

TREATMENT FOR A DOCUMENTARY TELEVISION DRAMA:

"THE TRUTH ABOUT THE GREAT BEAR CULT"

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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE GREAT BEAR CULT.

1. A speaker sits cross-legged on a corner of a wide desk, a theatrical bearskin over his knee. On the desk top beside him: a Guards bearskin hat, a copy of "Winnie the Pooh", a "Rupert" annual and a child's teddy-bear. The camera zooms slowly onto him across a wide bleak studio to the sound of "The Teddy-Bears' Picnic" played by a brass band. When it stops he says gravely:

SPEAKER: If you go down to the woods to-day
 you're sure of a big surprise,
 If you go down to the woods to-day
 you'd better go in disguise.

(HE SMILES AND STANDS UP) And if you happened to be cleaning out old cupboards recently it's ten to one you found one of these at the back of it - yes, a bearskin. Perhaps curiosity prompted you to try it on.
(HE CLIMBS INTO IT)

You can slip into them quite easily as you see. And once you've pulled up the zip and it's hidden by the fur you're surprised by how comfortable you feel.

(HE SITS DOWN, THE BEAR MASK HANGING FROM HIS SHOULDERS LIKE A HOOD)

In all probability the skin you found was a relic of the Great Bear Cult which swept Britain in the summer of 1931. Of course, two-thirds of those viewing to-night were born after 1931 and know nothing of the cult, while the remainder, like almost everyone who recalls that year, are only too anxious to forget it. But it is fortytwo years ago, so perhaps it is high time someone stuck his neck out and subjected the origins of the cult, its wildfire spread and wholly

unexpected collapse, to some kind of dispassionate examination

2. Henry, a young street photographer, is seen in Trafalgar Square in 1931. It is the year of the depression with world-wide economic crisis and over 2½-million unemployed in Britain.alone. Ramsay McDonald, with Baldwin as vice-premier, presides over a National Government. In Trafalgar Square the photographic business is in a bad way; too many photographers are chasing too few customers. Henry returns in a depressed spirit to his studio and his partner, George. Ruin faces them - must they also join the vast army of the unemployed? Henry has a sudden idea. He has heard that in Berlin (which has a bear on its coat-of-arms) photographers go around the streets with assistants dressed like bears for tourists to be pictured with. Why not try it? George objects that London has no bear in the coat-of-arms, and people come to Trafalgar Square to be photographed with pigeons. Henry shows a newspaper photograph of people queuing in hundreds to see a new bear acquired by London Zoo. Bears are popular - Rupert Bear in the Express, Winnie the Pooh, etc. He rents a skin and persuades George to put it on - he finds it surprisingly warm and comfortable. They go out into the streets arm-in-arm, and reach the Square followed by a small crowd of laughing onlookers.

HENRY. Come on now, who'll be first to be photographed with this fine chap?

They do a brisk trade, drawing clients away from their competitors, who complain bitterly that the bears are frightening away the pigeons. But next day when they return to the Square they find the other photographers also accompanied by bears, a black bear, a polar, and a child dressed as a koala. They protest. A brawl develops. The bears are arrested, fined, and bound over to keep the peace. However, the press and B.B.C. are glad of some comic relief from a grim world situation, and the matter is widely publicized. The queues to see the new

bear at London Zoo grew longer. "The Teddy-Bears' picnic" became a popular hit. A firm starts marketing teddy-bear suits for children.

3.

An international psychiatric congress is held in London and attended by Dr. Karl Adler (discoverer of the Inferiority Complex,) who is interviewed on B.B.C. "In Town Tonight". He is asked his opinion upon the new bear cult, and says that though the cult is (he believes) of German origin, he feels it is destined to make greater headway in Britain. He is asked the causes of the cult - why not an elephant or a tiger cult?

ADLER: In the first place a bear is one of the few creatures that do not look ridiculous when walking about upon their hind legs. But there are more significant reasons for their popularity. They are not normally flesh eaters - their favourite food is honey and buns - so women and children feel safe with them. But they have claws and teeth which they can use if threatened, so men can identify with them without losing their self-respect. In my opinion a civilization such as ours has much to gain from this cult. The greatest part of a psychiatrist's work is with people who feel inadequate as human beings, and considered objectively, most of them are physically and mentally inadequate; but dressed in a properly padded skin they make surprisingly adequate bears.....

4.

The words of the interview are seen to emanate from a wireless-set in George and Henry's photographic studio. George, dressed in his bearskin, is reading a newspaper. Henry switches off the wireless, saying irritably:

HENRY: What blasted rot! Take that thing off, George.

GEORGE: No. I'd feel cold.

