

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

Chairman's Awayday, Beckenham -
15th September 2001

Closing Date – Bill Barnes Poetry
Competition
30th September 2001

Closing Date – “I remember the day
that...” Competition
30th September 2001

Society's Annual Luncheon -
20th October 2001

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EDITORIAL

Adrian Danson

So many members have contacted me to point out that, in our haste, we forgot to put a closing date for our competition, “I remember the day that...” I am delighted by this proof that so many are helping in this measure to avoid our demise. I must apologise and ask that you return to your libraries and annotate the closing date of 30th September 2001. By doing so you will see if they still have it on display, though most are very good about this sort of thing.

Upon my soul, I’ve had another one. Another member in his eighties who thinks he might be getting too old to write any more. Living to 100 is becoming commonplace, so you’ve got 20 years or more and you don’t want to waste it, do you? Now what could be less wasteful than a bit of creative writing.

Get out of bed, make yourself a pot of tea or coffee and a bit of toast, get yourself some paper and study the ceiling. Now are you comfortable? Mind blank? Can’t think of a thing?

What day of the week is it? Thursday? O.K. what did you do on Thursdays when you were in your late teens? Not a lot, if you were like me. Pay-day was Friday and pockets were empty, so knock on her door and ask if she’d like to come for a walk. She did and you talked about your dreams, how to solve the world’s problems, what a nuisance your brother was. Perhaps a spot of necking and back home. Next day you’d got ten shillings, took her to the flicks and bought her some popcorn, maybe fish and chips on the way home. Now which day was best? It’s a moot point as to whether or not the best things in life are free, but be honest, it was probably the Thursday. You girls will recall it from your point of view, but was it so different?

All that struggle we’ve had in life, studying for exams, striving for promotion, living with a mortgage and bringing up a family, Well just think of that Thursday. Sharpen a quill, grind a bit of powder, add the water and fill the ink well. Now are you ready? All those memories sitting on the ceiling waiting for you to see them and copy them on paper. Too old indeed!

Our latest competition calls for memory, real or imagined. One day in your life – fact or fiction. Now there’s a chance for everyone, of any age. (Perhaps I can find time) So go to it and let’s have no more excuses.

Do you, like me, often find the letters column of a magazine more interesting than the rest of the contents? I hope you do not find this true of “Author”, but a few controversial comments would surely not go amiss. My attempt to stimulate such by inviting comment on what I call the recent abuse of English has produced some response. Can it be that everyone else agrees with me? I’m sure this is not so and hope to see more comment, preferably not about my own grammatical deficiencies. May I also remind you poets that Joyce Thornton still needs your contributions.

For those within range of Beckenham, don’t forget our Chairman’s Awayday on 15th September.

I hope you have noted that we are privileged to have a descendent of Charles Dickens at our Annual Luncheon on 20th October. I hope I will see many of you on this memorable occasion.

Adrian Danson



Pam Germany, one of our most recent new members, paid to have her children’s story published. It is beautifully illustrated and is an appealing tale about two pigmy goats and the family who provided them with a home. It is based upon the author’s own experience in raising a herd of pigmy goats, a subject in which she clearly has considerable expertise.

I hope to persuade her to tell us about her experience in trying to find a publisher, before she resorted to financing the project herself, what she has learnt from this and what advice would she give to others considering this route.

GUIDANCE FOR MEMBERS:

I promised to offer some comments on criticism and, as with anything else written by me, your comments on the following would be welcome.

A certain amount of self-belief is surely essential in order to offer one’s creative writing for judgement by another, yet this confidence is a fragile thing for most of us. Having risked such by entering a competition, or perhaps had one’s work published in “Author”, there follows receipt of that awful thing – the critique.

No matter how well founded, how competent and respected the judge may be, their criticism of our efforts is not easy to take. I recommend putting it away and reading it again on another day. On second reading there is a good chance that one will recognise a grain of truth in what is being said, perhaps even two grains.

Not many years ago a renowned American psychologist stated that criticism says more about the critic than about the subject of the criticism. That may be so and be fascinating to a psychologist, but bear in mind that it is intended to be helpful. For the sake of our own ego and recognition of the fact that critics are human, we do not have to believe every word. Even when the criticism appears to be self-indulgent eloquent nonsense, there is likely to remain that grain of truth.

PS. One of our members has proposed that we create a folio of short story exchanges via e-mail. Will anyone who is interested in this idea please e-mail me with your e-mail address and we will consider this further. As always, the contents of the folio would be copyright to the writer and remain eligible for competitions within SCPSW and other organisations. The exchange of stories by such means would be subject to the agreement to this by all subscribers.

I recently had to write to winners of our competitions to ask if they would be willing to let me publish their winning entries and, if so, to let me have a copy for this purpose.

I believe everyone is interested to read such work, for the pleasure of reading such and possibly to help in trying to emulate such in their future competition entries.

Will all members please note that, unless they state that they are not willing to have their work published in Author, or would wish to do so only under a pen name, winning entries will in future be published in Author at the Editor's discretion.

Many items are published in Author that have long ago won a competition, or, more often than not, have failed to win or have never been entered. If space allows, I propose to add a list of such stories and articles with the annual membership renewal form, asking for marks out of ten. The results of your votes will then be published and a modest prize awarded.

Please note that letters to the Editor on this, and all other subjects, continues to be invited.

You may remember the following, which I trust is now hanging on your library notice board. Do not forget to enter your own contribution in the next few weeks. On this occasion I have used my own address, instead of that of our competition secretary, but only for expediency. On this occasion you may also use single spacing, but your name, etc., should be on a separate sheet. Ed

I REMEMBER THE DAY THAT...

I GOT MY FIRST JOB,

I MET MY HUSBAND/WIFE,

I JOINED THE ARMY,

JULIUS CAESER CAME TO TEA,

I CLIMBED EVEREST,

OR WHATEVER.....

FACT OR FICTION – IT'S UP TO YOU!

£150 PRIZE MONEY AND PUBLICATION IN "AUTHOR"

Entry Fee £3.00 payable to SCPSW please. Entries in type by 30th September 2001 (maximum 2,000 words) to:

The Editor

38 Cumberland Road,

BROMLEY,

BR2 0PQ.

This competition is, of course, the Stroud Memorial Prize and the results will be announced at the New Year Party. Date & venue to be announced.

LETTERS

English Usage

The only guide to "correct" English is usage. (A guide, but not the only guide I think – Ed) The crux is whose usage. Being a class ridden society we may object to some speech as common or as posh, not to mention the different registers of our language e.g. "Yoof speak", the double speak of politicians or the slovenly drivel of commercial radio presenters.

Like you I do not much like *really really* because it reminds me of The Spice Girls (remember them?) and the fad of celebrity. But repetition is nothing new. Viz. Noel Coward's, "*too too kind*" etc. (I think this was intended to be pretentious, rather than for everyday use – Ed)

What saddens me is when the subtleties of language are lost. This can be phonetic e.g. An American uses the same vowel for "*Merry Mary married*" whereas we still use three different sounds. We still also differentiate between writing and riding. On the grammatical level I regret the recent but universal displacement of *as if* or *as though* by *like*. You may treat me like a fool but I hope you will treat me as if (not like) I knew what I was talking about! He moved like greased lightning, yes. He moved like his trousers were on fire, no. However all language moves towards simplification and all these battles are already lost. (Simplification often results in ambiguity. As for the battle, keep looking for that horseshoe nail – Ed)

I would only use the word abuse, however, for usage that is plainly wrong, e.g. the apostrophe s used for the plural s: *Banana's for sale* instead of *bananas for sale*. I have my prejudices, though. I deplore the habit of sports commentators of pronouncing s as sh e.g. "Oshtralia will win the Ashes" or "Shteward made a shtupendous catch." (I blame Sean Connory! – Ed)

Even more I hate the ignorant "false posh" of using I instead of me as in "*He told you and I*". Who would say "*he told I?*" I dislike the usage "*Me and Mum are going out*" but already "*Mum and I*" is perceived as quaintly old-fashioned. Another one lost.

Some changes I simply find fascinating. Take the recent ways of reporting speech. As well as the traditional *he said* we now have *he went* as in, "*Give us a break, he went.*" This has been with us over a decade but more recent is the very common *I was like* meaning *I said* e.g. "*I bumped into this really really big guy and I was like, ooh, er sorry!*"

William Wood

Dear Editor,

I was surprised to read that a relatively young man of 83 was thinking of laying down his fountain-pen, as you might say. I shall be 88 next month, but I still manage to string a few words together from time to time.

I will send you a copy of my latest contribution to the gaiety of nations. In the course of a long career as a letter-writer this is the first occasion on which I felt constrained to write to a newspaper about ladies' underwear.

All good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Button

Knickers to store offer

I wonder how many elderly gentlemen among your readers have been invited by Marks and Spencer, as I have, to spend £25 on ladies' bras and/or knickers.

