

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Vacant

Diary

New Year Party

26th January 2002

SCPSW Competitions deadline

28th February 2002

Poetry Workshop Weekend

12-14 July 2002

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.

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The SCPSW Author

Number 156

Winter 2001

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EDITORIAL - Please read Part 1 of this editorial as it affects you all. Part 2 is less critical:

Adrian Danson

PART ONE

On behalf of your committee may I express our good wishes for a happy Christmas and may 2002 bring you health, happiness and success in your SCPSW competition entries.

We continue to run our Society under financial stress due to reduced membership. Being aware of this and despite being a working nurse who spares us her valuable time as Meeting Secretary, Ethel Corduff has now also contributed £100 to our funds. Raising subscriptions to redress this situation has been considered. However, we are conscious that some members have their own financial difficulties. The logical conclusion is to invite members who could afford to pay a larger fee to do so on a voluntary basis. This brings me to the most critical point. Annual membership renewal is due on 1st January. The renewal form at the centre of this issue has been amended to accommodate the standard fee, or additional sums from those prepared to contribute more. To make completion of cheques easier we have registered our new name with the bank as SCPSW. Although payments made under both our old and new full title continue to be credited to the account in our new name, for those who pay by standing order, it would be advisable to ask your bank to amend the name of the payee from Society of Civil Service Authors to SCPSW. Your committee continues to do all it can to minimise costs and we hope membership will soon recover and thereby remove such problems.

PART TWO

I must begin with an apology to Roy Froud. The computer spelling check facility has the name Stroud in its memory, but not Froud, so it changed his name and I didn't notice. I have given the machine a good talking to and it now has Froud well imbedded in its memory. I also overlooked its attempt to change the spelling of Caeser to Caesar in our competition, but no one's perfect

The letters column includes one that praises a recent issue of Author. Clearly it can only be as good as the material provided to me and I hope many more will offer their work for publishing, including our poets via Joyce Thornton. I must also give credit to Alan Gibb who organises the layout, putting as much as he can of what I give him into each edition. I think you will all agree that he has done a splendid job. He and those providing the contents have ensured an excellent product to merit the praise expressed.

The Froud Memorial Competition, beginning with the words, “I remember the day that...” is a factual or fictional competition open to all. Thanks to the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship we had a number of entries from those who are not members of SCPSW, some expressing an interest in joining. I know many members persuaded local libraries to display our leaflets. This resulted in only a dozen or so competition entries, including those from potential members, i.e. Civil Servants or members of the Armed Forces, which was our principal objective. I am sure all of us spread the word, telling everyone what a wonderful lot we are. It mostly continues to fall on deaf ears, but we must keep trying. If you forgot to send me your own entry for the Froud competition, I will accept late entries until 10th December 2001. What a mad panic we had trying to get that leaflet out with the summer Author; how silly to overlook a closing date, but many a slip, as the great man said.

Elsewhere you will find details of our 2002 competitions. I hope Ron Jeffreys will be deluged with your competition entries.

We welcome our new Vice Chairman Terry Rickson. Many members know Terry as he regularly attends London meetings. He continues to be Treasurer of Poetry Workshop and co-ordinator of the short story folios. We also welcome our new Treasurer, Louise Lloyd, who has given us a few details of herself on another page. I am relieved to be able to give up one of my duties, though I will lose an excuse for any shortcomings of Author, but I am also delighted to find a lady prepared to take on this office. I am sure you will all make her life easy by sending in your cheques and membership renewal forms, indicating the amount you are subscribing and your name and address to confirm the accuracy of our records. Many members do not even give their name, which makes the life of the

Treasurer more complicated than necessary and has led to Author being wrongly addressed.

Although London continues to be the only practical place we can get together for our meetings, I hope to meet as many of you as possible at our annual events and welcome comments on how you think we might improve Author and meet your needs. We do have members attending from well over 100 miles away, which suggests meeting fellow members is worth the journey, but it is also pleasing to hear the sentiments expressed in Terry James' letter. We can know each other through our writing and perhaps our letters column enhances this. Letters on any matter that may be of interest to fellow writers will always be welcome.

Those who know him will not be surprised that Vice President and erstwhile long serving editor, Iain McIntyre, could not be constrained by a mere heart attack and has been doing his bit on the publicity front. Don't tell anyone though, I know it would only embarrass him. However, any serving member who is willing to take on this work would still be welcome.

GUIDANCE FOR MEMBERS:

In the absence of specific questions, I will continue to comment on matters that were of concern to me when I first offered my work to readers who were not close friends. Criticism was my last subject and assumed you have reached the point of inviting such through competitions etc.

"What makes a successful writer?" Perhaps a better way of putting it is, "How does one become successful?" However, when we first feel that compulsion to put pen to paper, such matters are not usually our concern. Having joined the Society, it can be assumed that we have progressed beyond that first epistle that we thought was so wonderful, until some cruel person told us its true value. We have probably progressed, at least to the point where we have a degree of competence and are seeking guidance on how to improve. There appear to be a variety of options, some may prove more suitable than others, but none is a panacea.

Adult education classes may prove useful, though the first class can be a little daunting. After all, we know everyone else attending is already competent, certainly have skills and experience greater than ours. Then we

find several of them know each other and the teacher. Just as we thought, they have attended the class before – our worst fears are confirmed. So do we walk out? Well we've already paid our fee and we might as well stay for one lesson. Then we spot another person looking lost and realise we are not the only newcomer. Before we know it we are the old hands, offering our superior smile to other newcomers. (Joan Hykin has submitted an excellent account of her evening class experiences, which I have saved for the next issue.)

Then there are writer's circles, where members read their work aloud and everyone is invited to comment. Trying to compile a useful comment (criticism) can prove more difficult than writing, but it can also be a learning process. Identifying weaknesses in other's work often leads one to recognise the same fault in one's own. It also teaches one to accept criticism more easily.

