

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Evil Spirits

Cliff Goodwin

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About the Book

In May 1999, after a 40-year career including 100 films, Oliver Reed died, as he had invariably lived, drinking with friends while making another film - his well-reviewed performance in the blockbuster *Gladiator*. Having risen through Hammer Horror films to international stardom as Bill Sykes in *Oliver!*, Reed became, in his own works, 'the biggest star this country has got'. With his legendary off-screen exploits and blunt opinions - especially of his co-stars - he was also one of the most infamous.

Bestselling author Cliff Goodwin uses material from first-hand interviews with Reed's family, friends and colleagues and never-before-seen photographs to explore Reed's eventful career, but he also reveals another side to this unique and complex man.

About the Author

Cliff Goodwin has worked as a reporter, feature writer and sub-editor for various newspapers and magazines. His coverage of the 1988 Lockerbie air crash earned him a regional press award and he has been published in over 200 newspapers and magazines worldwide. *Evil Spirits* is one of Cliff's four bestselling biographies, which include *To Be A Lady: The Story of Catherine Cookson* and *When the Wind Changed: The Life and Death of Tony Hancock*. He has recently also revised and updated his biography of Sid James to coincide in 2001 with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of the *Carry On* star.

EVIL SPIRITS

The Life of Oliver Reed

Cliff Goodwin



To Sarah: my beautiful companion and my friend. Thank you for saving my life.

*On Monday, when the sun is hot
I wonder to myself a lot:
'Now is it true, or is it not,
That what is which and which is what?'*

Prologue

Richard Burton was hitting the bottle with Jimmy Hurt the night before his death. He knew it was going to kill him, but he did not stop. I don't have a drink problem. But if that was the case and doctors told me I would have to stop, I'd like to think I would be brave enough to drink myself into the grave.

Sunday, 2 May 1999

OLIVER REED IS FINISHING his seventh bottle of German beer. He waves the empty at Paul Cremona. The Maltese bar owner keeps hold of the next bottle, forcing the actor to lean across the bar. 'You are like a bird freed from a cage,' he whispers in Oliver's ear. 'No drink for a week and on Sunday you go mad.'

Oliver takes the bottle and winks. 'Don't worry,' says Cremona. 'You are my best customer.'

At the far end of the bar Josephine Reed is showing Cremona's wife the gold bracelet Oliver gave her two days earlier. It was a special present for her 35th birthday, secretly designed and made by a Valletta jeweller. The older woman makes approving noises. 'I think he loves you very much,' she says.

I saw an old movie of mine on television the other night and I thought, 'God, Almighty!' I didn't realise how bad I was.

Oliver has been in Malta for five weeks. For his part in *Gladiator* he has let his grey hair grow long. He is suntanned and looking surprisingly healthy and determined

to enjoy his last week on the Mediterranean island and his last Sunday lunchtime at The Pub.

Turning his back to the bar Oliver looks around the room. It is small, no bigger than twenty-foot square. Down each wall are wooden bench seats. Five round tables. Few chairs. At the far end, in keeping with The Pub's mock-English decor, the single window is divided into squares like a Dickensian sweet shop. Outside, Valletta's Archbishop Street is bright and hot.

Warren, the Cremonas' son, has finished sorting bottles in the cellar. He shakes hands with Oliver and says he is going home to watch the San Marino Grand Prix on television. Warren is a lifelong Ferrari fan. Oliver supports McLaren. The two men trade friendly insults and Oliver promises to say goodbye before he flies home to Ireland.

As Warren leaves, a party of Royal Navy ratings fill The Pub. On their cap band is the name of their ship, HMS *Cumberland*. They recognise Oliver, who opens his arms and pulls two of the sailors toward him. 'Let's have a drink,' he announces. 'Black rum all round.'

If I went round constantly kissing babies in prams, saying I believe in the Church and doing good, the public wouldn't be interested. That's not what the public expects from Oliver Reed. They want him to fall off the edge of a dustbin, get into fights and get drunk and do all the things you read in the papers.