I admit I have not yet nerved myself to do this.

Henry Button

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Dear Adrian,

Sorry to hear about the Society's financial problems. I have applied to three libraries in London to put up the notice about the open competition.

Also, may I suggest, firstly, that we recruit new members in the Post Office, which as you know is ex-civil service. Secondly, that we save money by printing two annual anthologies of members' works, one of short stories and the other of non-fiction and poetry, about fifty pages.

Instead of magazines we print a newsletter every two months to keep members in touch. This could be done at home rather than at the printers.

Very best wishes for the Society

All the best

Brian Jones

[If we increase membership to levels of 2 years ago we will return to magazines every 2 months, but I doubt that a newsletter would satisfy many members. More views please – Ed]



MARKET INFORMATION

The Constructive Urge

By Gordon E. Gompers

I have long believed that repulsion was a stronger force than attraction. Some one with a kind of grudge against me tore up a valued book of mine. I was further sickened by the arguments of some of my pseudish "friends" that the action was "understandable". A protest by a progressive against a reactionary.

Until then my views were vague and wishy-washy. Now I questioned the company I had hitherto kept. What were such terms as "progressive" and "reactionary" but mere labels? "A progressive," I once read, "is some one hopelessly wrong years before anyone else." Elsewhere I read of a reactionary as "some one who puts on the brake when everything is going

down hill”. If progressivism meant the wilful destruction of my property then to Hell with it!

From that point I came to believe that all thought should be judged by whether it was constructive or destructive. I was studying various subjects at Morley College where I discovered the joys of tape recording. I threw myself heart and soul into the tapeology and immediately began to get acceptances in such publications as *Meccano Magazine*, *Amateur Tape Recording*, *Tape Recording Magazine*, etc. I was already a regular contributor to *Hobbies Weekly* and when that publication became the glossy *Hobbies Magazine* I was appointed the Chief Feature Writer on tape recording and allied audio topics. I also became the main adviser and contributor on audio topics for *Amateur Stage*. My writing on music and tapeology led to my appointment of Accredited Music Critic of Morley College. A position I held for six years.

My creative writing has probably no literary merit at all. However, to use a popular phrase, nothing is all there is. Constructive thinking must also count for something.

So my message to my fellow retirees: get a constructive hobby and write on it. Carpentry, metal work, tapeology, photography, etc. There are markets a-plenty.

[Or get a hobby that is not constructive, write about it and don't wait until you retire – Ed.]



POETRY WORKSHOP

by Mike Boland

Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

PW 2001

The annual get-together of the Poetry Workshop took place over the weekend of 13-15 July at the University of Birmingham. We were reduced somewhat in numbers this year, as several of our regulars were unable to

attend. However those who did take part enjoyed a varied range of activities. A full report of proceedings and details of the AGM, which took place during the Weekend, will be published in the Autumn Newsletter.

WAVES 2001

This year's WAVES, the annual collection of members' poetry, was launched at Birmingham, and is now available. Contact Bill Douglas at 47 Walkerston Avenue, Largs, Ayrshire KA30 8EP, for copies. Full details of this publication will appear in the Autumn Newsletter.

Bill Barnes Poetry Competition

The closing date for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition is 30 September. Rules for this competition, which is open to Poetry Workshop members only, were given in the Spring Newsletter. If anyone wants a copy of the rules please contact me at the address given above. Results and winning entries should appear in the Winter issue of the Newsletter.

Subscription

It is still not too late to take out a subscription for membership of the Poetry Workshop. The fee for 2001 is £3 for members of the The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. This gives you:

- three lively Newsletters each year
- the chance of publication in **Waves**
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes poetry Competition
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

Dates:

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 30 September 2001 | Autumn Newsletter |
| 30 September 2001 | Closing date, Bill Barnes Competition |
| 30 November 2001 | Winter Newsletter |
| 1 January 2002 | Subscriptions due |
| 30 March 2002 | Closing Date for WAVES |
| 30 March 2002 | Spring Newsletter |
| 12-14 July 2002 | Poetry Workshop Weekend |

POETRY PAGES
Edited by Joyce Thornton

THE MAYFLY
by ANDREW MILLICAN

Two to three years on the water
 all at a larval stage
just waiting for nature's order
 to enter a new phase.

Maturity comes all at once
 on a warm summer's night
when certain things are critical
 the temperature, the light.

As if by special magic a
 transformation begins
the larvae metamorphosise
 and sprout translucent wings.

And then they rise in pyramids
 on the warm evening air.
They take no food, just propagate
 then perish without care.

THE SHELL YOU FOUND
by JOAN FERRIS

Unlike some shells the sea has washed ashore,
The shell you found conceals a tender thing,
Which pulses, swells, as waves advance, withdraw
And sinks, in circles swiftly eddying.
When cold you throw it back. Ill winds will blow;
You too could founder – with your love below.

ON A PAINTING BY AUGUSTE RENOIR:
'A PATH THROUGH THE LONG GRASS'
by JOAN FERRIS

The children laughing follow their leader
Through pastures sweet with musk, where fancy weaves
A shining path from threads of gossamer
To vie with whitened veins on foremost leaves.
A hand is raised to brush a stalk away,
From hat more gold than swathes of light we see
Offsetting shadows underneath a tree.

Behind comes mother with her parasol,
A deeper red than any in the scene.
Her head held high, she sees above them all.
Superior in all she does, her dream
Is home where there are similarities
Between her treasures and the meadow trees:
Four right, four left, in perfect symmetry.

Her parents linger on the hill, hands joined,
Reluctant to descend for they have found
Why Renoir sought to take the eye beyond
The poplar, which divides the distant ground.
Enthralled, their heads are ever in the sky,
But linked to youth by clothes of gold and black,
They turn to let the children lead them back.

MAIDEN CASTLE
by TERRY RICKSON

The wind scythes
through a bent and twisted thorn,
to a death-watch click
of black-webbed twigs.
I see ancient men on the ramparts,
eyes rheum-red
from staring into the searing blast

for an enemy that never comes.

Now, only beruffled sheep
nibble the shivering grass.

PRINCIPAL GUEST AT THE SOCIETY LUNCHEON:

20TH OCTOBER 2001

MR CEDRIC CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens, the great English novelist died on 9th June 1870. Forty-six years later, on 24th September 1916, his great-grandson, Cedric Charles Dickens was born. He is descended from Charles's sixth son, Sir Henry Fielding Dickens (a lawyer and Common Serjeant of the City of London) and Henry's son Philip.

Cedric was educated at Cambridge, and amongst other things learned to sail yachts. He started work in 1938 with the British Tabulating Machine company and also joined the RNVR Division on HMS President. When war was declared he reported to the President, and was sent off to Butlin's Holiday Camp (now renamed HMS Royal Arthur) with the rank of rating. But after moving from one ship to another and indulging in various adventures, he became a naval lieutenant and returned home after VJ Day to resume his work with the British Tabulating Machine Company. The management was not too happy with him as he had volunteered for the navy (in their view 'on holiday') instead of taking on more erudite work at Bletchley Park. So he was sent to India to sell machines. Based on Bombay, his modest territory ranged 500 miles north to Ahmenabad, 1200 miles inland to Nagpur and south to Ceylon. He returned to the UK in 1950 by which time the company was beginning to look at electronic computers, although their first did not go 'live' until 1954.

In 1951 Cedric started the George and Vulture Luncheons in the tradition of Mr Pickwick who had 'hung out' at that hostelry, and he founded the Dickens Pickwick Club which held its annual general meeting there every Christmas. Cedric had carried a copy of 'Pickwick' in every ship he served in, and knew the book better than anyone. Meetings of the Club were always noisy and full of good cheer. One day Cedric proposed to write 'The Miracle of Pickwick'. To this end he accumulated all sorts of notes, pictures, cuttings, etc. but for some reason the book failed to be written. He did, however, write two very popular books which sold extremely well – 'Dining with Dickens' and 'Drinking with Dickens'. It

was not until he was discussing the proposed 'Miracle' with Alan Watts, who was of course a member of the Dickens Pickwick Club, that the project got off the ground. Now it is ready to go on sale.

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS
ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2000/2001
THE VINCENT BRENNAN TRAVEL ARTICLE
THE RESULTS

Number of entries 13. The judge was our chairman, Alan Watts.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

The standard was very high. There were none that I could relegate to the end of the list, and I had real difficulty in deciding which should go to the front. Eventually after considerable-heart searching I decided to award the three prizes to:

First: THE ROAD TO BOR by William Wood, Etchingam, East Sussex.

Second: MEMORIES OF NEPAL by Stephan Bibby, Silchester, Reading.

Third: GO WEST by Joan Hykin, Grantham, Lincs.

And I would like to commend:

OYSTERS AND OLD BOOTS by David John Woodward, Dover, Kent
and

THE ENDURING ENDEARING ARDENNES by James Lancaster,
Chorley, Lancs.