HENRY: I feel cold, but do I complain?

GEORGE: Yes, all the time.

HENRY: Then you might have the common decency to give me a shot!

GEORGE: (STANDING) I'm going for a walk.

HENRY: Like that?

GEORGE: Yes, why not? This is a free country and I'm comfortable in it.

(HE FITS THE MASK OVER HIS HEAD)

HENRY: But you look utterly ridiculous - oh, what's the use in talking? When you've your mask on you might as well be deaf.

George walks slouch-shouldered through Soho, followed by a small jeering crowd, most of it children. He meets another bear followed by a similar crowd. Coming abreast they glare at each other's muzzle, suddenly stand erect, put their backs to the wall, roar and menace their persecutors with their claws. The children stop laughing and run away. The remaining adults call the bears "cowardly brutes" and one or two of the most belligerent accuse them of being "afraid to fight like men". The other bear hangs back, but George flings himself on the critics and is badly beaten up in an affray which knocks over a costermonger's barrow. He is rescued by the police and accused of provoking a riot. He is brought before Lord Goddard or some other highly punitive judge of the period. There are only two or three bears in the public galleries but the judge begins by having them removed by the ushers. George's lawyer makes a dignified and convincing defence, pointing out that the accused has been the only person to physically suffer, that he was outnumbered and unjustly provoked, etc. Nonetheless, the judge sees George as "one of these misguided individuals who seem determined to lead Britain backward to an age of primitive savagery." and condemns him to an unusually savage term of imprisonment, while regretting that the laws of the land make it impossible to have him publicly flogged into the bargain. George, asked if he has anything to say to this, responds with dignity and courage.

GEORGE: I can't blame the children who mocked me - I do blame the parents who failed to restrain them. I can't blame the roughs who attacked me - I do blame the society which deprives them of honest employment and leaves them with nothing to do but roam the streets jeering at innocent animals. For I am innocent! Bears are strong but bears are gentle! Lastly I blame neither the police nor the laws of Britain for bringing me here, but I will say this! I would rather wear a bearskin and stand in the dock, than wear a wig and sit on the bench and pass such an inhumanly cruel sentence as you, my Lord, have passed upon me!

(VAST APPLAUSE IN COURT. THE JUDGE ORDERS
IT TO BE CLEARED.)

5. A montage sequence of stills shows headlines denouncing unkindness to bears appearing in all popular and progressive papers; bears at Hyde Park Corner demanding justice for their martyred brother; bears with collecting cans gathering money for the appeal fund; processions of bears with banners urging George's release. The appeal is upheld and George appears at the prison gates in his skin to be greeted by a mass of supporters, many of them wearing skins. He makes a speech:

GEORGE: Fair play has triumphed! For myself I am happy, but for my fellow-Bruins I am jubilant. The British people have always admired us for our gentleness; they are now learning to like us for our strength, and, believe me, we live in an age when strength was never more necessary. Sinister forces are abroad in the world, forces eager to tear the fur from our backs and the buns from the muzzles of our cubs. We must organize!

(HE FITS THE MASK OVER HIS HEAD AND
EMITS A HOLLOW ROAR.)

o.

A sequence of brief episodes shows the development of the Bear Cult, starting with advertisements for Bear Brand stockings, Polar Mints and parodies of well-known trademarks in which bears are substituted for the usual animals, (e.g. the Metro-Goldwyn lion replaced by a roaring bear.) We see advertisements for bearskins, and shop windows with stuffed bears standing among the wax dummies. We see a corner of Piccadilly Circus at night with prostitutes wearing skins attracting pin-striped business men by throatily roaring. A suburban husband - Mr. Osborne, - is seen coming excitedly home to his wife with a big wrapped box.

Mr. OSBORNE: I've bought you something, my dear.

Mrs. OSBORNE: Ooh, let me see, what is it?

(Mr. O. OPENS THE BOX AND BRINGS OUT A SKIN.

Mrs. O. REGISTERS INCREDULOUS DISGUST.)

Not a bearskin!

Mr. OSBORNE: Why not? They're all the go, you know!

Mrs. OSBORNE: But I don't want to be a bear. I want to be a squirrel - a super squirrel, with a great big bushy tail!

Mr. OSBORNE: No! You've got to be a bear!

(HE TAKES A SKIPPED BLUE CAP FROM
THE BOX AND PUTS IT ON)

I'm going to be the keeper.