By two thirty Oliver has downed twelve double measures of Captain Morgan's Jamaica rum – not his favourite spirit – and is back to his usual doubles of Famous Grouse whisky. His bar bill that lunch time alone has already reached 270 Maltese lira, almost £450.

One by one the sailors leave. After signing autographs, Oliver's shoulders and arms are aching. He ignores the

pain. Too much arm wrestling. He smiles at his wife and takes his drink and sits on the floor between the door and the jukebox. A few minutes later he is snoring loudly and apparently in a deep sleep.

The snoring stops. Oliver's head has fallen forward, as if he were thoughtfully studying something in his glass of whisky. In the half-light Josephine notices her husband's lips are darkening. When she reaches him it is obvious something is badly wrong.

I regret not having made love to every woman on earth, I regret having not kissed the wet nose of every dog on earth, I regret having not been into every bar on earth, but that doesn't make me a hell raiser. If somebody punches me on the nose, I will punch them back; if somebody buys me a drink, I will buy them one back.

Neriku Farrugia is the first to reach her side. The Maltese seaman first met Oliver while working as an extra on the film *Cutthroat Island*. 'Help him,' Josephine says. 'Please help him.' As Farrugia lifts his friend on to one of the bench seats Oliver grits his teeth and hisses: 'Lay down. Lay down.'

Oliver's breathing is shallow and rapid. His fists are clenched. Beside the bench, and level with his head, is a wooden table. His right hand comes up and begins punching the underside of the table. Each time his fist makes contact it lifts the table clear of the floor. He is desperately, painfully sucking in air, his lips grotesquely dark against his suntanned face and the white stubble of his beard.

Someone - Farrugia doesn't know who - is shouting for an ambulance. The men in the bar lift Oliver's body on to the floor. Farrugia cannot find a pulse. Pulling back the 61-

year-old actor's head, he starts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, desperately punching at his chest.

I am only an actor – not a priest beyond reproach. I'm not a villain, I have never hurt anyone. I am just a tawdry character who explodes now and again.

The ambulance arrives a few minutes later. As the paramedics work on Oliver the seaman moves back and sits on a stool in front of the bar. Josephine is quite calm. She is shaking her head gently from side to side.

From Archbishop Street the ambulance turns right into St Ursula Street. A car is blocking the corner into Castille Place. Bumping the kerb the driver looks over his shoulder into the back of the ambulance. His colleague has stopped giving heart massage and is feeling for a heartbeat. There is none.

Inside a casualty bay at St Luke's Hospital the doctors work for thirteen minutes to revive the actor. It is too late.

Oliver Reed is dead.

Chapter One

'My fear is what is going to happen to my body when life has left it.'

THERE WAS A SENSE OF URGENCY as the young man in the trench coat and hat and sensible beige-coloured shoes hurried across Coombe Lane and away from Raynes Park station. The mid-afternoon train from Waterloo – not his usual train – was half full and on time.

Already 26, he was still lean and never filled out the way his mother had wanted him to. He was terribly shy. He was frightened of people. Sport was the only thing he cared about, and horse racing in particular. He could talk to people about horses and handicaps and how the going at Fontwell or Sandown affected the chances of the second favourite, but the world in general frightened him. And at this moment he was extremely apprehensive.

He turned into Durrington Park Road and saw the doctor's car parked outside his house. Like most of the properties in this middle-class Wimbledon side street No. 9 was a detached house with a small front garden enclosed by a wooden fence and overgrown privet. It was mid-February and smoke was rising from the chimney. Inside he found his mother reassuringly sipping tea in the bay-windowed front room. Above him he could hear the doctor and midwife walking back and forth on the bare floorboards of the master bedroom. There was also the sound of his wife giving birth to their second child.

The house was his mother's. Beatrice May Reed had bought and taken possession of No. 9 Durrington Park Road in 1915. She was upright and polite and with the soft vowels peculiar to someone born and educated on the Isle

of Thanet. Her neighbours attributed the absence, and eventual non-appearance, of a 'Mr Reed' to the war raging across most of Europe. With Mrs Reed had come an assortment of children: Robin, Guy, Carol, Juliet and Peter. At four years old, Peter was the youngest.