In judging I differentiated between one or two entries which were guide-book rather than travel articles. I think this was justified, as there is a distinction. I tried not to be prejudiced by mistakes such as "it's" (it is) being used instead of "its" (the possessive), and the failure to distinguish between Napoleon (the First) and Napoleon the Third.

But all entrants should be congratulated on their work.

Alan S. Watts

Judge

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS
ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2000/2001
THE LEWIS WRIGHT SHORT STORY COMPETITION
THE RESULTS

The well-known Iain McIntyre was good enough to bring his wide experience and expertise to bear and act as the judge for this competition. We must extend our thanks to him for judging the s. stories in such a thorough and expert manner. Heading his wide reports I. M. writes:- "... It is a long time since I judged one of our short story competitions. I think the last time was when I shared the task with a good friend the late Betty Richards.

This year's batch of stories brings, as usual, remarkable variety. I am truly lost in wonder at the ability of our members to conjure up such tales of wonder, horror, humour and downright comedy.

My congratulations to all those who took part in the Short Story Competition and had a go!"

FIRST PRIZE £75:- A LITTLE FINE TUNING, Geraldine Smedley,
Alford, Lincs.

SECOND PRIZE £50:- THE GLORIOUS FIRST, Alan Watts,
Beckenham, Kent.

Runners up in numerical order. £5 to each R. U.

1. THE ROAR OF THE CROWD, Michael O'Conner, Gillingham, Kent.
2. THE VERDICT, Vivian Edwards, Newhaven, E. Sussex.
3. DEJA VU, Doreen Fay, Hampshire.
4. THE TIDE IS NOT FOR TURNING, L. M. Fletcher, Colwyn Bay.
5. THE EMANCIPATION OF MORAG, Roy Stewart, Edinburgh.

Ron Jeffreys
Competition Secretary

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS
ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2000/2001
THE GEORGE FARLEY PRIZE
THE RESULTS

In her covering notes Ms. P. E. Farley writes:– “... we are delighted with the quality of this collection, and as usual had a hard job picking a winner. But since needs must it is:– MISTLE POEM by Peter Rolls, Camberley, Surrey. It rollicks along, conjuring up wonderful images of the characters, and keeps its shape all the way through.

As for runners-up, the voting just gave joint lead to:– CARE IN THE COMMUNITY & WE APOLOGISE TO CUSTOMERS – both by William Wood, Etchingam, East Sussex without realising they were by the same writer, so well done them.

It was very good to find many different styles of poem, and interesting, everyday subjects. We are just sorry that we can't make everyone a winner; all entrants should feel proud of their work, and keep those 'pomes' coming.

Now, Miss Barber, and I'm sure others, ask what makes a humorous poem for this competition. Absolutely the only qualification is that it produces a laugh from the reader. It might be a chuckle, titter, guffaw, fall about, or whatever; but something about it must stir the funny muscles. All we ask of structure is that it enhances the subject and is identifiably poetry rather than prose. So every thing from the cleriheuw and limerick, to the narrative saga qualifies.”

Ron Jeffreys
Competition Secretary

Mistle-poem
by Peter Rolls
(Winner of the George Farley Prize)

Mistletoe, mistletoe, bring me a kiss
– a moment of magic and mind-blowing bliss.

But not Auntie Mabel and not Cousin Flo,
or the girl from the pet-shop who pecks like a crow.

And not Mrs Hacksaw, the carpenter's wife
with her grip like a vice and a nose like a knife.

Or the woman from Windsor, with bottle-green hair
And not Cousin Kate, who's had more than her share.

And not Sophie Squibb, who slurps like a frog.
And certainly not Mrs Figg and her dog.

And not Mrs Chumleigh and not Mrs Chubb
And none of the ones from the Badminton Club.

And please not Amanda, the Archdeacon's daughter.
he got me last year and it made my eyes water.

The Sisters of Mercy? I'll leave them for now.
Though I'm sure they're all dying to show me just how ...

Mistletoe, mistletoe, bring me a smacker
– that one in the pink, who's just pulled a cracker.



THE ARTICLE FOLIO

Joan Hykin

I am happy to report that the Article Folio is going great guns. Currently we are seven and the folio bustles round in about 7 weeks, sometimes less. The fourth round is in progress. We write on diverse topics, ranging from number games to the paranormal, antique fairs to Lipton, fitness centres to Africa ... We are constructively critical – no point in mutual back-slapping unless praise is warranted. The suggestions for markets are very helpful. (Possibly writing to a market should be the goal but some like to write the article first and some write for their own amusement – that's fine, too – we all enjoy reading the results.) Foliars (is that our own coining?) are very generous with help, it never fails to amaze that writers share their knowledge so freely. A second folio could run if a few more people come forward – we have one member on the waiting list. I don't want to run a

folio with less than 6 writers as I think a range of opinions is very useful. Write to me if you want to know more.

A LITTLE FINE TUNING

by Geraldine Smedley

Wayne Paterson tied a Roman Candle to the tail of Miss Sherington's favourite cat on the day of her father's funeral and marked a turning point in all their lives. Sharma was never to completely regain his regal good looks; Miss Sherington was faced with extreme distress and trauma, not to mention an exorbitant vet's bill which she could ill afford, and Wayne, incapable of any rational thought, possibly changed the course of scientific history. Harold Sherington, inventor, eccentric, freethinking radical, was, of course, dead.

Emma placed the cat basket carefully on the kitchen table and gently extricated the still woozy Sharma from his mohair blanket. The room was chilly, and on the windows spidery streaks of rain formed random patterns in the fading light. From outside came the sound of muffled engine revolutions as Wayne tuned the Mondeo. With a sigh Emma removed her dripping coat which still smelled slightly of mothballs, and tackled the gas fire which eventually spluttered bad-temperedly into life. Even on this dreadful day, she thought, he had insisted on following her so closely, harassing – the Mondeo's red bonnet only feet from the rear of her little Mini. Now that Father had gone, she did not suppose things would be any better.

She settled the cat, half of him now entwined in bandage, and sipped tea and brandy. Her face felt tight and strange. She rubbed it impatiently, unsure whether the tightness was a result of the rain or the tears shed as her father was lowered into the earth. Strange to think of him in there. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes – how he would have scoffed.

Father had been a kind and gentle man, but a great scoffer, reflected Emma, allowing herself to relax a little in the brandy's warmth. She recalled quite clearly her last day at school. It was the day of her first science lesson and she had been just ten years of age.

“And what did you learn today, Sweetpea?” Father had asked as he peered, soldering iron in hand, into the convoluted innards of his latest invention.

Emma had stood before him, eyes closed in concentration, and pronounced proudly “Matter cannot be created or destroyed”. Her father's reaction was quite alarming. “Balderdash!” he roared, flinging down the soldering iron in

unaccustomed rage. “Monstrous poppycock!” and Emma, transfixed, had watched him dance in fury as raindrops of silver sprayed tiny burn marks over his cardigan and bare knuckles. She remembered his dear face, puce now from anger, peering closely into hers. “And who,” he asked, dangerously quiet now, “told you this bunkum?”

“Mr Posthwaite,” Emma had replied breathlessly, “and Mr Posthwaite says ...”

“Mr Posthwaite can go hang,” snorted her father. And that was it.

Emma stroked Sharma’s singed and tatty fur, and took another sip of brandied tea. What a fuss there had been when Father had announced that she was to be educated at home. Visits from various bodies occupied her parents for weeks – arguments, threats of legal action – most unpleasant on occasions. Her father had been adamant and he had won. No doubt the authorities had backed off in view of his outstanding academic record, although his untimely retirement from the Institute after that unfortunate incident with the Director and the laboratory rat had caused concern. The full details were never publicly disclosed – Emma had been too young at the time to grasp any implications, and anyway the Public’s attention had been diverted by the Bomb and its associated horrors, allowing Harold Sherington to pursue his research at his home in Peters Close, with his new assistant, Emma.

She studied the contents of the little room. It had barely changed since Mother left, so suddenly, all those years ago. Emma supposed that she had finally got tired of her little family’s scientific preoccupations – but to leave with no goodbye note and just a handbag ...

To her shame, Emma had to admit that she had barely missed her mother, so engrossed was she in her Father’s invention. She frowned, concerned at the lack of guilt. Father had seemed a bit distracted, but time had passed. And now he too had gone.

“So where do we go from here?” she asked of Sharma, who gazed implacably back, amber eyes flickering in the light of the gas fire.

Where indeed? Who, thought Emma, will employ a female of sixty-plus with no paper qualifications, an aptitude for assembling whacky items – and an in-depth understanding of her father’s notion of particle physics. Oh well, they had existed for years on a small pension and even smaller royalties. She could not envisage an upsurge of interest in such notables as the indispensable Every Fisherman’s Automatic Power Assisted Casting Reel – at least, not since that brain-dead angler had succeeded in lassoing a passing dignitary and hauling him into the canal. Anyway, these days people were into IT.