I have no knowledge of creative writing correspondence courses, but my experience of such in maths and science, when serving in foreign lands, suggested to me that they treat everyone the same, comments were stereotype and often unrelated to my work. If any member has experience in this area, please let me have your comments.

Then there is SCPSW. We offer some feedback, when our judges have time to do so, publish your work whether as prize winning entry or simply because you offer it, hold occasional readings (inevitably in London) and provide our quarterly Author. We also have folios, where articles, short stories, etc., are passed amongst members and their comments are offered. Those who subscribe to such consider it a most valuable facility and one that I heartily recommend. Can we do more? Are the above comments of any value to you? Please write and tell me?

MARKET INFORMATION by Gordon Gompers

Providing details of what to write and where to send one's work for publication and hopefully be rewarded with dosh, (to quote Gordon) is obviously finite. Although Gordon has been as reliable as ever by writing to me under this heading, his interesting observations include nothing that fits the title. As we have so much to include in this issue, I hope he will



forgive my not publishing his words on this occasion.

A few words from Louise Lloyd, our new Treasurer.

I'm 29, married with 3 children under the age of 4, and live in Nottingham.

I work part-time for the Inland Revenue as a specialist in Pensions. I have worked for the Inland Revenue for nearly 10 years, and have had a variety of jobs including being an auditor, and a customer service manager.

I have been a Treasurer before, for a netball club, and hopefully that in conjunction with my experience of accounts from my job will stand me in good stead for this position. I hope I will be able to run the accounts as efficiently as Adrian has done over the last few years.

Reader's Successes

Our congratulations to Pamela Shields on the publication of her fascinating book, "Essential Islington. "What makes Islington so special," says the synopsis. Well the sub-title, "From Boadicea to Blair" gives a clue. For anyone interested in buying a copy, let me know and I will provide details - Ed"

Paul Williams, one of our London members, has just been published by Janus Books. His book, "As Handsome Does", priced at £10.95, is described as a warm, humorous and moving story of three young people following their chance meeting and also offers a reflection of London life today. We wish him every success.

William Wood was also close to being published when last we exchanged e-mails. In the Spring issue I hope to report that he also is in print. Ed.



Joan Carroll attended a writer's course and has recommended it to other members, namely Writers Holiday run by D. L. Anne Hobbs, School Bungalow, Church Rd., Pontnewydd, Cwmbran, South Wales, NP44 1AT;

tel: 01633-489438; e-mail: writersholiday@lineone.net; website: writersholiday.net.

All contributions for the Spring issue must be received by the Editor not later than 21st January 2002

Letters to the Editor

I want to thank Alan and Marjorie Watts for their wonderful hospitality on the “Awayday” on the 15th September. We all had a most stimulating and interesting day. As well as discussing our own work we delved into so many interesting aspects of writing and literature. I would not miss it for anything! Looking forward to next year.

Ethel Corduff

Dear Editor,

I should like to thank our new editor Adrian Danson for the work he put into editing the Summer issue of the ‘Author’ (No 154). This was a splendid issue, and full of good things. I especially enjoyed Alan S Watts’ story ‘Harvesting’ — a marvellous yarn that contained absolutely authentic dialogue straight out of a ‘Western’ film — thank you Alan. The ‘Author’ also contained some great poetry from the pen of Bill Torrie Douglas. All in all, a brilliant issue; and one that augurs well for the future. I feel that our Society is now back on an even keel. The ‘Poetry Workshop’ section is flourishing, reflected in the prestigious ‘Waves 2001’ anthology of members’ work.

Despite some key members of the Society having sadly passed on, we have still many talented members. And one of our major strengths is the friendliness of the Society. Even living in darkest County Down, many miles from where ‘it’s all happening’, I feel I ‘know’ many of the members; even though I’ve never met them.

So, let us all look to the future with optimism. Proud that we are members of an old-established Society with a distinguished past.

Terry James

Sir,

I am greatly concerned to ensure the survival of good English grammar. It grieves me to read phrases such as ‘people to who much is given’, ‘if it

was known' and similar violations. Is English grammar still taught? Certainly it was better understood when most secondary-school scholars took basic Latin. What can be done to rectify the present erosion? Have any of your readers any suggestions?

Alan S Watts, Grammarian

SCPSW ANNUAL COMPETITIONS FOR 2001/2.

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition.

Maximum length 3,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £3.50 per story. Total prize money for best seven entries, £150.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition.

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the George Farley Prize) . Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £2.00 for first & £1.50 for each subsequent poem. 1st prize £50, 2nd prize £30 & 3rd prize £15.

Vincent Brennan Travel Article.

Maximum length 2,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £2.50 per entry 1st prize £30, 2nd prize £20 & 3rd prize £10.

George Farley Prize.

For light humorous verse only. Judges and sponsors, Pamela Farley, Aline Shee and Jean Squires (daughters of George Farley). Judges look for the qualities their father valued in humorous verse – “wit, clever construction and interesting language”. Entries returned if accompanied by s.a.e.

NOTES FOR ENTRANTS TO ALL COMPETITIONS.

1 Unless entrants state on entering competitions that do not wish their entry to be published, all winning entries will be published in Author if space permits. The entrants name will also be quoted, unless entrants advise on entry that they prefer to use a pen name.

2 Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of submission. Entries exceeding specified number of lines or words will be disqualified

3 All entries should bear only the pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting, pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. (Optional for serving members, Department and staff association for potential publicity use.)

4 All entries should be sent to Competition Secretary, Ron Jeffreys, 186 Lewis Flats, Lisgar Terrace, London W14 8SQ not later than 28th February 2002.

R C Jeffreys
Competition Secretary

POETRY PAGES

edited by Joyce Thornton

11th SEPTEMBER 2001

by Alan Watts

What can you do when mind is wrenched asunder?
And thought is scattered like a blossom blown?
When bird-song becomes metallic grating,
Familiar accents turn to anguished groans?
How can you think without a brain to think with
Nor words to say what you would wish to say?
Crude, raw emotions rise and rend reflection,
Triumphant hate drives stricken love away.