By 1934 Peter Reed had realised his teenage ambition to become a racing journalist and was contributing to the sports pages of a national newspaper. He had also fallen in love. Marcia Beryl Andrews was the daughter of a City businessman and a caring but pretentious mother who, despite their misgivings, soon realised they could do nothing to divert their energetic daughter's intention to marry a young man who appeared to possess no ambition whatsoever. The couple married and moved to a small but adequate house in Cobham Road, Fetcham, just south of Leatherhead. Orchard Cottage was also a short taxi ride from Tattenham Corner racecourse and the stables of Epsom Downs. It was here, on 7 February 1936, that Marcia gave birth to the couple's first child. They christened the boy David Anthony Reed.

Finances were tight. Even with the little extra Peter made from betting on the horses he wrote about and tipped, it was soon evident a journalist's salary could not support his family and sustain his wife's apparently endless extravagances. When, less than fifteen months after the birth of their son, Marcia announced she was once again pregnant, Peter swallowed his pride and sought his mother's help. Sometime in the autumn of 1937 they moved back to the Wimbledon house in which Peter Reed had grown and lived for the majority of his life.

On 13 February 1938 – just six days after David Reed's second birthday – and after a long and painful confinement Marcia gave birth to her second son. The arrival sparked an immediate and bitter quarrel between husband and wife and opened the first irreparable crack in their marriage.

Marcia wanted to call the baby Launcelot after her father, a suggestion Peter did not like and a name frowned upon by the child's grandmother. Why not call him Robert after one of his father's own relatives? Marcia, who suddenly found herself besieged and outvoted in a house that was not her own, attempted a compromise: her youngest son would be called Oliver, in deference to her own mother Olive. The disagreement was still smouldering when Peter Reed visited Wimbledon register office on 4 March to record his son's birth. The registrar, Alfred Good, was informed the parents had still not settled on a name and left the appropriate column blank; it would be another eighteen years before the entry was officially completed. To a world of doctors and schoolteachers and other petty administrators the boy would grow up as Robert Oliver Reed. To his family and friends – and to his mother's satisfaction – he would be called Oliver Reed.

As the only male resident of No. 9 Durrington Park Road, Peter Reed's name now replaced his mother's on local authority roles as head of the household. Although her mother-in-law still employed and paid the wages of a cook, maid and butler it was Marcia Reed who effectively oversaw the domestic affairs.

Within days Marcia had visited a large store that catered for the needs of domestic staff and, armed with the relevant measurements, demanded to be shown a selection of uniforms. Unswayed by the latest colours and styles favoured by the nobility, Marcia was far more likely to choose something to match the curtains. The cook, who seldom left the kitchen except to go to her top-floor bedroom, always wore grey with a very large apron. Daisy the maid was inevitably in some shade of green with a small and elegant apron. And George the butler wore a traditional black suit and mirror-polished black shoes.

For Marcia Reed motherhood was never a profession, more a part-time hobby. One of her first demands was for a nanny to look after her young family. With such a small staff the nanny occupied top slot in the domestic hierarchy, sometimes eating with the staff in the kitchen and sometimes with Peter and Marcia in the dining room. Most of her time was spent with her two charges.

Childhood, for the latest addition to the Reed family, was a collection of images and colours. The nanny wore a grey uniform to which she added, whenever she went outside, a white cap and stiff white cuffs. At home Oliver's memory stored flashes of ... 'A burning fire grate ... A potty overturned on a linoleum floor ... The taste of cold urine ... A world of legs - table legs, chair legs, sideboard legs, human legs'. Like his brother Oliver was allowed, even encouraged, to call all adults by their Christian names. Kisses, too, even between adults and maiden aunts should be delivered full on the lips.

On 27 April 1939, the government announced the military call-up of all men aged between 20 and 41. Should war come, and Peter was convinced it would, it would be only a matter of months before the upper age limit was increased. He informed first his mother and then his wife of his intention to register as a conscientious objector. 'Wars start because politicians want them to,' Peter explained to a colleague. 'The thought of ordinary decent men killing each other, no matter what country they are from, is barbaric.'