Father had stumbled upon the microchip quite by accident and had immediately applied it to his research. From this had been conceived the invention which Emma considered the discovery to end all discoveries. But now it lay buried somewhere in the shed, together with the Reel, and the Battery Operated Backscratcher, and various other extensions of her father's genius. Patent filed, ridiculed and forgotten. After the incident with the Paterson's Pit Bull, Father had been adamant. He had taken the little device and packed it resolutely in a sealed box. "Never to be seen again in my lifetime, Emma."

And that was it.

Never in my lifetime. Embargo lifted, Emma thought a trifle disrespectfully, raising brandied tea to a hopeful future.

Early the next morning she unearthed the Zapper from its wrappings in the shed. It lay on the kitchen table, quiet and serene, the size of a hair drier. It did in fact have a hair drier case – Emma smiled, remembering her objections to the hijacking of her Pifco when her father was in full flow. "Science waits for no man," he had lectured sternly, "reverse the Hoover, Emma, it will serve the same purpose." And so her hair had been a trifle sticky and dusty, but the Zapper had been completed.

Potent. Emma had always thought it could be the answer to the world's disposal problems – no more ugly landfill sights, no twisted car wrecks distorting the skyline. For this little appliance – her father's *pièce de résistance* – had the capability to vaporise rubbish. It was totally self-contained and self-generating – and the remote control was the icing on the cake, thought Emma, even though she had grumbled when the television had to be operated manually.

It also had other somewhat dubious attributes. There had been that unfortunate occurrence in the case of the Pit Bull. How was she to know that the awful creature would decide to chase Sharma across the lawn at the precise moment she was adjusting the range of the ray? Next-door's canine had just disappeared. So much for the theory that matter cannot be destroyed, said her Father. Unfortunately, it could not be created, either, and the Pit Bull had gone for ever. Emma had wondered idly at the time whether Pit Bull Particles were drifting invisibly around as she explained to the Patersons and the police that, yes, she had seen the missing dog in the garden, no, she was not harbouring it (the very thought!) and, well, it just disappeared over by the fence there. The device was too dangerous to be used until modified, decided Harold, and so it was stowed away. Until now, thought Emma, as she packed the Zapper carefully into the Mini's boot. Further testing was needed, the further away from the neighbourhood the better, in case of more accidents.

Emma drove thoughtfully towards home. It was really quite astounding. The Zapper had performed as if it were yesterday. Not only that, but the beam was content to operate on concrete, metal and anything else she had tried on the deserted airfield. What a pity that Father would not be here to celebrate its success, for success there would surely be. They, whoever They are, thought Emma, would have to take notice – the implications were too incredible.

She was never quite sure what happened next. One moment she was daydreaming of her father's posthumous fame, and the next ... She was aware of the red Mondeo bonnet in the rear view mirror and of Wayne's florid leering face mouthing obscenities. What surprised and shocked her was the sudden image of the scarred and pitiful Sharma, and the memory of that hideous firework, burned into the raw and melted flesh. Had she reached for the remote before or after the Mondeo touched her rear bumper? There was just a blur in her memory bank – a heart stopping moment as the Mini crossed the white line, narrowly missing the oncoming police car, a crash, and then silence.

There were sirens, loud voices, flashing lights, a kindly steering arm around her shoulders. Emma's gaze had been fixed on the Mini's open boot and the innocuous little hair drier case. Of Wayne and the Mondeo there was no sign.

She sat quietly in her father's bedroom, unsure of where to start. Part of her insisted that it was sacrosanct, and should remain so for some time to come. Her more practical side dictated a clearance of the cluttered room, a new beginning, and as usual, this side won the mental struggle.

An hour later she was sitting, stunned, her mother's handbag in her hand. Trembling, she undid the clasp, and looked inside. An untidy jumble of the usual handbag items – purse, makeup bag, comb – and an envelope addressed to her in her father's firm and upright hand. She opened it slowly with a feeling of foreboding.

My dear, dear child

By the time you read this I shall be gone and you will be, of course, expecting an explanation.

You may already have guessed from the presence of the handbag, my dear, that your Mother, God rest her soul, did not desert us. She loved you too much to ever do that, and I was too much of a coward to tell you the truth. Perhaps at the time I loved myself more than both of you. I owe you an explanation, and what you do with the knowledge is up to you. You were always more practical and sensible than me – I know you will do the right thing.

You had such touching faith in my creation, but you will know by now that with construction comes destruction. I clung to the idea that, with a little fine

tuning, my Zapper could change the world. I was right, but not in the way I desired.

I know that you envisaged a cleaner, rubbish free environment, but you saw for yourself the effect on soft tissue. I speak of the Paterson's dreadful dog. Loathe it as I might, Emma, I could not have wished that fate upon a living creature. Tragically, I thought that this fault had been ironed out. I was wrong, which is why I forbade the Zapper to be used in my lifetime.

There was a terrible accident at the Institute, before I had a chance to make any adjustments. Of course, it was so much easier to hush things up in those days. Martinson, the Director, arrogant pig that he was, stepped in front of the beam before I had adjusted the strength. What a terrible mess it was!

At this point, her father's writing faltered and almost faded. Emma read on.

Particles had obviously not dissipated as intended. The poor devil's head and torso ended up on the body of a laboratory rat, while bits of the rat were twitching about everywhere. It really was quite a pantomime. Reversal was impossible. The screams were dreadful. Euthanasia was the only solution.

Emma read on in horrified fascination.

Your dear, dear mother was a lovely soul, Emma, but had no interest at all in the work we did, as you must have noticed. I told her so many times about our creation, but she didn't take it in. She wasn't an airhead – don't ever think that, dear, just different interests. That night we had our first argument for years. She was getting all dressed up for Bingo. Bingo. I ask you. You never take me out, she said. Buried in your work, she said. Oh, Emma, how I wish I could turn back the clock, but I have not yet worked that one out. If only I hadn't been so careless, but I so wanted to show her what we were working on.

I left the Zapper on the table, and walked out to cool off. When I returned, she was sitting there, so beautiful, just about to dry her hair. I shouted, but it was too late. She'd gone, just like that. She never left us, my darling, remember that ...

Emma studied the Prosecuting Counsel with interest. A portly, sardonic sallow little man who was addressing the jury earnestly on the State's behalf. Dangerous driving, indeed. She had robustly pleaded Not Guilty, but things were not going too well. The fact that Wayne had collided with her just on a bend had not helped. The view of the patrol car driver had been obscured. No-one had seen Wayne, and naturally he was now not available. Emma had told them the full story, which seemed to be a mistake. She had almost been deemed unfit to plead.

Now he was waving the Zapper at the courtroom. His lip curled. "We are asked to believe, Your Honour," he smirked ingratiatingly at the judge, "that

this hair drier has magical powers.” The Courtroom sniggered. Playfully, he pointed the Pifco at the Bench.

“Zap,” sneered the Prosecuting Counsel.

And in the millisecond before Judge Arnold Weston evaporated, Emma had time to reflect on the need for just a little fine tuning.

THE GLORIOUS FIRST

by Alan S. Watts

Well, my old dad, you see – he was a queer ’un if ever there was – he would say about my old mother – she was his second. Yes, he’d say, she was my second, and a better and handsomer lass, you could never see. And he’d drop a tear as he spoke of her. ‘Buxom!’ he’d say, ‘And such a sweet smile.’ And he’d shake his head as he remembered her. ‘Ah, me! if that’s the way of Providence, I don’t know what sense Providence has.’ And then he’d tell me about his third, but when he shook his head at what he remembered, it wasn’t her sweet smile. ‘She was a tartar!’ he’d say. And then with much more emphasis – ‘She *was* a Tartar. I mean a *Tartar*!’ ‘But,’ he would always end by saying, ‘there was Providence at work again. I never thought as Providence had much to do with cholera, but there we are. And I missed her when she’d gone. I’ll be honest. I missed her.’

And I’ll be honest, too. I’d miss my first if she were gone. It may be true I didn’t think much of her when I got her. But that doesn’t mean I don’t now. After all, it’s the way Providence has worked. It’s entirely through Providence that we’ve become man and wife. You wouldn’t believe all the twists and turns that Providence has been making. No-one, least of all me, could have dreamed what it was up to. Oh, but Providence has worked hard to make it so. I’ll tell you all about it, if you’ll only wait a minute.

I don’t know much about my father’s first except that her uncle kept an alehouse and she had pimples. But it was through her uncle that I went to sea. He never intended me to go to sea, of course. He thought I was picking up a bit of knowledge helping Ezra Grottens sawing up wood and carpenting and using an adze and the like. And I was getting a bit skilful, too – not in a special fine workmanship way. Ezra told me plainly I’d never make a cabinet-maker, but I was quite useful nailing up boxes and screwing hinges on doors. But it was all Providence. Ezra didn’t know it. Nor did I, but that’s what it was.