SPECIAL AIR SERVICE MEMORIAL
AT VALENCAÿ, LOIR et CHER
by Albert Thornton

Moon silence, a windless rustling,
leaves parting the paired stones,
the broken wreaths of poppies.
A Christmas gift moon
a moonlit high noon moon
ready to pirouette.
A sad tree, still, standing alone
looking for its roots,
stones daring it to move.
Below, the names carved crisp
wait for the soft water smell

of a thousand tears, each having its own.

Today, a blank sky with saw-edged trees
pin sharp in their dark green dresses
sees flickering ghosts and bottom centre
despair, when lack of moon shadow
kills innocence in a bomber's moon

CONSIDER

by Pat Brindle

If he were to come again, this Christmas —

He would find a new star —
not of His Father's proclamation —
hanging low in the evening sky,
ready to relay the news.

Instantaneously

The Sun would beam a message out
reflected by the Morning Star,
Mirrored along every highway
Telegraphed from Canary Wharf.

Le Monde would know.

Express delivery
would speed the paparazzi
and the hounding
would begin again.

It would be the gossip of The People.

Mail would be filled
with the News of the World,
if He should come —
and if He were believed.

BEYOND THE STARS

by Joyce Thornton

Man dreams to conquer the stars
to make them his, to harness them
for his own purpose. Their fire
burns into his soul, their brilliance

lights his path, and yet

The stars remain aloof and eclipse
what lies beyond their spheres,
beyond the vast firmament,
beyond man's reach, beyond all time
where there is nothing beyond.

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

Summer Newsletter

The Summer Newsletter, in its new A5, twelve-page format, is now available and has been posted to all PW members. It contains a report of the Poetry Workshop Weekend at Birmingham in July, details of the AGM, an article by Bill Douglas explaining his editorial policy for Waves, general Poetry Workshop news and some poetry.

AGM

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop took place during the Birmingham Weekend. Full details are given in the Summer Newsletter. Subscriptions for 2002 will remain unchanged at £3 for Society members.

PW 2002

Next year's Weekend will take place on 12-14 July 2002. We are booked into our usual venue of Chamberlain Hall at the University of Birmingham. The University conference manager has told us that the price will be unchanged from this year. Full details plus a booking form will be included in the Winter Newsletter.

Bill Barnes Competition

Given the short time between the closing date of the competition and the deadline for this article, no results are yet available. However, the entries have been collated and sent to Bill Douglas, editor of Waves, who has

agreed to judge the competition this year. If the results are ready in time, the winners will be announced in the Winter Newsletter, deadline 30 November. In any case, the results, plus all entries, will be printed in the new, fourth Newsletter, which will be a competition special issue. This may or may not appear before Christmas, but in any case will be sent to all 2001 members of the Poetry Workshop.

Subscription

Subscription fees for 2001 are £3 for Society members. This gives you:

- three lively Newsletters each year, plus a fourth, competition special issue
- 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

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.

Poetry Workshop Dates

Summer Newsletter	out now
Competition Special Newsletter	date to be confirmed
Winter Newsletter	30 November 2001
Closing Date for Waves submissions	31 March 2002
Spring Newsletter	30 April 2002



THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL AND PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS
ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2000/2001

THE PATRICIA CHOWN SONNET COMPETITION

THE RESULTS

The number of entries received for this competition was 11. The judge was Barbara Dickinson (Poetry Workshop) and her report was as follows:-

‘Before reading the poems, I had to decide on the criteria I would use to select the winner. As I hadn’t had the opportunity to set my standards before the competition was announced, I decided to adhere to completely conventional rules, e.g. a poem of 14 lines, with the line metre in iambic pentameter and the rhyme scheme of either the Shakespearian form. In the event, all the entries were in the Shakespearian style.

I then read all the poems aloud several times. They were all good, but some had minor imperfections in metre and one had a poor rhyme. Eventually I short-listed three: *IS IT TRUE* (E. Marjorie Bradley, Bristol, Retd. DHSS) *DREAM LIFE* (C. P. O. Elvidge, Co. Durham. Retd. DEESA) and the *THE WILL OF THE GODS* (Same as previous sonnet). My final choice for the Patricia Chown sonnet prize was *THE WILL OF THE GODS*. However, there was one sonnet which really captured my heart, although judging by strict standards I couldn’t give it a win. But I love the sonnet variants, and *ALLEGRO AND FINALE* (Albert Thornton, West Yorkshire) which has a pleasing variation in the line metre, reads aloud well. I am going to give it a special mention. A lovely poem.

Many thanks to all entrants. It has been a great pleasure to read your poems.’

Barbara Dickenson

THE HERBERT SPENCER POETRY COMPETITION

THE RESULTS

The number of entries for this competition was 27. The judge was Keith Scott of the Poetry Workshop and his report follows.

FIRST PRIZE £50:- TREASURE HUNTERS

Nicola Warwick, Ipswich, Suffolk. Dept: Benefits Agency, Emp.

SECOND PRIZE £30:- TOLPUDDLE REVISITED

Doreen Fay, Portsmouth. Dept: DRA Retd.

THIRD PRIZE £10:- NOW WE ARE OLD

E. Marjorie Bradley, Bristol. Dept: DHSS Retd.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:-

WITH ROSES IN MIND James Lancaster
CUPID ECLIPSED James Lancaster
MAN OF THE MOMENT Nicola Warwick
ON WRITING BY HAND William Wood

R. C. Jeffreys

Competition Secretary.

Herbert Spencer poetry competition — judge's report.

Judging poetry in the final analysis is a matter of relying on gut instinct and this is probably what makes the final result so problematical. As an entrant to the competition in previous years whose work never got higher than a commendation I understand the hurt pride that goes with failure to achieve success. What may be scant comfort to some is that none of the poems entered were inherently uninteresting or poorly written. The grasp of poetic form, structure and language use was competent so in the end I was forced to look at other factors such as the ability of the poem to strike a fresh pose, say something sharp and interesting about the human condition and generally use language, imagery and rhythm in an interesting, slightly less conventional way than the average.

