

AN ENGLISH WINDOW ON THE WORLD (8)

SOME HOLIDAY HANKY PANKY?

So, the Holiday Season is behind us and we leave behind a forgettable 2020 and enter an uncertain 2021. I hope despite all the restrictions everyone managed to enjoy Christmas and New Year though for most it was a somewhat different and possibly unsatisfactory experience. Maybe though the Holiday was brightened by the pleasure of enjoying some Hanky-Panky.

Now before you call me and berate me for what you may already think is an intrusion into your personal or private life, let me elucidate. For sure, my Collins dictionary defines the term as 'dubious and foolish behaviour' or as 'illicit sexual relations'. However, the English language as we know it is alive and forever changing, and around one hundred years ago hanky-panky was defined as magic or witchcraft, and I don't suppose you indulged in that over the Holiday either, unless of course you received a present of a book such as that illustrated here.



However, if you had been a guest at London's Savoy Hotel one hundred years ago it is possible that you would have partaken of some Hanky-Panky provided at a price by what we can unkindly refer to as barmaid Ada Colman. Since that title demeans her status, we must refer to Ada as Head Bartender in The American Bar at the Savoy. And how did she provide the Hanky-Panky? Well, in a glass actually, or to be more precise in a cocktail glass, since a Hanky-Panky (or should I say an Hanky-Panky?) is a cocktail drink created by 'Coley', as she was known, for her clientele at the Savoy. One of her regular clients, comedic actor Charles Hawtrey (no not the Carry On... one), on drinking it for the first time is credited with saying, 'By Jove! This is the real hanky-panky', i.e., it's like magic!



So how does one create a Hanky-Panky? It is a cocktail of gin, vermouth and Fernet-Branca, the latter being an Italian almond-based liqueur with the addition of twenty-five or more herbs and other ingredients, the exact formula being a secret known only to the president of Fernet-Branca who personally adds the ingredients during the production process, before the drink is aged in barrels for a year.

Ada worked in the American Bar for over twenty years and on her retirement in 1926 she was dubbed 'England's most famous barmaid' or to put it more pertinently 'The Queen of Cocktail mixers'. Hanky-Panky cocktail is still served at the Savoy to this day.

Reference to our modern interpretation of hanky-panky, it is perhaps still an apt phrase for what has always occurred and continues to occur at the hotel to this day – though I have no first-hand experience! One of the most infamous examples of such hanky-panky involved the sexual activities of Irish novelist Oscar Wilde whose well-publicised then-illegal acts based at the Savoy ended with his imprisonment in 1895. It should be recorded however that, along with around 50,000 others, his activities received a posthumous pardon by the UK courts in 2017 when such pardons arose from we may now refer to as The Alan Turing Law.

So, if you wish to meet me at the Savoy some time perhaps we can enjoy some Hanky-Panky together. (Note my careful use of capitals).



Cheers!...and a Happy New Year.

J W Stebbings
4 January, 2021