I had gone down to my father’s first’s uncle’s alehouse – the Admiral Shovell – to find out what had become of my old father. (He weren’t so old then, of course, nor was I, and you might have realised that I shouldn’t at that time have been any age at all, my father not having yet married his second, and my mother being his

second.) And I found myself all of a sudden in the midst of a real rough and tumble. Just gone round the corner, I had, and I saw these fellows running out of the Admiral, and other fellows seizing them, and fighting, and rolling on the ground, and these marines frog-marching them off, threatening them with cudgels, and striking some of them on the head.

I'd never seen the like. Never! And I stood there like a statue, watching it all. And you know what happened? If I hadn't been such a big lad for my age it probably wouldn't. But before I could get free of 'em I was lying in the bottom of their boat and being taken to a big first-rater lying out in the bay.

My mother – my father's second – was in a dreadful state when she discovered what had happened, and I did learn – a long time after, you'll realise, that when she did she scratched the face of my father's first, and took some of her pimples off, blaming it all on her uncle who kept the Admiral Shovell – and his family, of course. If she accosted any ship's officers in the street, she'd begin pleading with them for me and arguing and getting hold of the lace on their jackets and the buttons on their cuffs and making herself as unpleasant as my father's third might have done if she had been my father's third at that time. Meanwhile, the first-rater with me in its hold was beating down the Channel, and I was sick as a pig and frightened to death, and wondering whatever would happen to me.

But those days I'd spent in Ezra's shop were a blessing. If it hadn't been that I could shape a bit of wood, they might have sent me aloft, walking along a spar hundreds of feet above the ocean, and clewing up wet canvas with the wind threatening to blow me off my perch and send me into the waves far below. I shudder at the very thought. How glad was I to find myself working with the carpenter's mate, fixing the broken gunwale of the jolly-boat, mending a rudder, helping the carpenter to repair one of the gun ports. There were scores of little jobs to be done on a first rate man-o'-war, and I was busy with them thanking Providence I wasn't one of those human monkeys up on the top gallant mast.

Of course, I had to do other jobs. I had to be ready for that dreaded day when we would come up with the enemy. Three of us had to man one of the guns on the poop. I hardly knew what the poop was until I joined that gun-crew. And then, day after day, we had gun-drill – opening the gun-port, dragging the gun on its trunnions to where we could load it – powder rammed down – shot following, also rammed down – touch-hole ready for firing – gun run out again – stand by for orders! It was hard work. The weight of a round shot is unbelievable. Needs a couple of men to carry it. And all the time, the ship rolling, or pitching its bowsprit dipping into the sea to dredge up a wall of green water which would come cascading off the fo'c'sle and running along the waist.

We had joined the fleet. It was off Brest, they told us. Where Brest is, I have no idea, but that's where we were. Ordinary sailors know very little of what's going on. All they see are waves, and water, and clouds. Admiral Howe was our

commander, but I never saw him. They said – rumour said, that is – we had come to capture some corn ships arriving from America. But I never saw any corn ships, and for all I know, there never were any.

I felt a little safer, being with the fleet. A solitary ship might have been picked off by the French, but in the midst of the fleet, it was hardly likely. But the other likelihood, as the carpenter explained to me, was that we might be heading for a big naval battle and that is just what happened. But Providence had it all mapped out, though I didn't know it.

Mind you, when the day came, I have never been so frightened in all my life. It was gun-drill for real. There we were, standing behind our gun, and through the open port we could see the line of enemy ships ranged against us. Their gunners were doing exactly what we were doing – ramming the powder down their barrels – rolling in the shot. I'll tell you, I could have run away and hidden somewhere. But where? And Providence saw me having to stand there, my legs trembling.

Somehow we knew they would fire first. Some of our men shouted out: 'For what we are about to receive ...' There are jokers even when death faces them, so I've found. And the next moment came the thunder of their guns, and there was a whirr over my head and blocks and tackle fell down on the deck, and I was not sure what was going on. My mate holding the linstock put it to the touch hole. Our gun belched out and ran back until the tackle held it. I was dipping the sponge in the water-bucket when, without warning, there was a roar and a flash, and pieces of metal scattered about us like angry bees, and the man with the linstock was lying on the deck and there was blood everywhere. And the other men at our gun were staggering about. One had no head, and he still had the water-bucket in his hand. The officer who had been on the poop-deck behind us was holding his stomach. His white breeches were all red, and his stockings were all red, and his buckled shoes were slowly going redder and redder. I didn't know what could have happened. The scene had changed in a moment. We had been standing behind the gun, and now, we couldn't stand any more.

I couldn't stand any more either. I tried to stand, but I fell over. The deck was very slippery. But it wasn't the slippery deck. When I looked down. I saw I had no leg. I had one leg, yes. But the other had gone. I just couldn't believe it. And I just couldn't believe that the other men at the gun were unable to get up, and that one had no head. I was struck dumb. I just lay in the blood, and the battle went on around me, and I took hardly any notice of it.

I won't tell you what I went through in the ship's cockpit, and how the surgeon sawed off what was left of my leg, and how all these fellows were groaning and moaning and shrieking all around me. It was like Hell itself. But there was Providence at work in it. When we got back to England after we'd buried a lot of these poor lads at sea, sewn up in their hammocks with a shot along of them to send them down to the bottom and the fishes, I was fitted with a wooden leg and

could peg along the road with it and get about in that way. So I was able to join Ezra in his workshop again, and earn a frugal penny or two.

I also got a pension. That's where Providence took a hand, and I went home to join my old father. He was sure I had gone for ever. He had never heard a word from me since I had fallen prey to that press-gang outside the Admiral Shovell. He had more to think about than what might have happened to that little bastard he had fathered one night in his cups. His second, my mother that is, had passed away. His third had shown herself to be a tartar of the first order. And then she'd passed away too. But, as he told me afterwards, it was all Providence.

I'll say this of him. He was very pleased to see me, wooden leg and all, and even more pleased when he heard about my pension. He began to take a great interest in me. And it was him who told me what had happened when I was in that first-rater off Brest. It was on the First of June we had fought the battle. We went to the alehouse to read the newspaper – at least, Tom Spain read the paper because we couldn't read, either of us. It was an old newspaper by that time, because I had been in hospital and all sorts of things had happened. But Tom Spain read it out and I found that Admiral Howe had won a great victory. It was called the Glorious First of June, though how all those poor fellows who were sewn in their hammocks and consigned to the deep could ever, even in the next world, think of it as Glorious, I just don't know.

But my Father told everyone what a hero I was, and we had many a dram of liquor on the strength of my valour. And I had my wooden leg to prove I had been in the thick of the fight. And my Father began to look around for a wife to take care of me, and to take care of him too, now that his third had followed the others. And being quite a hand at finding ladies ready for wedlock, he found one before too long. Her name was Mog.

I wonder now whether she had ever been christened Mog, or even had she ever been christened at all. She was – and is, because she is still with me – about the ugliest woman I have ever set eyes on. I just couldn't believe my Father would bring such a creature to the house. But he had a persuasive way, and Mog had a persuasive way too. And Providence had an equally persuasive way, now that I had a pension and could earn a few shillings from Ezra. It was probably Providence which made me fall ill, whatever the doctor said about my having lost a lot of blood and suffered a lot of pain and I don't know what. But one way or another, the three of them made me agree to go to the church with Mog and get married.

And it has been wonderful ever since. Mog and my Father make the most of my pension – and good luck to them. Mog looks after the house. I smoke my pipe. The potboy brings me my ale from the Shovell every day, and if it's fine I can sit in the sun and enjoy life. I tell Mog she's my First, and when I think of the Battle, I tell her she's the Glorious First, and so she is.

THE EMPTY ROOM

by Doreen Fay

In automatic pilot she smoothed over the pillow slips and sheets, afterward placing them in a neat pile on the nearby coffee table. Then she made a start on the clothes. First up was one of her own blouses which received cursory attention, mostly to the collar and cuffs, before it was half folded and added to the pile on the coffee table. Tilly smiled as she picked up the next object. It was a football shirt, bright red with bold, black print declaring that it was a, Toptown Terrier's, shirt. Carefully she flattened it out on the board and ironed out its creases, turning it and treating its reverse side. Then each of the sleeves were tended. Finally she folded the shirt and added it to the pile.

‘Mum, have you ironed my jeans yet?’

‘No, but you can come downstairs and do them yourself if you like.’

‘I can't, I'm doing my homework.’

Tilly smiled at the predictable response.

‘Well, you'll have to wait then. I'll do them when I come to them.’

The football shorts to match the top were next up on the board and Tilly frowned at the slight sign of grass stain that still marked them.

‘I don't know what that boy gets up to,’ she thought, ‘but these stains are indelible. I could do with one of those soap makers knocking my door and offering to wash them, like you see in adverts.’