It was an argument Marcia thought cowardly and futile. Bitter rows turned the Durrington Park Road house into a battle zone. Married to a husband she no longer respected - and certainly did not love - Marcia secretly plotted her escape. Long before Britain and France declared war on Germany, the private war between Peter and Marcia was over.

Early in September Marcia and her younger son were driven to an aunt living in Berkshire, far enough from London to escape the feared bombing. David, due to start preparatory school early the next year, would remain in Wimbledon with his father. As the Phoney War dragged through the winter she relented and allowed Oliver to return to Peter in south London. Marcia had another reason for remaining in the country: she had fallen in love with an RAF officer.

On 2 July 1940, the first German bombs fell on London. A month later a Luftwaffe bomber was shot down over the capital. The Blitz had started. Marcia returned to Wimbledon, scooped up her younger son and followed her lover to his new posting in Buckinghamshire. She left no note and did not tell Peter's mother where she would be living. The new home to which Marcia brought two-year-old Oliver was her lover's thatched cottage on the outskirts of Bledlow, near Princes Risborough. The rented house was stone-floored and smelled of wood smoke and warm hay and was ruled over by Nanny Morgy, an elderly cook devoted to her employer.

Bledlow was a quiet village, one of a score of hamlets tucked beneath the wooded scarp of the Chiltern Hills. The only strangers it attracted were cyclists and ramblers exploring the Buckinghamshire countryside or Roman historians walking the nearby Icknield Way. For any stranger, let alone a child too young to read, the lanes approaching Bledlow gave no clues to journey or destination, for the signposts to such places as Christmas Common, Park Corner and Russell's Water had all been dismantled or destroyed in the fear of invasion.

Her son wasn't the only possession Marcia transported to Buckinghamshire. Crammed beside him on the back seat of the car had been a tall metal cage containing Ockey, an African parrot. Each evening after dinner Marcia would

switch on 'the Murphy', a brown Bakelite wireless, and waltz in great swoops around the cottage sitting room. Snatching up the parrot's cage, she would deposit it on the radio, commanding Ockey to 'dancey-dancey-dancey', to which the bird would stiffen its bright green tail feathers and strut about in time to the music. To a three-year-old there was only one way to compete. Oliver would clamber on to the coffee table and shuffle and stamp his feet. It was, he claimed many years later, his first public performance.

Sometimes there would be air raids. Nanny Morgy would grab the toddler from his bedroom-cum-nursery and they would huddle together under the Morrison shelter in the kitchen. The shelter, which doubled as a table, was made of steel and had wire-mesh sides to protect the occupants from falling masonry and bomb debris. The floor was padded with cushions and pillows and Morgy, smelling of flour and cloth and wax, would read stories from *Winnie-the-Pooh* as the Bofors guns crump-crumped in the distance.

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't. Anyhow, here he is at the bottom, and ready to be introduced to you. Winnie-the-Pooh.

Through the eyes of an inquisitive and sensitive child Oliver's brief existence had so far little to do with reality. He had no recollection of his father, nor of his older brother. His mother rarely spoke of Wimbledon. And his world focused more on the blue-uniformed men who visited

the cottage or sang and staggered out of the Red Lions or mysteriously and silently disappeared overnight.

One day between the wail of the siren and the thump-thump of the bombs Nanny Morgy and her charge heard a different sound. From under the table it sounded like hundreds of popguns being fired in quick succession. As the pop guns got faster and faster the sound got louder and louder until Morgy, pricked into action by a sense of impending doom, grabbed the boy and dragged him through the open back door.

The pair emerged into the sunlight just in time to see an aircraft with both its engines ablaze dipping toward the cottage.

BANG!!!???*!!

Piglet lay there, wondering what had happened. At first he thought that the whole world had blown up; and then he thought that perhaps only the Forest part of it had; and then he thought that perhaps only he had, and he was now alone in the moon or somewhere, and would never see Christopher Robin or Pooh or Eeyore again.