Some poems like '*Maiden Aunt*', '*Lust*' and '*Grandad*' looked at interesting human subjects competently but I felt lacked an emotional engagement, did not really get beyond stereotype. Others relied heavily on the English pastoral tradition and managed an ornateness which reminded me of the work of Thomas Hardy, Walter DeLa Mare and A E Houseman. '*Willow Pattern*' for example carries in its opening lines echoes of the description of Ophelia's death in '*Hamlet*' and the whole poem is written with a good ear for the music of verse and the sensuousness of imagery. Where it was less successful for me was in its lack of ability to generate sharp or specific insights into its subject matter.

Other poems were somewhat over-rich in imagery to the point almost of confusion. '*Special Air Service*', '*Semiotic Dog*' and '*Accident*' had an original feel but I was left with a feeling of confusion at the end of it all — images bombarded me — the character's dog in '*Semiotic Dog*' for example is compared simultaneously to both a 'mobile signal box' and an

‘express Pullman of a dog’. In this poem and others I was punch-drunk with imagery.

Now for the commended and the winners. I won’t say much about them as the awards should be enough in themselves to indicate my approval. All four commended poems impressed me by their simplicity and engagement with the subject matter. ‘*Writing by hand*’ for example successfully conveys the sensual pleasure of using pen and ink integrating rhythm, movement and imagery and subject and finishing with simple yet effective final lines. My choice for third prize, ‘*Now We Are Old*’ uses personification and metaphor superbly to develop the theme of old age. Choosing the outright winner was difficult. I liked the originality and understatement of ‘*Tolpuddle Revisited*’ which deals with the subject of posterity’s valuation of dead heroes but in the end I plumped for ‘*Treasure Hunters*’ for its skilful evocation of seaside landscape. I liked its simplicity and effectiveness which both focuses on the process of collecting fossils and the thoughts and feelings of the collector.

Keith Scott



THE PATRICIA CHOWN SONNET COMPETITION THE WINNING SONNET

The Will of the Gods
Patricia Elvidge

I crave the moon, knowing it can’t be mine
For at my birth the gods mapped out my days,
Setting our paths to meet, but not entwine,
Each following their own appointed ways.
But your own first kiss changed everything for me,
Your arm across my shoulder felt so right,
I knew, at once, how happy we should be
If we could make our destinies unite.

Too late I found your promise had been given
To one you loved as your intended wife
Till suddenly your youthful heart was riven,
Betrayal had destroyed the rest of life.

Defiance of the gods is never wise,
Only true love will win a worthy prize.

THE HERBERT SPENCER POETRY COMPETITION THE WINNING POEM

Treasure Hunters
Kim Fairley

On the beach; our feet skim
over shingle until we reach
a place still wet with the tide.

Your machine, primed, whines
for the quick fix of the scavenger
seeking precious metals, ship-wrecks.

I want each piece in context,
colour, things that sparkle,
fossils, amber, discarded sea-shells.

If I shout 'Look', you won't hear,
hemmed in by your head-phones
and your technological world.

My first find is glass worn round
by the sea, a scrap of blue
like an eye, or a teardrop.

I look on and find a fossil,
a small coiled shell,
stuck like a memory in solid rock.

No magic trick, this decay, a natural
process. Sediment has seeped in,
turning soft tissue to stone.

I hold my treasure tight
until its edges pierce my palm.
Something was here that is now dead.

ROBIN POSTMAN

Terry Rickson

It was still dark when Robin Postman set out with his postbag full of letters. It was cold. Robin pulled his postman's cap further down on his head so that he couldn't feel the wind. He took the scarf Mrs. Robin had found and wound it around his neck to keep himself warm.

"There'll be tea and toast for you when get home," said Mrs. Robin.

Robin Postman gave his wife a peck on the cheek and off he flew to deliver the letters to the animals of Primrose Wood.

Robin was always happy and cheerful, he didn't mind the cold one bit. He whistled a merry note as he popped the letters through the letterboxes. The folk of Primrose Wood loved to hear his song, especially on a winter's morning.

The first pale glimmer of morning was beginning to show through the branches of the trees.

"Oh! What was that?" he said to himself, as a silent shadowy form flitted over his head.

"Mr. Owl it's you; you quite made me jump."

"I didn't mean to frighten you-oo-oo," hooted Mr. Owl, as he flew to his house in an oak tree. He was just about to shut his front door when Robin chirped,

"I've letter for you, Mr. Owl, two in fact."

"Thank you-oo-oo," said Mr. Owl. He tucked the letters under his wing, blinked his eyes sleepily, yawned and went into his house shutting the door behind him.

Robin flew on. There was a postcard for Miss Jessica Jay and another for the Woodmouse family. There was a package for Wesley Woodpecker which looked very interesting.

Wesley Woodpecker was up and about already, Robin could hear the sharp taps of his beak sounding through the wood.

“Thank you, Robin,” Wesley said, “can’t stop, very busy. Leave the package on that branch.”

Robin left the package and flew on his way, he could still hear Wesley hammering busily at the tree-trunk.

Robin’s sharp eyes spotted Mr. Badger who was about to disappear into a tunnel through a briar patch.

“Hello, Mr. Badger,” he called.

“Hurrumph, grurrrmh,” was the only reply as Mr. Badger snuffled and scrabbled through the tangle of briars.

“Mr. Badger, I’ve got a letter and a parcel for you.”

Mr. Badger stopped snuffling and scrabbling and poked his head out from under the briars.

“What was that you said, young Robin?”

As Mr. Badger was very old, he called everyone “Young”.

“I’ve a letter and parcel for you,” Robin said.

“Ah, I’ll take them, thank you; save you a journey. I hope it’s the book I’ve been waiting for,” Mr. Badger said.

Mr. Badger had lots of books. He spent most of the winter indoors, sitting comfortably in his chair by the fire reading and enjoying his tea and cake.

Mr. Badger took the letter and parcel.