‘I'm hungry,’ the twelve year old owner of the football gear appeared in the doorway.

‘You've only just had your tea. Make yourself a sandwich.’

‘Oh mum!’ the football player wailed.

‘I can only do one job at a time, Peter. You want your football things ironed. Jenny wants her jeans so ...’

The footballer disappeared into the kitchen in a cloud of disapproval.

Tilly was still frowning at the grass stain which was growing in size in her mind, until it took on the proportions of Wembly football ground. She

shook her head to clear the image, finished the shorts and placed them with the shirt.

Peter appeared in the doorway again, this time with a clumsily made cheese sandwich in his hand. He approached the coffee table.

‘Will dad watch me play football on Saturday?’

‘Don’t touch until you’ve eaten that sandwich,’ said Tilly sharply as Peter’s greasy fingers stretched out to his clothes.

‘Oh, Mum ...’

‘And don’t talk with your mouth full.’

Peter disappeared into the kitchen.

‘I seem to be always moaning at that boy,’ she sighed.

Tilly picked up one of her husband’s shirts. She held it up, then tossed it to one side. ‘There’s more of those, I’ll do them altogether. Better do Jenny’s jeans next I suppose.’

Tilly picked up the jeans and laid them on the board.

‘Good heavens, what a length. I could wear these. How did I come to have a daughter who’s as tall as I am? Seems only five minutes since ...’

‘Can I take them now,’ said Peter.

Tilly looked at his freckled face and the bit of butter on the end of his nose and smiled.

‘Are your hands clean?’

‘Yes.’

‘All right then, but try not to slide about so much on the ground.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Well where does the grass come from then.’

‘Sometimes I get pushed over.’

‘I believe you, go on then, but be back in at seven mind.’

He was gone and she wasn’t sure he’d heard her last request.

‘Good bye,’ said Tilly to the empty room.

The jeans were dry and hard to iron but Tilly did not want to dampen them again so she struggled on flattening and smoothing. Jenny did not

like creases down the middle, she said it wasn't cool, so Tilly ironed them flat. She had no sooner finished, than Jenny was in the room and pulling them on.

'Gosh you must have radar, how did you know that I'd just finished?'

'Ooh they're lovely and warm,' Jenny giggled as she wriggled herself into them.

'Where did you spring from, I thought you were doing your homework.'

'I was but I've just rung Cindy because I've got a problem with my maths and she wants me to go round. Well dad's not here to help me is he, and you're no good at maths.' She had started rummaging among the clean clothes and did not see the hurt expression that flashed across Tilly's face.

'Is there a T-shirt here mum? There's lots of dad's shirts, why don't you tell *him* to do his own?' Jenny found a top. 'This'll do mum.'

'Why don't you iron it first?'

'No one'll notice.' She pulled on the top, shaking her hair clear. 'Cheers mum, thanks,' she kissed Tilly briefly on the cheek.

'Don't be late,' called Tilly, but Jenny was gone.

'Good bye,' said Tilly to the empty room.

Ironing was not Tilly's favourite occupation, it was just one of those jobs that had to be done.

Through her hands went more of Peter's shirts and Jenny's tops, then their night clothes and more of her own tops. Finally she came to her husband's shirts. Carefully she ironed each one, then folded it as if it was new. There were six shirts, two of them were slightly worn on the collar.

'Now if I was my grandmother I would be turning that,' she thought.

When all the ironing was finished, Tilly put away the board and stood the hot iron on the kitchen counter to cool. Next, she got some brown paper from a cupboard and made a neat parcel of the six shirts. Then she took a sheet of writing paper and wrote,

'I think that's the last, don't think there's anything else.' She wanted to say, 'Please come back, I love you, and Peter and Jenny need you,' but she didn't, she just tucked the note into the parcel, sealed the parcel with

cellotape and addressed it to her husband at the home of the woman he was now living with.

‘Good bye,’ said Tilly to the empty room.

DOUBLE CON

by R. R. Yearley

I was working at G.P.O. Headquarters and my wife and I had a small house in Little Britain just round the corner, as you might say. We were near neighbours to John Betjeman, the poet. I am a born and bred Townee but my wife is a country girl. She has learned to appreciate a lot of the good things about the big city but she doesn’t ‘reckon much to Londoners’. I liked Faringdon more than any other part I’d lived in: it was quiet with only a few shops and restaurants and, of course, it was close to the City and the bus routes and underground stations.

My wife is a very good-natured woman but it was amazing how sarcastic she could be about ‘city slickers’. One Saturday morning the milkman didn’t deliver and my wife asked me to go to the dairy in Charterhouse Street to collect a pint. On the way back as I was passing the chemist’s, I saw a young woman leaning against the window and looking very distressed indeed. When I got home I told my wife of my ‘adventure’.

I’d asked the young woman if she was all right – silly question, she obviously was far from all right. She said, “Oh, dear”, a number of times before she was able to tell me what the trouble was. She had been cycling along when she saw an elderly lady sitting on the pavement. She had had some sort of ‘nasty turn’ and asked if the young lady would go into the chemist’s and bring her a chair and a glass of water to give her a chance to get her breath back. This the young lady did but when she came out the elderly lady had gone and so had the young lady’s bicycle. I said how sorry I was and suggested she should report the loss to the police but the young lady said that I didn’t understand: she had been working at the International Telephone Exchange on night-duty and her parents would be expecting her home in Dalston. And her hand-bag and purse were in the saddle-bag of the bicycle and she had no money, “Oh dear”.

At this point my wife interrupted my narrative to ask: “This young woman was attractive? Well-spoken? Well-dressed? And she shed a tear? And you gave her some money?” Too late I heard the sardonic tone in her voice.

“Well, yes,” I faltered, “it seemed the only decent thing to do.”

“Well, fancy you, a cocky streetwise Londoner, falling for a con like that.”

“Oh, I’m sure she was genuine, she was so upset.”

“And did you think that young ladies don’t carry large hand-bags nowadays?”

“Did you see a chair outside the chemist’s?”

“No, but I expect she’d taken it back.”

“Oh, yes, and where’s the milk?”

“Oh, Lord, I must have left it outside the chemist’s.”

“Then you’d better go and pick it up if she hasn’t taken it. And go to the Police Station while you’re out and check on your poor suffering victim.”

At the chemist’s I found no trace of the milk (“Well, what did you expect?”). I went on to the Police Station in Aldersgate Street and told the Sergeant at the desk about the ‘incident’.

“A young woman? you say, attractive, well-spoken, well-dressed? Had to get home to Hackney or Leyton?”

“It was Dalston,” I said.

“And her bike had been stolen?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” he said.

“You mean it wasn’t true?” I said.

“Bless your ’eart, she’s lost more bikes than you’ve ’ad ’ot dinners. I’m pretty sure that was Phyllis. Well-known to us.”

“But why should she go to all that trouble for a pound or two?”

“It’s not the money, it’s the challenge of the creative urge. Making up a plot and solving the problems as you think on your feet. I’ve known her several years now and I’ve often talked to her. She’s a university drop-out and lives on social security and what she can con. I’ve often suggested she should write some short stories, she obviously has the talent, but she says she couldn’t sit at a desk alone, puzzling things out. She has to have action and be centre stage.”

“That sounds incredible.”

“Well yes, it does, but given her psychological make-up you can visualise the scene. She sees a nice kind-faced gentleman coming along and by the time you reach her she’s leaning against the chemist’s window, working out her plot, and the dialogue and any rebuttals which might be necessary. People who have been taken in have told me how quick she can be.”

“And there’s nothing to be done?”

“Not really. If you give me your telephone number I’ll let you know if we bring her in. But there is one thing; I do a lot of work with NACRO (National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders). Our local branch is very active and if you were interested you might find it worth while helping these people to sort themselves out.”

When I told my wife the Sergeant’s story she said, “Well, it’s nice to hear there are some kindly Londoners.”

THE TIDE IS NOT FOR TURNING

by Les Fletcher

Every October I go to ‘Sebreze’ to dabble at painting for several weeks, as well as enjoy a stay by the sea. My wife had come from this part of Wales and I had come to love it. She died of cancer three years ago and now, left on my own at 42, I could paint or walk – and remember.

‘Sebreze’ is a modern dwelling just back from the cliff edge on the Pembrokeshire coast, and I usually paint inside as it can be tricky handling an easel in a stiff breeze. This is not as bad as it sounds because there is a large studio room upstairs which has a series of windows which extend over three walls giving superb views.

I was doing some preliminary sketching when I felt a presence behind me. I turned and studied the little boy standing there, his face a little red, apparently from exertion. “Hello, Billy,” I said. Billy is blond and chubby and about two and a half, and way behind with his speaking. I knew him and his seven year old brother well, as they lived about half a mile up the coast and I let them wander in and out more or less as they pleased.

