

# The Corner Shop

It wasn't the most auspicious of meetings.

The three popular and well-loved comedians had agreed to meet at four o'clock in the Coach and Horses public house on the corner of Old Compton Street. John Cleese, who had invited his two colleagues "for a pre-Christmas drink", was hoping to recruit them for a Video Arts training film that he had in mind. The location was convenient since he would be coming from a meeting with a scriptwriter and producer who had offices just across the road from the Prince Edward Theatre.

The "two Ronnies", as they were now universally known, arrived first and, after buying drinks at the crowded counter, settled down to wait for their friend at a relatively quiet corner table with three chairs. The three had been firm friends for nearly ten years, since April 1966 when they achieved comedic immortality with a sketch on the "David Frost Show" that lampooned the British Class System and brought them instant public and critical acclaim. Since then, John Cleese had enhanced his popularity through Monty Python's Flying Circus and his financial well-being through Video Arts, a highly profitable producer of tongue-in-cheek training films for business. Messrs Corbett and Barker, for their part, enjoyed almost "national treasure" status with the eponymous "Two Ronnies".

While they waited for Cleese, Barker and Corbett discussed the "topic of the moment"; the ending just four days previously of the "Balcombe Street siege" with the surrender of four IRA members and the release of their two hostages. So engrossed were they in their conversation that they didn't notice John's approach and jumped at his hearty, "Well, Hello there. Glad you could both make it." The three men shook hands, and Cleese weaved his way to the bar to buy himself a drink and refresh his friends' glasses.

When he returned with the drinks, he joined the IRA bombing discussion and added some gossip. Apparently, at the meeting he had just come from, there were unsubstantiated rumours that all was not well with the Prime Minister's health. Although he urged his friends to handle that sensitively because his scriptwriter friend had access to highly privileged information on the topic, and the PM was at pains to keep it confidential until he could make it known at a time of his choosing.

After a while, Cleese broached the topic he had invited his friends to discuss. Video Arts had been asked to make some training films for the Retail Consortium to help raise the quality of customer service offered by shop assistants. He hoped the two Ronnies might be interested in developing some sketches set in a "corner shop". He had in mind to combine the verbal comedic skills of Barker with the straight-faced foil of Corbett in the setting not of a local shop on the corner of two streets but in a branch of a Monty Python-esque chain of high-street shops that sold only corners. Tight ones that you could escape from. Unvarnished ones that you could paint yourself into. Transformational ones that you could turn. Blind ones that you couldn't see around. Edgy ones that you could drive someone into—possibly even neutral ones, where you could escape all forms of conflict.

Barker thought the idea had merit and could be developed into something useful. But Corbett found the idea fanciful and too bizarre for the "two Ronnies" brand. And that's where the meeting ended - with a stalemate.

Without harsh words or hard feelings, but with no firm plans, the three friends departed to their respective families to celebrate Christmas and welcome the New Year of 1976.

And it might well have ended there, were it not for Ronnie Barker's fertile imagination. On 20th February 1976, a new TV series called "Open All Hours" aired, starring Ronnie Barker and giving David Jason his first significant TV role. Later in the same year, on 18th September, the "Two Ronnies" screened the now-famous "Four Candles" sketch, set in a small hardware shop, with the script written by "Gerald Wiley" - a pseudonym of Ronnie Barker.

## **Afterword**

On 16th March 1976, Harold Wilson caused a political sensation when he announced he would resign as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party just over two years into his fourth stint as Prime Minister and five days after his 60th birthday.

Terry Cooke-Davies

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