“I should get home as soon as you can, young Robin,” he said, raising his head and sniffing the air. “It’s going to get colder and there will be snow.”

Robin had been so busy, he had hardly noticed that sky had not cleared. The clouds were dark and heavy with snow. Indeed, fine flakes of snow were beginning to blow through the wood, driven by a cold wind.

“I’ve just got to call on Jenny Wren, then I’ll be home in time to open the Post Office,” Robin said.

“Hurrumph,” grunted Mr. Badger and with that he disappeared into the briars.

“Goodbye, Mr. Badger,” Robin called, “I hope you enjoy your book.”

He wasn’t sure if his old friend had heard but a faint “grurrrmph,” came from the direction Mr. Badger had taken.

Robin flew quickly to Jenny Wren’s teashop.

There was a lovely smell of freshly baked bread and cakes.

“My last letter, Jenny, and it’s for you,” Robin said. “Now I must fly home. Mrs. Robin will have tea and toast waiting for me, before I open the Post Office.”

“No need to hurry, Robin,” Jenny said, “Mrs Robin is here; she called in early for a fresh loaf and I’ve just made some tea.”

The three friends sat down and drank their tea and tucked into croissants spread with lovely dobs of yellow butter. Then it was time to go.

“Goodbye, Jenny,” said Mr. and Mrs Robin, “and thank you for the tea.”

Then they flew home to the Post Office through the falling snow.

CAN YOU WRITE AN ARTICLE?

Alan S Watts

If for years you have been thinking up plots for short stories, devising names for characters and giving each one a distinctive form of speech, and have laboriously typed out your masterpieces only to find that the editors to whom you have sent them, merely thank you for the offer of ‘the accompanying enclosed, but regret it cannot be accepted for publication’. If this has been your experience, then give a thought to writing articles.

It so happens that I might be able to help you here. Indeed, we might be able to help one another, and when two people feel they are mutually in need of help, then something is likely to be forthcoming.

Let me explain. Two years ago I found myself editor of a new publication, *The Dickens Magazine*, aimed at teachers, sixth-formers, undergraduates, and members of the general public with an interest in nineteenth century literature and history. The first six issues of this magazine were centred on the novel *Great Expectations*, but they contained articles on Victorian writers such as George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, on modern writers in the Dickens tradition such as H. G. Wells and J. B. Priestley, and on events during the time when *Great Expectations* was written.

Those six issues have now been published, so the articles I have outlined are not required. But — a further six issues are being planned, to be centred on another Dickens novel, *Hard Times*. These issues will contain similar articles on Victorian and modern writers, events in the 1850s, etc. They need to be well-written, accurate, and attractive to the readership. Many, if not most, of the members of our Society could produce such work, and would greatly help the editor of the Magazine, who needs to recruit a team of regular reliable writers. There is one drawback at present, and that is payment. Whereas with the first six issues we managed to reward our contributors, it is by no means

certain that we can do so with the next six although we shall try. All depends on the number of subscribers we get. But benefits accrue to writers who get their work into print. I have just received £20 for a paragraph 100 words long taken from a book I wrote 20 years ago, and for which I was paid quite handsomely at the time. And as this is the *Dickens Magazine*, I must remind you that Dickens received no payment at all for his first published story, except the wonderful joy of seeing it in ‘all the glory of print’.

I am currently drawing up plans for the next six issues. If you feel you would like to participate, please write to me at No 34a The Avenue, Beckenham, Kent, BR3 5ER, and I will tell you what subjects are being planned and for which issues.

BEING A WRITER

Martin Kelly

Being a writer must be exciting and rewarding. I say *must be* because I have endeavoured to produce something considered worthy of publication, for some time, without success.

Although I am a little old man I still aspire to succeed in my endeavour. I am not just a little old man, I am a confused little old man.

If Sir could see what has happened to the English language since the middle of the last century he would have a fit.

Regularly he would make the class repeat —

The split infinitive is not permitted; a sentence should never end with a preposition; the position of the word only, in a sentence, warrants careful consideration.

Then he would write a number of sentences on the board and ask the class to correct them. This became fairly easy after a while until the cunning swine presented one that didn’t require correction. Once, when he returned an essay of mine he had written the comment — *You could have a great future writing telegrams*. The message that came across was — make them longer.

More recently, at writing classes, the advice given has been — prune, prune, prune — cut out all unnecessary words — never use a long word where a short one will do — writing is all about communication — and so on. [It’s the short word “all” that undermines such advice — Ed.]

I find it bewildering, therefore, that many writers of stories being printed in quality publications, seem to ignore much, if not all of this advice.

Not long ago one story had an opening sentence made up of fifty six words, a main clause and four subordinate clauses. I had to read it several times to understand what the writer was trying to convey. The second sentence was no better. Hardly an example of good communication. What happened to short crisp sentences?

Would it be facetious to suggest that some of the modern established writers are more interested in impressing their peers than catering for the reading public who might buy their works? In this connection is it not significant that few of the books acclaimed, or awarded prestigious prizes, sell enough copies to justify publication in the first place? What's to be done about it? Extend the fatwa?

Way back in the distant past I remember an essay, set for examination, in which the author said, A cautious premonition to the olfactory was constantly whispering to me, that my stomach must infallibly, with all due courtesy, decline it. I discovered that what he meant was that he didn't like the smell.

Circumlocution, they call it. One of the best, or worst, examples I have come across, was a story about a court scene. A witness used the expression *Oh Yeah*. The judge looking over his spectacles, asked what the meaning of that expression was.

The QC replied,

M'lud it appears that this is a slang expression of American origin which has gained regrettable currency in the language of our people through the insidious agency of the cinema. It is, I am led to understand, employed to indicate a state of dubiety in the mind of the speaker as to the veracity or credibility of a statement made to him.

The judge looked over his glasses again and said — “Oh Yeah”.

A couple of years ago I listened to Professor Jean Aitcheson delivering the Reith Lecture on Radio 4. It left me a little disturbed. The impression I got was that words don't matter. Lord preserve us, even the double negative is acceptable. Now who am I to cross swords with such an authority? — then I have always admired the young boy who cried — the King is in the altogether.