There is a shot of the illustrations for the A.A. Milne poem showing Christopher Robin avoiding harm in bear-infested streets by stepping between the joins on the pavements, then photographs of familiar scenes with a high proportion of bears among the citizens: Princes Street, Edinburgh, Wigan Pier, the sea-front at Blackpool, Trafalgar Square - bears are now being photographed in family parties. Then we have a newsreel sequence:

(A SHOT OF THE CHANGEING OF THE GUARDS AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE: THEIR UNIFORM IS ASSUSUAL, EXCEPTING THE HEADGEAR, WHICH IS A MIXTURE OF GERMAN AND VIKING HELMET: AN INVERTED METAL BASIN WITH A SPIKE ON TOP AND CURVING HORN-SPIKES STICKING OUT AT THE SIDES)

ANNOUNCER: For more than eleven hundred years - ever since the days of Ethelred the Unready - the Guards of the British Royal Family have worn the traditional spiked hat, popularly known as the Wanky.

(A SHOT OF A SPIKED HAT BEING PUT INTO A GLASS DISPLAY CABINET)

To-day the Wanky is consigned to a niche in the Imperial war Museum, and a new piece of headgear brings the tourists flocking to the palace

(SHOTS OF TOURISTS CLUSTERING WITH CAMERAS ROUND GUARDS IN BUSBYS)

..... the Bearskin! Traditionalists may sneer, but throughout the Empire many will find reassurance in the thought that the British Monarchy is able and willing to move with the times.

7. Meanwhile George's position as Leader of the British Bear Cult is becoming increasingly eminent. He is receiving heavy subsidies from the furriers and has a wide range of skins to choose from, which he varies from meeting to meeting, (soft brown fur for garden fetes and flower shows, black grizzly for Rotarian Clubs and factory visits and white polar for massed public rallies.) In towns throughout Britain Bear Gardens have been started, where bears are able to hug each other and eat buns and honey in perfect freedom. They also dance in rings round a (human) piper, have a Junior Branch movement, called "The Cubs" and a ritual in which the leader and the bear hoard shout slogans at each other:

LEA LEADER: Bears are gentle!

HOARD: Bears are strong!

LEADER: Our fur is soft!

HOARD: Our claws are long! (etcetera)

In a South London bye-election George stands as candidate and wins by a narrow majority. It is recognised that from now on bears are a force to be reckoned with.

A man is found clawed to death on a pavement. A shock of horror runs through the country. The Leader of the Bear Cult expresses his grief at the incident and hopes the police will soon lay their hands on the culprit. Oddly enough, the number of bears walking the streets increases yet further. Nervous old ladies and weak people in general feel it unsafe to go about like human beings. Mr. Osborne, the suburban husband, is shown returning home in the evening in a tube train full of bowler-hatted grizzlies. Getting into the house, he unzips his skin, saying with heartfelt relief:

Mr. OSBORNE: Thank God I'm home - it's great to feel human again.

(HE STARES AT HIS WIFE, WHO IS SETTING
THE TABLE IN HER BEARSKIN.)

I wish you'd take that thing off.

Mrs. OSBORNE: But it was you who made me wear it in the first place.

Mr. OSBORNE: That was just for a lark - but it's serious now. Haven't you seen the headlines? Hidden Claw Strikes Again. Third Killing in a Week. Honestly, I'd rather have you a squirrel again. Or even a woman.

Mrs. OSBORNE: What are the police doing? That's what I want to know!

9.

In the House of Commons, James Maxton (I.L.P.) asks what the Government, what the police are doing about the wave of killings which everyone in Britain associates with a certain political movement, backed by the International Fur Trade, whose spokesman, even now, sits on the benches opposite. Ramsay McDonald rises to reply. He says that, in a democracy like ours, every section of the community deserves to be represented - the Bear Cult is so far a minority, but it musters more votes than, (for example) the Independent Labour Party: moreover, he for his own part is convinced that the bear killers are a minority of the minority. So far, the killings have all occurred in South London. His Government,

representing, as it does, the right and left wings of the British political spectrum, can hardly condemn a whole movement for the action of one or two fanatical extremists. The Leader of the Liberals rises to speak:

LLOYD GEORGE: I cannot find it, in my heart, possible to blame those misguided people who have taken to wearing bearskins. A bearskin is ridiculous! It is ridiculous! But it is also warm, and comforting, and cosy, and we live in chilling times. I do blame the Government which, in spite of all its promises, has failed to give the people the coal to keep them warm enough to dispense with bearskins.

(GEORGE HAS BEEN SITTING HEARING ALL THIS WITH FOLDED ARMS AND HIS MASK ON. HE SLOWLY REMOVES THE MASK AND STANDS TO ADDRESS THE HOUSE)

GEORGE: Mr. Speaker, a new and terrible slur has been cast upon those I represent. Yes, in South London, the Centre of the Great Bear Movement, yet another innocent victim has been clawed to death. The heart of every true British Bruin must bleed for the relations of the deceased, but that is not enough, not enough by a long chalk. We must not rest until the criminals are found - and who are the criminals? Not bears, at any rate!