The Messerschmitt had skimmed the top of the cottage, ripping off the ridge thatch and setting light to the rest. By the time Morgy and Oliver picked themselves up, the bomber had crash-landed two fields away. The RAF firemen from a nearby base soon had the blazing roof under control and the inquisitive Oliver wandered away to look at the wreckage.

From a grassy bank he could see the plane embedded in a ploughed field. On what remained of the tail was a swastika and on the fuselage a black and white Luftwaffe cross. Looking down through the scattered windscreen the boy could see the pilot, his eyes still open and his head

slumped to one side. A trickle of bright red blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

It was the first dead body Oliver had seen. Wrapping his arms around himself he began to cry. He was still crying when Nanny Morgy found him an hour later.

Sugar, butter and bacon were the first foodstuffs to be rationed after Britain's declaration of war. Whether by deceit or out of genuine motives, Marcia registered her youngest son with the Ministry of Food as a vegetarian. Non-meat-eaters were allowed an extra ration of eggs and cheese and Nanny Morgy put them to good use, supplementing the produce from the garden allotment and the daily bunches of carrots donated by a neighbouring retired French general with an obsession for root vegetables.

One morning, not long after Oliver's fourth birthday, a letter arrived at the Bledlow cottage. It was from Peter Reed's London solicitor and informed Marcia, in the polite but threatening language employed by lawyers, that her days in hiding were over.

It had not been too hard for Peter to trace his wife's whereabouts through the family's ration book. The only surprise is that he took so long. He made no threats or demands. He simply wanted his wife, whom he still loved and was prepared to forgive, to know that he knew where she was living and, with both ends of the bridge now established, it was up to Marcia to make the return journey.

Life at Bledlow was far too gay for Marcia to consider any kind of reconciliation. The men her lover invited to the cottage were young and intelligent and desperately virile. On special days her son was allowed to stay up late, pushing his way through a sea of blue-serge trousers to deliver the drinks or plates of sandwiches Nanny Morgy made in the kitchen. For the adult Oliver, the memory was

sprinkled with a dusting of childish romance. 'During the war I used to be a cocktail barman at my mother's lover's cocktail parties,' said Oliver. 'And the guests were from fighter and bomber command and the parties used to get smaller and smaller and the laughter got less and less as the men I had seen would go off to war and die drunk.'

To a young boy's knee-high view of the war - even the fringes of it - the people and places survived more as childhood whimsy than adult wisdom. There were no 'bombers coughing at the end of the garden' nor did they taxi 'down the field and onto the runway where they roared off and sailed away like unflapping bats into the red evening sky'.

Its position tight under the Chiltern scarp made Bledlow an impossible location for an airfield. Of the twelve RAF bases in wartime Buckinghamshire the closest to the village was at Haddenham, near Thame, five miles to the northeast. Consisting of little more than a grass aerodrome, served by a hangar and three billet huts, RAF Detachment Thame was the brief home of the pioneering Glider Training Squadron. The twelve Army pilots - wearing khaki and not blue uniforms - moved on to the base in December 1940, and flew out the last of the prototype gliders two years later. It is more likely, therefore, that Marcia's lover - 'who never wore wings' - was a senior officer stationed at one of the nearby RAF training bases.

Buckinghamshire was never a front-line county in the air war: more than half the county's air bases were primarily concerned with pilot training or the selection of bomber crews, although Bomber Command headquarters at Naphill outside High Wycombe was one of the exceptions. There were no fighter squadrons stationed in Buckinghamshire and, from 1942, the only active-service squadrons were B-17 crews of the United States Army Air Force based at Bovingdon and Cheddington.

Cutting through the lanes, it would take Marcia's lover less than twenty minutes to drive north from the Bledlow cottage to No.11 Operational Training Unit at Westcott. From squadrons and selection bases around Britain pilots and navigators and engineers and air gunners would descend on Westcott, and its satellite at nearby Oakley, to be trained as bomber crews. Many of the pilots had seen action during the Battle of Britain. 'They had names like Pip and smoked pipes and wore white ribbons beneath their wings with diagonal purple strips,' recalled Oliver years later. 'They were young and full of extravagance, indulgence, elegance and arrogance and I felt exhilarated by their rowdy bonhomie.' When the faces disappeared it was because the crews had been posted to Lancaster and Halifax squadrons around Britain.