I am reminded of a story about a temporary road works sign in Yorkshire. Apparently Eli was instructed to make a sign for temporary traffic lights. He complied by writing,

WAIT while lights show GREEN

The daft southerners were totally confused and consternation resulted until Paddy, who was known to call a spade a shovel, realised what was wrong. He changed the *while* to *until* and all was well.

Words don't matter? Oh Yeah.

Of course words matter. If a young man said to his girlfriend,

“When I look at you time stands still” — she would probably be pleased but if instead he said, “Your face would stop a clock” — I don't think it would have the same effect.

In fairness to the most erudite lady I must admit that I listened to only the first and last lectures and could have got the wrong end of the stick.

I have often thought that any Dickens story could be reduced to half its length without spoiling the readers' enjoyment — perhaps that enjoyment would be enhanced. Heresy? Well maybe the descriptive prose would suffer.

In my dotage I now accept that the old rules relating to split infinitives, and sentences ending in prepositions, have gone by the board but as far as the written word is concerned I hesitate about splitting infinitives. I understand that Winston Churchill put an end to the preposition controversy when, tongue in cheek, he said — *up with which I will not put*.

I have reached the conclusion that there is a difference between writers and storytellers. Some tell a good story with adequate prose others write beautiful prose but say nothing. Only the fortunate succeed in combining the two.

Jeffrey Archer's books are unlikely to appear on the A Level syllabus but at least he tells a good story that the average reader can enjoy. More to the point, his stories sell.

At writing classes I have noticed that the ladies use more poetic descriptive language than the men — an observation not a criticism. An article I wrote involved an old lady talking to herself, similar to Talking Heads. As far as I was concerned it was what she had to say that mattered but the ladies wanted to know what she was wearing and how her hair was

done. This alerted me to the importance of knowing your potential readers.

Please help a little old man. Who is right — the long winded or the terse brigade, the ladies or the men, precise or the imprecise? I must know if I am to succeed with my endeavours. With your help, perhaps, I might be able to write, “Being a writer is exciting and rewarding”.

I believe it was William Hazlet who said, “When a thing ceases to be a thing of controversy it ceases to be a subject of interest.

[I hope members enjoy this as much as I did and perhaps will be inspired to add their two penneth! — Ed.]

THE WEAKEST LINK

Martin Kelly

She holds them with those steely eyes / They never seem to blink / The object of the exercise / To find the weakest link.

She starts the show with scorn / That has the lot in fear / And all for petty prizes / They'd get more from *Millionaire*.

Lambs to the slaughter many come / They know not what's in store / Abuse and exploitation / All that and even more.

You dunces, fools and idiots / The questions weren't tough / Goodbye, clear off, good riddance / You didn't bank enough.

Some say she is a pussycat / With velvet fur and paws / Who's kidding who? I hear you say / *All* pussycats have claws.

'Tis rumoured that she's leaving / To look for pastures greener / I bet within a month or two / They'll wish they'd never seen her.

Dear Anne beware of foreigners / They are another nation / If you persist as we observed / I fear assassination.

Now when she's gone what will we do? / Our lives could be made dull / I
bet she couldn't care a toss / *Her* coffers will be full.

Now who'll replace her you may ask / Where will we find one starker? / It
won't be easy after her / I fancy Susan Barker.

Too nice — you think? Well maybe so / Who else could it be? / Paxman?
Rippon? Bruno? / Or even Carol V?

Dither, dither she will not / No matter what we think / When our friend
Anne makes up her mind / She'll leave us with a wink.

THE BOX

Stanley Gunn-Matthews

Jethro Green sighed to himself, wiped the running sweat from his dirt
grimed face and proceeded to unbridle the two shire horses, mares that
had been pulling a plough shear for the last three hours.

“Time for a well earned drink my ladies,” said Jethro, leading the horses
to a shallow part of the stream that fed a mere.

Hardenham Hall overlooked the scene, an impressive stately home
owned by Sir William Reid and family.

The sun shone brightly overhead as the farm labourer proceeded to seat
himself on the grassy bank of the stream and unpack his lunch.

Having taken one mouthful the food tasted delicious — he rapidly
followed with a second large ravenous bite, thinking to himself what a
lucky chap he was marrying Mary, who had served him well as a wife and
mother of their three children.

A figure casting a shadow over him interrupted his line of thought; “I
thought I'd find you here boy Jethro,” said the large bodied gamekeeper,
holding a double barrelled twelve bore shotgun, “I've got some news for
you. You're a father again boy.” He said smilingly. “Mary gave birth this
morning to a seemingly healthy boy child, they're both in good spirits.
That was the message the midwife Hazel gave me to tell you. Number four

I believe that's quite a responsibility for a farm labourer. One last thing, I was told the baby boy sprouted a fine head of red hair."

Jethro stared at the keeper intently saying grimly, "If you're jesting you've said enough, if it's true what you say that's another burden I have to bear, I hope you appreciate that fact and say no more on that score."

"It's not often I say sorry Jethro but these things happen in life, I took it upon myself to soften your blow, I've known you and your family all my life," hesitatingly he said, "try not to upset Mary over this, you've got a good wife there, if you take my advice help her through this difficult time she'll have enough gossip to face in the village."

Jethro sat stunned, his sun-tanned weather beaten face began to pale, he swallowed hard and started packing his lunch away in his knapsack.

Turning away from the keeper he began to rebridle the mares and resume ploughing the fertile valley field.

Swallowing hard again, looking white faced and trembling slightly, the shock of what John Rand had told him gradually took effect.

He began work again on the land as though in a daze. There was no doubt about the fact that all the Reid family had red hair.