(CRIES OF "OH! OH!" HE RAISES HIS VOICE.)

Bears are strong but bears are gentle! Bears do not kill old women, elderly stock-brokers or innocent rate-payers! We too are innocent ratepayers! Bears have claws and know how to use them, but our claws are only used in self-defence! I have no hesitation in declaring that when the culprit is finally tracked down he will prove to be an enemy of our movement, a fanatical communist or liberal, hell-bent on bringing our movement into disrepute! I declare the author of these crimes to be a bare-faced human being, and I also ask the British Government ~~what~~ are the police doing to bring the criminals to book?

(HE REPLACES HIS MASK AND SITS)

7. Soon after, a man is found clawed to death in South London. He is the leader of a local Bear Hoard whose skin was ~~the~~ the cleaners' and who was just going round to the local newsagent's for a packet of cigarettes. The Bears attack the headquarters of the local communist party. The police, with difficulty, separate the combatants. The refrain "What are the Police doing about it?" is reiterated on all sides. At length an announcement comes over the wireless. Many sections of the British Police feel their uniforms command too little respect among the population as a whole. In view of the dangerous political situation, the Metropolitan Police have decided, as an experiment, to try out a new kind of uniform in the South London area. This is a black bearskin with extra large claws, but the mask, instead of covering the head, rests on top of it, the policeman looking out through eyeholes in the chest. We have a set of still photographs of city streets patrolled by eight-foot-high bears. Shortly after, a small bald man with rimless glasses and a weedy moustache gives himself up as the murderer to a South London Police Station. The police look into the matter and are hopeful of making the charge stick. The little man is not a member of the Great Bear Movement; on the contrary, his aunt is secretary of the local branch of the I.L.P. George, addressing a rally in Trafalgar Square, says:
- GEORGE: The miserable Faustus responsible for these crimes is now in the hands of the police - but where, I ask, is the Mephistopheles?

10. Collapse of the National Government. Ramsay McDonald announces a general election in three weeks' time.

11. The trial. While the small man insists he is the criminal, and the police are sure of it, the success of the prosecution depends on the evidence of a housewife who saw a bear leave the spot where the murder took place. There is much public interest in the case. The public gallery is crowded with bears. Half the jury are bears. Few of the lawyers and courtroom officials

(apart from the policemen) are bears, though some have furry ears attached to their wigs. But when the judge enters, he is an enormous black grizzly with a greying muzzle. The witness is confronted with the prisoner, who is ordered to fit on his mask. At the question: "Look carefully round the court - do you recognise anywhere the bear in question?" she glances around her. There follows a rapid sequence of upward shots of bear muzzles staring down from every angle; the accused in the dock, public gallery, jury box, from under the judge's wig. She turns to the grizzly policeman behind her, screams and faints. The case is dismissed through lack of evidence. The following day another murder is committed. Headlines announce: "Hidden Claw Killer Still at Large".

12. The two detectives responsible for the case are visited by a forensic expert, a Scottish Dr. Glaister type, new to the job, of whom they hope much. He has come to report on the latest killing.

EXPERT: No doubt about it, yon poor devil was killed by a bear.

DETECTIVE: Of course he was killed by a bear. But what kind? A brown bear? A Polar, or a Grizzly?

EXPERT: A grizzly, most likely, but it could be a bigger than average brown bear or a smaller than average polar bear. ~~Ko~~alas and pandas are out.

DETECTIVE: That's not much help! There are hundreds of thousands of these species in South London alone.

EXPERT: Havers! The bears in South London could be counted on the toes of one foot.

(THE DETECTIVES STARE AT ONE ANOTHER, THEN)

DETECTIVE: Do you mean a real bear is responsible?

EXPERT: That's what I'm telling you! The digits of the human hand would be incapable of carving someone to death like that - even if they did have artificial claws on the ends.

The detectives investigate Britain's zoos, and find that a pair of grizzlies escaped a month before from the private zoo of senile Lord Pabham.

13. Mr. and Mrs. Osborne sit on either side of the living-room fire. She is mending his bearskin - a patch of fur got nipped and pulled out by the doors of the Underground. They are listening to Sandy McPherson on the wireless when suddenly the programme is interrupted by a special announcement. Lord Reith personally comes on the air to introduce the Prime Minister, who wishes to address the people of Britain on a matter of national importance.