I thought I knew what he wanted. “Yes, you can have an apple.”

I turned back to the canvas as he went towards the table. My pencil remained poised waiting for the crunch of teeth sinking into apple flesh. It didn’t happen. I turned slowly. He had taken an apple but it was clutched to his chest and the other hand was pointing.

“What’s up, Billy?”

“Maffoo,” he said.

My heart gave a sickening lurch of fear, for the hand was jabbing now and he was doing a little dance.

“Matthew! What’s happened to Matthew? Has he fallen over the cliff?” I didn’t wait for a response but grabbed him under my arm and ran outside. I set him down and knelt before him, “Which way, Billy? Which way?”

His arm pointed more to the sky than anywhere but it was strongly biased towards the south. “How far, Billy?” It was a stupid question but I was sick with urgency. I’d come to love those kids. Stooping to his level I swung him up and over my shoulder and ran, twisting with the path as it skirted boulders and bushes. After a couple of hundred yards I put him down and tried again. He was pointing down this time, right down to the beach. Desperately I strained my eyes, searching the mass of rock outcrops and boulders below, then I heard a faint wail on the wind. From this height I could see the whole beach so I wanted to find him before I went much lower.

“Maffoo!” exclaimed Billy, pointing out to sea now.

Impatiently I followed the general direction of his arm and immediately saw the small figure of Matthew close to a large boulder we called ‘Dyn Mawr’ (Big Fellow). It gave me a sense of relief because he couldn’t have fallen off the cliff and ended up so far out, furthermore he was waving. I carried Billy to the end of the cliff path where it merged with the beach.

“Now Billy, I’m going to get Matthew and you must sit here and not move. You understand?”

“Maffoo tuck,” he said, his large blue eyes gazing at me.

The sense of urgency had gone now and after wagging my finger at him again to stay put I jumped on to the beach and hurried across to the boulder. “Now, young man, what sort of trouble ...” I stared at the tear-stained face. He must have been there some time.

“I slipped and my leg’s stuck,” he murmured, the relief at seeing me filling his face. And then as if as an afterthought, “and the tide’s coming in.”

I’d forgotten the tide. It was three or four metres away and I knew “Dyn Mawr” was covered at high tide. A large wooden beam had been washed up during a heavy sea and lay partly covered by boulders. Matthew had often run along it but this time had slipped and his leg gone down a narrow gap. The leg was raw where he had tried to get it out.

“OK,” I said reassuringly, “What goes in must come out,” and at first I thought it was that simple, but he was wearing sandals and the sole must have got stuck beneath a projection inside, because although I lifted him up and turned him all ways it wouldn’t come free. And there was no way I could get my hand in while his leg was there. I tried to move the beam by heaving on the end that gave most leverage, but got no movement at all. I’m no Goliath and after several minutes I stood back to think, sweating and gasping. Inexorably the water lapped towards us.

There wasn't any sign of drift wood that I could use as a lever and my eyes swept the cliffs desperately for a walker, anyone. I shouted. Billy sat staring at us, obedient to my command. What on earth could I do? I tore at the boulders, then the beam, grunting and straining, but it was hopeless.

I stared at Matthew and he stared back. The tears began to well up again. "I'll drown, won't I?" Matthew knew the tides far better than I did. I was shocked by the bluntness of it, and for a moment I could see it happening, but one thing I was sure of, if this boy drowned I would drown with him. "No, we'll get you out somehow."

But how? 'Sebreze' had no telephone and nor did Matthew's parents. The climb up to their house a mile along the cliff would kill me, or take far too long. And what then? We were talking minutes, not hours. I tried to think what I had at 'Sebreze' that was strong enough for a crowbar. Nothing came to mind. I looked up at the sky and said a prayer, as I wiped my forehead.

When I looked at Matthew again he had twisted as far as he could and was looking up the hill. "Ginty's there," he said. Suddenly I was running, running as I'd never run before, along the beach, splashing heedlessly through the shallows.

Along the shoreline away from my bungalow I sped, up on to the grass, under a fence and up the slope of the field that led to Pitcross farm. I was gasping and my heart thumping loudly when I topped the slope and stared across at the farm buildings. They were another mile away and there was no sign of anyone, but there was Ginty, her head down, steadily grazing. What a joyful sight she made! She was about thirteen hands, and sturdily built. The farmer hired her out to the local pony trekking people when they were busy. In October there wasn't much of that and I'd often helped to give her some exercise, so Ginty knew me quite well.

There was a small hut at the corner of the field where they kept essential tackle, so after giving myself a few seconds to get my breath, I jogged across to it. There were three bridles hanging up and I picked one, then hunted for some rope and anything else I might need. I had to discipline myself to stand there and ponder. It would be no use getting back with the horse and not have the equipment to use her. There were two lengths of rope which were neatly coiled and I bandoliered them. A few carrots were always kept to help catch Ginty and thankfully I found one on the floor.

Ginty had no idea of the urgency and wandered away as I approached her, but she came for the carrot at once. She took a bite and crunched it while I grabbed her mane and slipped the bridle on. Gently I led her through the gate and using a rung of the fence clambered, clumsily on her back. There was a

moment's hesitation while I debated riding to the farm. But what if I could find no one? From experience I knew that was easily possible, and I would have wasted precious minutes.

The decision made, my heels tattooed on her flanks and we were away at full gallop. Bareback riding is an unknown art to me but somehow I stayed on.

In a couple of minutes we were on the shore and galloping through the shallows with water cascading to either side up to where the sand met the pebbles. We trotted from there with me running alongside. The sea was swirling along the beam by now. Matthew didn't speak, he just watched me as I looped one of the ropes under and up across the horse's chest and gave the end to him to hold. Then I lashed the other rope to the beam a metre on either side of him. The waves knocked me to and fro perversely. Finally I tied Ginty's rope to the centre of the other.

"The water will have lightened the load, Matthew. Ready to go?" He nodded, his lip puckering.

Slowly I led the horse away until all the slack was taken up. "Pull, Ginty," I shouted at her with my left hand holding the reins forward and my right up near the bit. "Giddup, Ginty!" She strained forward but nothing happened. I knew the rope would cut into her. I looked back and saw a large wave envelope the boy, then the water levelled and his head was free again.

In fear and exasperation I yelled at Ginty again. "Pull, damn you, girl, pull!" and with that I smacked her so hard it stung my hand badly. Her front rose up out of the water and she came down with an enormous splash. I looked back but could see nothing but spray. Now Ginty had taken fright and with the water up to her withers was trying to get rid of the rope. Lunging and snorting she forced me away from her so that I lost my balance and went under. I came up coughing and spluttering because I'd taken more than one mouthful. Ginty was still tossing and lunging, but my only thought was for the boy.

I turned, and there was Matthew dog-paddling towards me, his face washed clean and with an impish grin of pure delight. As he reached me I clasped him in a bearhug that was saturated with emotion.

Near the shore there were two men wading towards us. "Dyn Mawr" was three-quarters covered now. I looked across at the cliff path and there was Billy in his mother's arms, and she was waving. The farmer reached me, "OK, Jim, I'll take over now," and he waded towards Ginty who turned as he called her. As the water blissfully floated my exhausted body I murmured a thank you prayer.

To this day, if I close my eyes and think back that is the scene I remember in all its detail. I put it on canvas over the next few days, and you can see the picture in one of the art galleries. Now I have told you the history you will recognise it instantly, and understand the full meaning of the title – “JUST IN TIME”.

THE TWILIGHT HOUR

by Gordon E. Gompers

The bar was filling up at the Roxydoo Hotel. The bulk of the folk were wedding guests. Mr. Curitas was not one but was happy to accept the groom’s offer of a drink. As he was a strict teetotaller it was an iced coke.

As old as he was Mr. Curitas was still male and he had seated himself, as a matter of course, next to the prettiest girl in the room: Molly Graham nee Connor. He was cultured and a man of impeccable taste especially with regard to women. Furthermore, he was a man of some celebrity.

“Mr. Curitas,” said Molly dimpling, “you flatter me with your company.”

He was about to say something complimentary when Molly’s attention was drawn to the behaviour of her husband.

“Coo, look at Rodney!” she cried.

Rodney Graham, Molly’s husband, had grasped the bride and was showering her face with kisses. She, on her part, reciprocated enthusiastically. As for the groom, he was likewise occupied with a completely strange lady.

“Excellent!” cried Mr. Curitas.

“Excellent?” gulped Molly.

“Yes, if they can misbehave so can we.”

He plonked a kiss boldly on her cheek. She was radiant.

“I guess you wanted to do that ever since you arrived,” she purred.

“On the contrary,” said Mr. Curitas, stiffly, “I’ve only just thought of it.”

To Molly that was like a douche of ice cold water. She was not all that happy to see that Rodney had finished with the bride. He sat next to her on a vacant stool on her other side. His kisses were all very well but too much of a sameness.