Reaching the edge of the field he was met by Mr Graham Reid, eldest son of Sir William. Gamekeeper John Rand stood some distance away. "Good afternoon Green," said Mr Graham Reid. "Midwife Hazel has reported to me that your wife Mary gave birth to a son this morning also the disturbing knowledge that there is considerable dampness in the back room used as the children's bedroom. In the light of this, I have made arrangements to have your wife Mary and boy child transferred to a more suitable room in the hall. When you return home this evening you will find Maidservant Alice Trimble has replaced her to carry out the necessary womanly duties. This will only be temporary arrangement until I can re-house you and your family in a more suitable cottage. Mary was considerably weakened giving birth; I hope and trust you will treat the woman with the necessary respect she deserves. It will be convenient for you to call and visit Mary on Sunday afternoons at the trades entrance, of course you will be made welcome and provided with afternoon tea. I realise this re-arrangement will come as a shock to you but after a week or so you will soon get into the run of things. Your hard work on my estate

has not gone unnoticed, keep at it and you will be suitably rewarded, I'll keep in touch."

Jethro swallowed hard, giving Mr Graham Reid a direct stare he said, "Thank you Sir for your kindness."

Sunday afternoon soon came around and with Alice Trimble's assistance the three children all wearing Sunday best clothing, together with father Jethro, rang the door bell, the door was promptly opened by Mrs Rand.

Sensing the children's excitement, Mrs Rand quickly took them along the corridor to the room that was occupied by Mary Green.

Knocking on the door, Mrs Rand heard Mary's voice say, "come on in!"

Mrs Rand opened the door, the three children ran in saying, "Mummy, how are you? It's good to see you."

The two youngest knelt on the bed, putting their arms around Mary's neck giving her many kisses.

Michael, the eldest, stood back for a while then went and kissed his mother Mary, giving her a bunch of wild flowers freshly picked from the hedgerows during the journey.

Margaret the eldest daughter said, "where is your baby, mummy?"

Mary looked quite pale faced at her daughter, then said, "He's out with the nanny, you'll see him another time quite soon."

Margaret said, "Have you decided on a name for our baby brother?"

Mary looked quite embarrassed then said, "It's lovely to see you children but I wish to speak with your father now."

At that moment Mrs Rand opened the door saying to the children "There's tea and cakes in the kitchen if you would like to follow me."

The children said, "Yes, yummy. See you soon mum." leaving the room to Mary and Jethro.

For several seconds there was an uneasy silence, then Jethro went across to Mary, kissing her on the forehead. Mary looked down and started to cry, "I'm sorry Jethro," she said, "you've been a good husband and father to my children. The master called with a brace of birds last Christmas, he

had been drinking and asked me for a Christmas kiss. I never intended anything further; can you forgive me?"

Jethro held Mary close to him saying, "We've had a good marriage so far, I've given the matter a lot of considerable thought and I'm prepared to live with what's happened."

Mary raising her head said, "Come here my husband." Putting her arms around his neck she gave him a loving kiss then said, "I'm proud of you Jethro, in fact I love you more now you've accepted my weakness with the master. There's one more thing I must tell you, the master intends to exchange cottages between us and the Rands. Mrs Rand doesn't know yet, so I trust you not to say anything until she's been informed. Their cottage is in a far better condition than ours, it will be much better for the children. He intends to renovate the back room and prevent the dampness, so the Rands won't suffer too much."

Looking at Mary Jethro said, "Mrs Rand won't take to kindly to this but in the circumstances the move will be far better for us."

Their conversation was interrupted, Mrs Rand standing in the doorway said, "will you be taking tea Jethro?"

"That's kind of you," said Jethro, "and a cup for you too Mary I take it?"

Mary nodded her approval. Mrs Rand turned around walking back to the kitchen.

The next week passed rapidly and next Sunday Afternoon found Jethro Green with his three children on the track to Hardenham Hall once again.

As Jethro and children rounded the back end of the hall, he glimpsed a shadowy figure slipping between the tall elm trees.

Instinctively Jethro thought of John Rand; suddenly he was confronted by a sheet of searing flames being directed by a strong breeze blowing, endangering the north end of the hall.

Moving with quickened reaction Jethro raised the alarm; fortunately the blaze was quelled by the servant staff with Jethro's assistance.

His heart still pounding, something caught Jethro's attention, bending down he picked up a single blue topped matchstick. Strange thought Jethro, John Rand has used blue topped matches for years.

Visiting Mary was restricted with the intervention of Mr Graham Reid accompanied by Sir William, who shook Jethro by the hand and questioned him as to whether he knew how the fire had started.

On the return journey, Jethro stopped at the Rands' cottage, slipping the single blue topped matchstick through the letterbox. Gazing up he felt he was being observed behind the upstairs window curtain.

Later that evening Alice Trimble informed Jethro that John Rand had taken his own life by blowing his brains away with his own shotgun. Mrs Rand was in a state of shock and had been committed to a sanatorium.

Found on the Rands' table was a blue cross match box with a single blue topped matchstick lying alongside.

ANASTASIA - THE TRUE STORY

Brian Jones

The fate of Anastasia, youngest daughter of Tsar Nicholas of Russia, has excited world speculation since the July day in 1918 when the Tsar and his family were reported massacred by Bolshevik soldiers, and controversy has raged as to whether the seventeen-year old Grand Duchess escaped death and was smuggled out of Russia.

The tragic events leading up to the deaths of the Russian royal family are well recorded history. The Revolution of 1917 culminated in the downfall of the fabulously wealthy Romanov dynasty. In 1918 Nicholas and Alexandra, their daughters Olga, Tatiana, Marie and Anastasia, and the Tsarevitch were imprisoned in Siberia. It was reported that on the night of July 16th the entire family, along with four retainers were shot and bayoneted to death and their bodies disposed of in the nearby forest.

However, over the years there was a number of claimants to the title of Grand Duchess Anastasia, heiress to a vast fortune, and the rumours persisted that the young Anastasia miraculously escaped the massacre and was smuggled out by sympathisers. The most famous of these was Anna Anderson, who was the only woman who tried legally to establish herself

as the legitimate heiress to the Romanov dynasty. After many years her case was dismissed in the German courts in 1967.