It was on the River Thame, south of Westcott, that the crews were tested on their sea survival techniques. Dressed in full flying gear and with their bright yellow Mae Wests inflated, they would hurl themselves from a bridge and into the water to be assessed by a squadron leader 'with a face like a badger's bum'. One day, claims Oliver, he was allowed to watch:

It was there I first met Lovely Gravy. The other pilots jumped into the river two at a time with a rubber dinghy held between them, but he jumped over the parapet of the bridge with his dinghy tied to his head and shouted out 'Lovely Gravy' before hitting the water flat on his back. I thought it was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen. So I climbed on the parapet and old Badger's Bum looked up, startled, and pointed his finger. I thought it was my signal. I jumped and my mouth filled with water and I couldn't swim. Lovely Gravy pulled me out and turned me upside down to empty the water out of my wellingtons.

Some evenings, when the wind was from the south and when the weather was warm enough to leave his bedroom window open, Oliver thought he could hear the distant rumble of thunder. When he asked Nanny Morgy what it was, she explained it was the German bombs falling on London.

In 1940, soon after his wife's disappearance, Peter Reed had moved out of his mother's house and into an apartment overlooking Wimbledon Common. The board that examined his claim to be a conscientious objector had restricted his movements and ordered him to contribute to the war effort; Peter volunteered as an ambulance driver. The raids had kept him constantly busy and exhausted. Eventually, Peter decided it was time for Marcia to look after their elder son.

Returning to the cottage one afternoon Oliver was confronted by a fair-haired boy he did not recognise. 'Hello, Ollie,' said the boy, offering his hand.

David Reed was two years older and two inches taller than his brother. To a boy whose brief memory could recall little else than the kindness of two or three females and the rowdy camaraderie of a largely male population, the sudden appearance of this 'polite but determined' rival was unnerving. Oliver's immediate recreation was to stomp his way to the top of the stairs and hurl his toy dog Fizzy over the banister. 'I really didn't mind him that much,' admitted Oliver many years later. 'Most small boys got babies for brothers and mine arrived grown up, with a school cap, stiff leather gloves and a Mickey Mouse gas mask case'.

The youngest and most inquisitive member of the Reed family was a long way from making the connection between his ancestry and his own compulsive behaviour. It was, for a five-year-old boy, nothing more than instinct, a flux of rootless inquisition and innocence.

He did not know why, but somewhere, deep inside the child, the tight green jumpers of the Land Army girls and the pleasing creases of their khaki breeches produced as unsettling excitement. And when Nanny Morgy caught him listening to the breathless giggles from beneath the camouflage-draped gun emplacements beyond the garden fence it lit a fascination and force within Oliver Reed that burned for the rest of his life.

Chapter Two

'I wish I could have written a book or a film about the love story of Herbert and May.'

IN LITHUANIA IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES: the Prussian princes who once invaded the Baltic state were now established as land-owning aristocrats; German was the approved language and, for a merchant, adopting a Germanic name would almost certainly have attracted the approval of the ruling establishment, if not more custom. It was not long before the Beerbohm family firm was one of the biggest and busiest timber importers and traders on the Baltic coast.

In modern terms it would have been hailed a supreme example of 'public imaging'. As a corruption of *Birnbaum*, the German for pear tree, it linked the family with its trade. There could, however, have been a deeper, and more personal, meaning. A popular German saying of the time included the phrase '*der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Birnbaum*'. A loose, but acceptable, translation would be 'like father, like son' – an admirable sentiment for a business employing two or even three generations.

When the Beerbohms helped Frederick the Great finance a minor conflict they were rewarded with an estate called Bernsteinbruch and, from their humble beginnings, were now highly regarded and welcome confidants of the Prussian royal family. Ernst Beerbohm, Oliver's great-great-grandfather, had married Amalie Henrietta Radke. She was a beautiful and independent woman.