“Have you seen to the bride’s maids?” Molly whispered.

“The bride’s maids?”

“Yes, you do not want to disappoint them, darling.”

“But where are they?”

“Find them! You do not expect me to do *that* for you?”

Rodney stumbled off his stool and went in search of the bride’s maids. Molly hitched her skirt well above her knees.

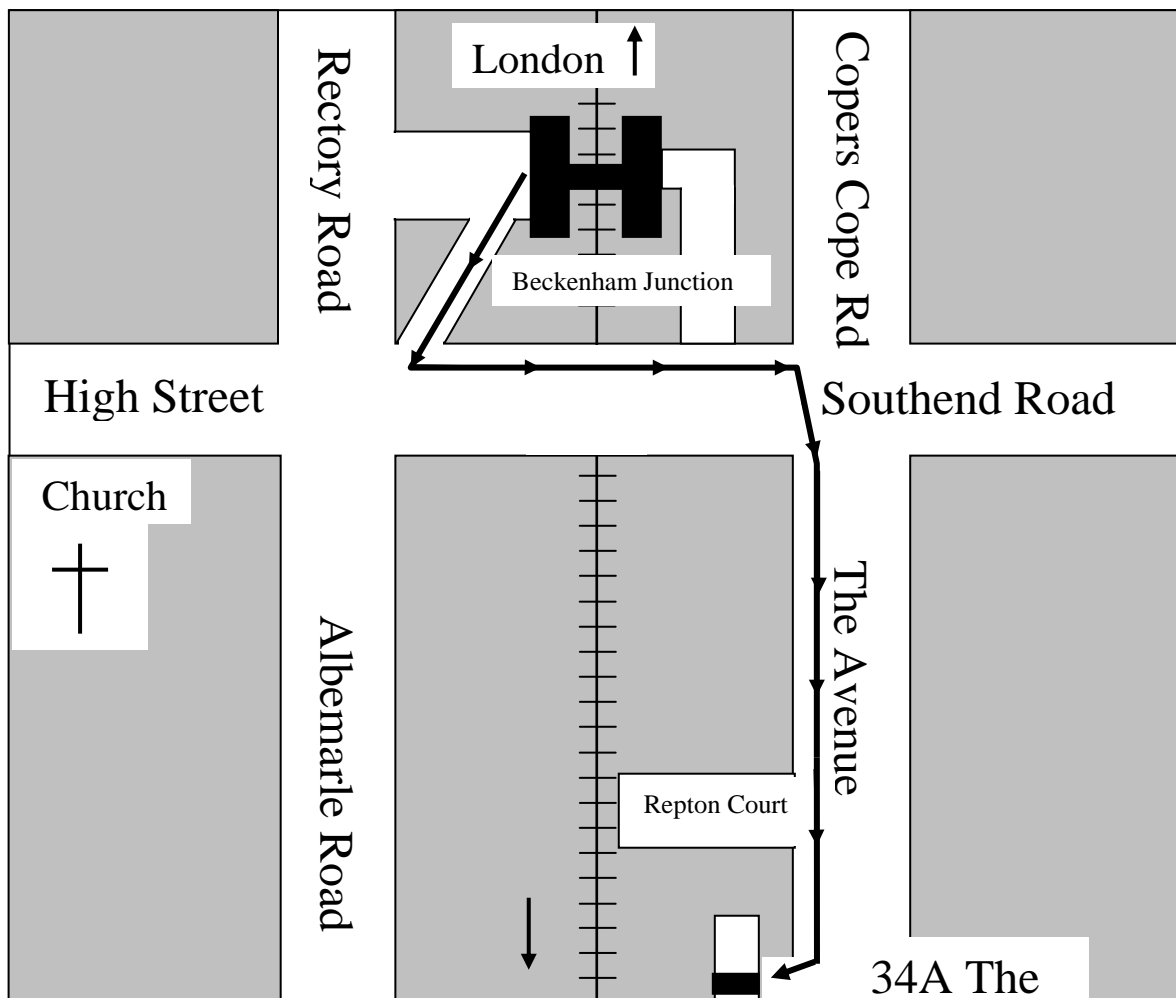
“Mr. Curitas, now you have both thought of it and sampled, where do we go from here?”

‘Awayday’ at Beckenham

On Saturday 15th September 2001, Alan and Marjorie Watts will be hosting another ‘Awayday’ at their home: 34A The Avenue, Beckenham, Kent. All members welcome. Don’t miss this excellent writers’ workshop.

You may wish to bring along for criticism, a short story, article or poem, not exceeding ten minutes reading time.

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| 10.00 am | Assemble - Coffee - Workshop |
| 12.00 noon | Lunch - bring own sandwiches - soup/tea/orangeade available |
| 1.00 pm | Workshop continued |
| | Mid afternoon break for tea |
| 4.00 pm | Finish |



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Main: Veal Escalope Stuffed Breast of Lamb Roast Sirloin of Beef

Vegetarian: Stuffed Pepper

Desert: Spicy Apple Pie Fruit meringue Cheesecake

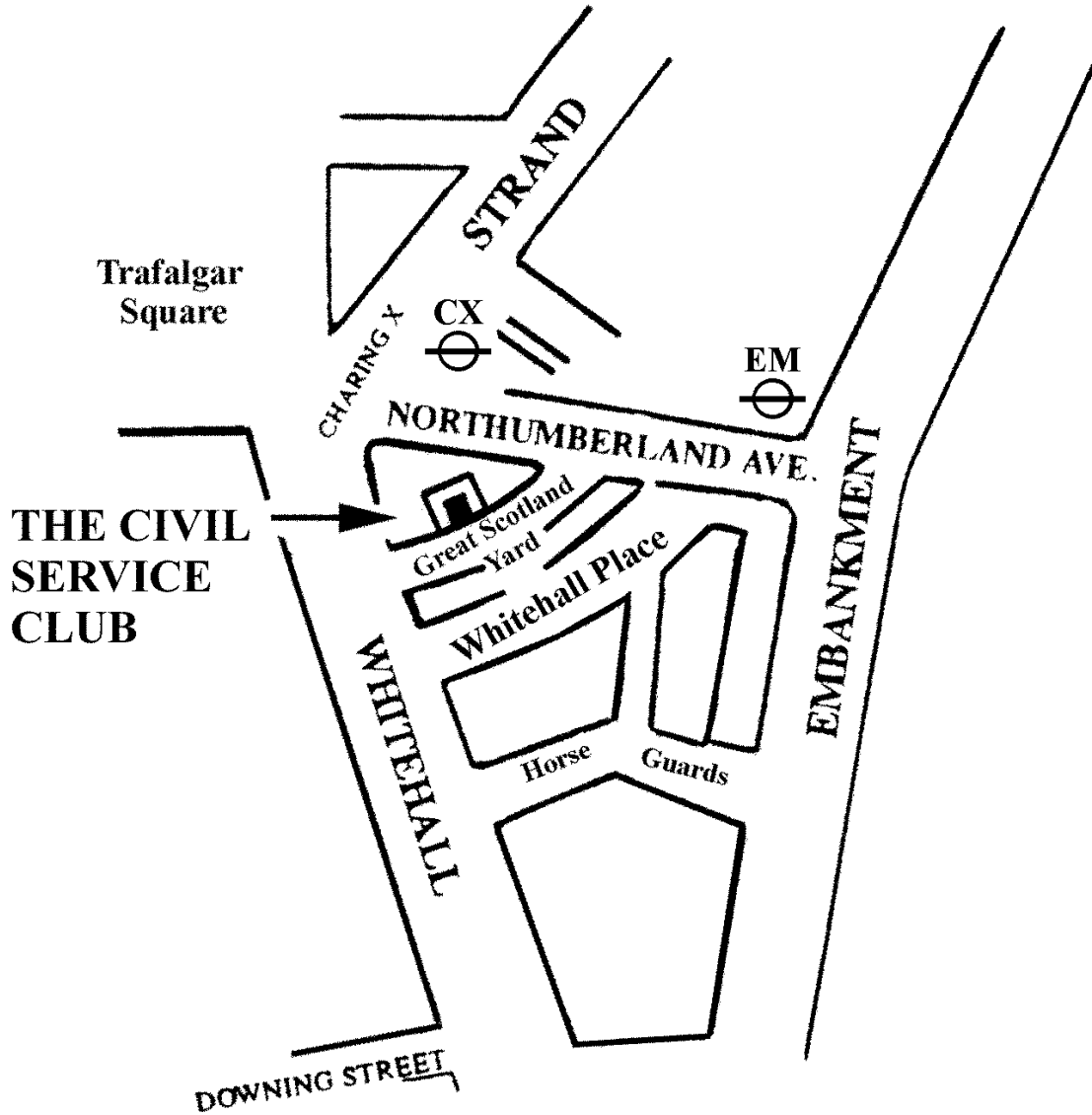
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