RAMSAY MCDONALD: You know, modern science is a very wonderful thing. Here am I sitting comfortably in my Downing Street study, and talking to all of you sitting cosily by your hearths throughout the length and breadth of Britain. But I have something more important to tell you than just that. Tonight, at a special emergency meeting of the Cabinet, it was decided to make it illegal to wear bearskins in public, for the foreseeable future. I know this will come as a shock to many decent honest people throughout the length and breadth of Britain

He goes on to explain that the police have little hope of capturing the real bear murderers while so many imitation bears are roaming the streets. He is sure the public will be glad to co-operate. Perhaps, after all, the cult of the bear has gone a little too far. It seems that real bears, though strong, are not always gentle.

Mr. and Mrs. Osborne stare at each other, then Mr. Osborne rises, switches off the set, snatches the skin and - despite his wife's protest, - stuffs it dramatically into the fireplace, causing a deal of smoke. There are rapid shots of people throughout Britain thrusting bearskins into cupboards and dustbins and shouting "I told you it was silly" at each other. These interact with shots of a frantic George at a desk full

of telephones, desperately trying to hold together his crumbling organization:

GEORGE: These murderers are not real bears - bears are strong but bears are gentle - these bears are only criminals because they have been soured by captivity! In next week's General Election bears will be fighting two hundred and sixty seats! Every furrier in Britain is behind us! We don't need skins, we'll wear badges instead!

The real bears are detected, netted and sent back to the zoo. There is a shot of exploding rockets and the camera pans down to a stuffed bear on a bonfire with a crowd dancing the hokey-cockey round it, then a montage of headlines announcing Baldwin's victory at the General Election. A tiny paragraph at the foot of a column states that George Webly, Britain's only Bear M.P., has forfeited his deposit. No other bears have actually contested their seats - they all withdrew at the last moment.

14. We return to the television studio where the interviewer, still wearing his skin, sits with Professor Grotman discussing the sudden collapse of the cult. Grotman, a social anthropologist, explains that the psychological basis for such a startlingly widespread reversion has been much exaggerated. In his opinion, the main cause of the movement lay in the widespread coal shortages of the winter of 1931. It was actually warmer to dress as a bear than not. What killed the movement was less widespread disillusion with bears as a species than that, by 1932, it was becoming clear to the intelligent part of the population that a second World War, with its promise of full employment for everyone, lay just round the corner. What killed the movement, in fact, was hope for the future.

INTERVIEWER: But is the movement really dead? Remember, at its peak, it had a following which could be numbered at well over three millions. Perhaps the person most qualified to answer that question is the Great Bear himself, the founder of the cult: George Webley. still remarkably fit and active for a man of 68 and living at present in a bed-sitting room on the Old Kent Road.

15. George is shown, white-haired, spectacled, with the air of a vaguely dissolute Grand Old Man, sitting in a stuffy room full of trophies of former grandeur: stuffed bears of the three main species, bearskin rugs on the floor, framed newspaper photographs of such moments of glory as the programme has dealt with. He is wearing pullover and corduroys but has a badge on his shoulder with a Rupert Bear head on it. Answering the question of an invisible interviewer, he speaks sadly of the collapse of the Cult; his present situation, (he has his Old Age Pension, but still receives the occasional cheque from one or two fans of his - the children of furriers whose fathers made their fortunes in the early 1930's) and his future hopes. He says that the Bear Cult suffered by being ahead of its time - its ideals were too radical for the thirties. But he himself is still convinced that the future belongs to the Bears. The camera zooms slowly back, leaving George brooding in a high, throne-like chair, an old man alone with his dreams.

16. Freeze frame, then the camera zooms back further to show the image multiplied on a bank of monitor screens in a T.V. Gallery. Zoom back further to reveal the surface of a consol in the foreground. A bear's paw comes in and turns a switch. We see that the whole gallery is staffed by bears; a bear director stretching himself, a bear secretary, bear sound technician with headphones. The director rises and walks

out into the studio, passing various cameramen, etc., all in skins. The interviewer is helping Professor Grotman by zipping a skin onto him.

DIRECTOR: Not bad, Peter. Not bad at all.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it seemed to go all right.

DIRECTOR: Coming for a drink at the Club, Professor?

GROTMAN: Certainly - why not?

The interviewer and the professor adjust their masks over their heads and walk off with the director. The credits come up over images of them strolling down the corridors of a bear-infested television centre.

NOTE: This play could last as little as fortyfive minutes, but an ambitious production could extend it, without padding, to much more.

The techniques it employs should be those of a straight-faced documentary. Many of the more ambitious crowd-scenes could be conveyed by taking photographs of the period and having photographs of bear-masks cut out and fastened to them by an intelligent designer.