Like all the Beerbohms, Ernst and Amalie produced a large and surprisingly healthy family. The youngest of their

twelve children was Julius. Sometime in the 1820s Julius decided his fortune lay outside his native Lithuania and persuaded his father to finance an extended education in France. It was while studying commerce in Paris that Julius earned the nicknamed 'Monsieur Superbe-Homme', a sarcastic swipe at his bearing and fashionable clothes. In 1830, just as a revolutionary fervour was once again sweeping the French capital, Oliver Reed's great-grandfather boarded a packet and set sail for England.

Trading corn from the City of London proved as lucrative and time consuming as Baltic timber. It was not until Julius reached his early forties that he wooed and then married Constantia Draper, an Englishwoman little more than half his age yet who shared his passion for Dickens and languages; her husband could speak six fluently.

Constantia fell pregnant within the year and the couple moved to a large house at No. 2 Pembridge Villas, Kensington. It was here, despite her ever-declining health, that Constantia gave birth to three boys and a girl in yearly succession before collapsing and dying at the age of 32. Herbert Beerbohm - Oliver's paternal grandfather - was born on 28 January 1852.¹

Throughout her confinements and ill health the Kensington house was kept by Constantia's younger sister Eliza, not an uncommon arrangement in Victorian society. Within a month of his wife's death, and apparently ignoring the conventions of mourning, the businessman proposed to his sister-in-law. English law in the 1850s refused to allow a widower to marry his dead wife's sister. Julius, a calm and unimaginative man, promptly whisked Eliza off to Switzerland, where they married before returning to London to start a family of their own. The new marriage produced five more children and a confused set of relationships. Julius's youngest child was Max Beerbohm -

the future artist - who, as well as being Herbert Beerbohm's half-brother, was also his cousin.

By the age of seventeen Herbert had already joined and performed with several amateur dramatic clubs. He was a tall and slim youth whose carrotty red hair contrasted sharply with his turquoise-green eyes, and his 'foreign' profile and good looks seem to have placed him in constant demand as villain or scoundrel. His announcement that he wanted to earn his living on the stage found little favour with his elderly father. Julius Beerbohm had already lost his eldest and youngest sons to dubious adventures - Ernest was in the Cape Colony and Julius Jnr in Patagonia - and he was not about to lose another. The family corn business badly needed an infusion of new blood and Herbert was ordered to stay.

His sense of duty lasted eight years. During the day Herbert mollified his father by playing the role of corn merchant. Each evening he left the Kensington house to perform impressions of Henry Irving and JL Toole and other leading actors at smoking parties and Bohemian clubs.

By 1876 Julius Beerbohm relented. 'Possibly Herbert's lack of aptitude for business, total boredom with figures of any kind, an infinite capacity for taking no pains at all with the corn business, were additional reasons for his father being in the end willing to go,' says Madeleine Bingham in her biography *The Great Lover: The Life and Art of Herbert Beerbohm Tree*. 'By this time Julius had other sons and possibly they would be drawn to the city.'

Allowing his 24-year-old son to leave the family firm, the patriarch advised Herbert to work hard and aim for the pinnacle of his profession. Legend has it that Herbert informed his father that the 'top of the tree' was where he was going and, as a constant reminder, he would adopt the name 'Tree'. Herbert Beerbohm Tree was now a professional actor.

After two years of poverty and mounting debts, Herbert had still not secured a full-time engagement. In 1878 he was invited to play Grimaldi in a Globe Theatre charity performance of *The Life of an Actress*. Following the show he was called aside and invited to join the Bijou Theatre Company on its forthcoming provincial tour. The run would start at Folkestone Town Hall on Monday, 20 May, and to advertise the company's latest addition its posters announced:

Besides the well known members of the Company, the management have much pleasure in announcing that they have secured the services of Mr. H. Beerbohm Tree who will appear during the week in various pieces and on Wednesday and Friday will give (by special desire) his inimitable Dramatic and Mimetic Recitals. Stalls (price three shillings) are to be obtained at Goulden's Library, Folkestone.

