alice. The girl's lost gloves reveal to both the blackmailer and the honest cop her part in the Artist's death. At Scotland Yard time is measured by frequent close-ups of hands stubbing out

cigarettes in what were, for the period, well-filled ashtrays. In one delectable conceit, Hitchcock has Alice and Frank talk of going to the movies to see a thriller based on Scotland Yard, called *Fingerprints*. When Frank protests that producers of such films always get the police details wrong, Alice replies tartly that this time 'they've got it right because they hired a real criminal as director'.

Cyril's part in *Blackmail* could be called small but pivotal—he seduces the girl and in doing so is killed by her. Rape and bloody death in what was hailed as 'the groundbreaking Knife Scene' followed by mayhem and blackmail!

LOOKING AT CYRIL'S photo I wonder—what *did* Grandma Ritchard think? When he begged to be allowed to leave Sydney University where he had been unwillingly studying first-year medicine, his mother made him promise in writing that if he went on to the wicked stage he would remain true to his Catholic upbringing and protect himself by receiving daily communion. An heroic promise for a 19-year-old to make even in those days of strong faith. I assume that when complying he added the words 'when possible', at least as a mental reservation—he had been educated by Jesuits. His diaries, which cover his adult years, show that he remained an almost daily communicant to the end of his full and successful acting life. He died in 1977, three weeks after collapsing in the wings of a theatre in Chicago where he was appearing as the Narrator in *Side by Side by Sondheim*. He was 80 years old and had worked continuously as an actor on stage, film and television since that day in 1916 when he signed the remarkable promise for his mother.

Margaret Ritchard doted on her first-born and the story of Cyril's conception and birth has afforded wonder and mirth for three generations of our family.

Margaret and Herbert Trimmell Ritchard had been married for almost a year and Margaret had not conceived. In those days it was generally accepted that the purpose of marrying was to have a family and, in Irish-Catholic circles, the larger the better. Margaret began to worry that, if a pregnancy did not occur soon, not only would the spectre of childlessness begin to stalk her life, but her dear Herbert, having been converted from Protestantism before their marriage, might be suspected of not doing his duty. She began a novena to the Virgin

Mary and during those nine days of prayer often visited a Good Samaritan convent where the nuns were praying for her 'special intention'. One of these good women gave her a small vial of sand upon which Our Lady's milk had spilt during the Flight into Egypt.

Being a woman of firm character and having a proper self-regard, Margaret did not for one minute think that the failure to conceive was due to any lack in her. It was obviously Herbert who needed his fertility boosted. So every morning for a week she surreptitiously sprinkled some sacred sand on Herbert's porridge. Soon Margaret was able to inform him that the longed-for child was on the way.

When the time for her accouchement, arrived she and Herbert were managing the Railway Hotel at Hornsby, a far northern suburb of Sydney, a haunt of timber-cutters and railway workers whose admirable thirsts considerably boosted the family fortunes.

While Herbert was supervising the bar on a busy and hot December afternoon, the midwife was upstairs keeping an eye on Margaret's protracted labour. Just before midnight a lad was sent for the doctor. The midwife, eager to claim the extra fee of half a guinea (close to \$100 today) that would be hers if the child arrived before the doctor, rolled her sleeves up and, as the clip-clop of the doctor's sulky was heard coming down the dusty road, gave the reluctant baby a good strong tug and Cyril was born, all 12 pounds of him.

BEFORE CYRIL'S BIRTH Margaret had heeded the current advice that an expectant mother must eat for two and this she did with a will. Afterwards she never regained her shape but she carried herself well, had a commanding air, and was always described in family lore as a fine figure of a woman. I have her very large gold watch in a heavily engraved case that she wore pinned to what could only have been an ample bosom. My husband has fond memories of his grandmother and speaks of visits to her as a small boy when he found her to be as generous as she was comfortable, willing to share jokes with a small boy and reward him with half a crown. She must also have had emotional and mental resilience to survive with equanimity two miscarriages brought about by unusual events.

The first one occurred when Herbert, who in his photos always appears somewhat sober-sided, felt an urge to play a trick

on his wife. Perhaps it was 'a dark and stormy night' when he hid in the cupboard used for the hotel linen. He covered himself in a sheet and waited till Margaret came up to bed. As she passed he sprang out at her with ghostly groans. To his great distress his wife miscarried. No doubt he made heartfelt amends for his ill-considered stunt and soon another baby was on the way.

A family picnic on the ocean front at Manly was planned. The whole family, with a young girl to help, took the train to St Leonards where they were met by a hired charabanc. Baskets, rugs and provisions for the long, thirsty journey were loaded and they set off down the highway to the Spit, where they joined other travellers queuing for the punt to take them across the water to the Manly side. Then on up the hill and down the length of Sydney Road until the Pacific was sighted through the Norfolk pines.

A perfect picnic day with sand and surf and games with Father while Mother sat on a bench under the pines and watched.

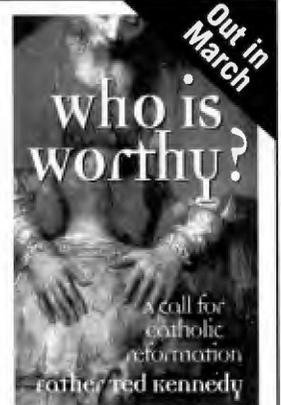
A young woman came and sat at the further end of the bench. She seemed hot and flustered and out of breath as if she had been running. Suddenly a man with frantic eyes was standing before the bench. His shaking hands held a revolver, pointed straight at the now whimpering woman. The shot was deafening.

As Herbert raced forward to pull Margaret away, she glimpsed the body of the woman slip to the ground. Then came the long journey home in the hot afternoon, Margaret sitting upright, outwardly composed for the sake of the children. Within days she miscarried again.

So perhaps seeing her dear boy Cyril transforming before her eyes into a sex-crazed rapist was not such a shock for this stout-hearted matron. After all he was so handsome in that very fine suit and such a splendid actor, and the story—well it was all fantasy really, mere shadows manipulated by that strange Mr Hitchcock. ■

Margaret Goldrick is a freelance writer. *Photo of Cyril Ritchard* courtesy Margaret Goldrick.

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