Unlike his father, who despite being a passionate husband was rarely passionate about sex, Herbert was physically attractive and attracted to women. To his friends Herbert admitted several actresses had been 'good' to him on tour, 'good' being a late-nineteenth-century euphemism for physical love. He was, nevertheless, committed to marriage. In late 1881 Herbert met the woman he was eventually to marry. At eighteen Maud Holt was eleven years his junior, a flighty young woman determined to become an actress and marry an actor, and equally determined to make him suffer in the process.

Within three months Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Maud Holt were engaged. Their future son-in-law appalled the Holt family: Herbert had arrived for lunch in frayed shirt cuffs and talked of nothing but the theatre. A remonstrance from Maud flared into an argument and the engagement

was off. Reconciliations were inevitably followed by further tearful separations until, the following summer, Maud finally agreed to set a date for their wedding. Herbert and Maud were married on 16 September 1882.

One of Tree's greatest achievements was the building of Her Majesty's Theatre - later renamed His Majesty's - to his own specifications. It was the fourth building on the same Haymarket site since Vanbrugh's original New Opera House and cost £30,000. In 1705 Vanbrugh's Queen's was still surrounded by farms, the acoustics were appalling and performances were frequently punctuated by animal noises. Almost two centuries later Tree's luxury theatre offered a new dimension in sound and comfort for both performers and audience.

Her Majesty's was opened in 1897, Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee year, by the Prince of Wales and not without incident. As he arrived, Prince Edward was dismayed to see that Beerbohm Tree had dressed his white-wigged doorman in replica uniforms to those worn by Buckingham Palace servants. Seconds later, as the prince entered the foyer, the electricity failed, plunging the building into darkness. But the irritations were minor and, within a year, Beerbohm Tree received a knighthood.

Beerbohm Tree was driven as much by instinct and inspiration as perspiration. His few errors of judgement were spectacular and legendary. One of his friends was JM Barrie. Sitting in his domed living room the author started to read the script of his new children's play. After just two acts the actor-manager begged his friend to stop. 'You must be mad,' Beerbohm Tree informed Barrie. 'It will never be popular ... especially with a name like *Peter Pan*.'

Like royalty, Beerbohm Tree rarely carried cash. Most days he was forced to pay off his cab by borrowing five shillings or half-a-crown from the box office. And during the sumptuous receptions in the living quarters built into the

dome of the theatre – the main room was fifty feet long – he would often disappear without explanation. Bored with the official function, he had slipped out to a nearby cabbies' shelter, where he played dominoes until dawn.

Just when or how Beerbohm Tree met Beatrice May Pinney is a mystery. The daughter of a music professor, Beatrice May was born on 23 May 1871 in Ramsgate, a resort often frequented by the Tree family. She was a gentle and good-natured young woman who much preferred to be called by her middle name, and her ancestry was as long as and still more distinguished than that of her future lover.

Professor William Pinney was a direct descendant of John Pinney, the architect and builder. Another relative was Charles Pinney, a mayor of Bristol, who nearly lost his life in the 1831 Bristol Riot. But it was William Pinney's wife, Henrietta, whose family would eventually add a splash of intrigue to the Reed bloodline and, according to Oliver, be responsible for much of his excessive behaviour. As a Rowlatt, Henrietta was the daughter of Canon Rowlatt of Exeter, whose family was founded by a bastard child of Peter the Great. On her mother's side there were several royal connections, including a direct line to Charlemagne, the eight-foot King of the Franks and the founder of the Holy Roman Empire.

The rebellious and reforming Peter fascinated Oliver, who related his ancestor's achievements and infamy with equal enthusiasm and never failed to point out the parallels in their characters.

In 1689 the sixteen-year-old Peter mounted a coup to force his half-sister Sophia, the regent, to resign and retire to a convent. The teenager feared that his half-brother Ivan, with whom he had ostensibly been sharing power, was about to have him killed. After the takeover Peter