As a schoolboy in the late 1950s I well remember seeing the first release of the cinemascope film ‘*Anastasia*’ starring Ingrid Bergman, Yul Brynner and Helen Hayes. This was in my home town where the faded gilt and red plush in the little Edwardian theatre-cum-cinema were perfect settings for this elegant romantic drama. It had none of the action and pace of the kind of adventure films I usually liked but, all the same, it made a lasting impression on me.

The film begins with Paris by night, the River Seine mirrors the hopeless fate of Anna (Ingrid Bergman) as the émigré General Bounine (Yul Brynner) prevents her suicide and brings her unwillingly to the basement of his restaurant and interrogates her. Bounine and his associates realise that this mysterious woman, recently released from an asylum, is ideally suited to their plan of claiming the fortune awaiting the genuine heiress to the Russian throne. She has no relatives, no friends, no memory and no identity.

Then, under the ruthless tuition of of Bounine she is taught everything about Anastasia until at last she comes to believe that she really is the Tsar’s daughter.

The climax of the film, the meeting of Anna and the elderly Dowager Empress (Helen Hayes) is a scene of great power and beauty — acting on the grand scale.

‘*Anastasia*’ was a case of a legend playing a legend and marked Ingrid Bergman’s triumphant return to Hollywood after an enforced exile in Italy for the sin of living with a married man.

However, in spite of its merits, the Hollywood film was entirely fictional. It did lead to me reading a number of books about this elusive legend which claimed *not* to be fiction.

After the bloody events in Siberia various people came forward to claim that they were Anastasia, Olga or Alexei. Of the claimants, one was taken seriously by some members of the Romanov family and their circle. This was Anna Anderson, latterly Mrs Jack Manahan. For over sixty years she clung to her story that she was Anastasia, although her enemies claimed that she was actually Franziska Schanzovski, a former Polish factory

worker. In 1994, DNA tests undertaken by British scientists proved that Mrs Manahan was indeed Franziska Schanzovski — which means that her 1958 ghost-written ‘memoir’ *‘I, Anastasia’*, must now be classed as fiction.

It seems to me that Franziska is a fascinating subject in her own right. One feels a reluctant admiration for this confidence trickster who played her stellar role so convincingly and for so long — truly one of the great performances of the 20th century.

What was her history? Franziska was born in a poor family in rural Poland. As a young woman she arrives in Berlin. She is quite primitive but believes she is going to be someone. Franziska loves cheap gaudy clothes, the theatre, the cinema and she falls in love. Then comes the Great War, her fiancé is killed in action and Franziska, herself, is seriously injured during an explosion in a munitions factory. After this she suffers a nervous breakdown and is incarcerated in an asylum. Here, one of the inmates tells her that she bears a remarkable resemblance to Anastasia. Everything stems from this conversation. Here new role of a fairy-tale princess gives glamour and meaning to her drab, hopeless existence. She will never allow herself to lose this sudden flowering of a new life.

Released from the asylum Anastasia gradually became the vogue. There were Anastasia cigarettes, perfume, jewellery — even an Anastasia tango. She lived with various Russian émigrés in surroundings ranging from simple, poor apartments, to castles and mansions. She lived with wealthy ‘relations’ in New York and refused to recognise her real family when they called. Her patrons paid for several major operations.

The Second World War began and Franziska almost starved to death in wartime Germany. She was completely forgotten.

After the war, now living in a shack in the Black Forest, the world starts to remember the Anastasia legend, interest fostered by new books and films.

The elderly Franziska went to live in the USA where she married the historian, Jack Manahan. They lived an increasingly eccentric existence on a farm in the middle of nowhere.

What a story! What a survivor! How she must have laughed inwardly to think that a simple Polish peasant woman had fooled so many.

Franziska played out the last act of her drama — as the eccentric. Of course, she was much too old now to act the role of the forlorn young girl. The hermit of the Black Forest evolved into a sociable, talkative old lady, who even gave interviews on American television. No longer any need to act Anastasia and Franziska had merged into one — indistinguishable. Perhaps she even dreamed of a childhood in Holy Russia.

Someone ought to write a full length biography; or perhaps a stage play portraying Franziska as pathetic, lonely eccentric in bombed out Germany.

One fact is certain — the Anastasia enigma will continue to be of enduring appeal and interest.



THE EMANCIPATION OF MORAG McLEAN

Roy Stewart

As if somehow able to foresee what much of the future held for her, Morag McLean was reluctant to enter this world. Accordingly she chose what the attending doctor described as ‘the godawful hour’ of 4.27 a.m. to be born. In addition, despite earlier evidence to the contrary from scans and internal examinations, she successfully manoeuvred herself into presenting her already ample buttocks, rather than her mopsy-haired head, to the waiting medics. Coarse epithets and much perspiration were therefore heard and seen in the Delivery Room as doctor and aides battled to withdraw the reticent babe from the womb of her mother, Regina McLean.

Naturally, this aggravation did not endear little Morag to her mother. In any event Regina had not welcomed the news that she was with child nine months earlier and had bitterly regretted the extra glasses of Bulgarian dry that her husband, Alfred, had plied her with prior to luring her to the fireside couch. Now, as she lay listening to frequent ‘damn’n’blasts’ from the obstetrician and felt her insides being stretched and pummelled, her thoughts were not joyous and maternal ones.

Morag duly emerged into the light of day, whereupon her backside was well and truly paddled, with somewhat unnecessary vigour, by not one, but

all three of the nurses who had laboured with rising bad tempers during the previous ninety three minutes. Not surprisingly Morag gave vent to loud cries at this treatment, yet the act of crying apparently held some innate appeal for her, so much so that she continued to regularly exercise her lungs and vocal chords in this manner for the next three years.

Said three years proved to be ones of extreme purgatory for Regina and Alfred McLean. Little Morag interspersed her wails and tears with dramatic bouts of croup, whooping cough, bed-wetting, diarrhoea and a stubborn determination to fail her potty-training course. During this period Alfred McLean sought solace elsewhere, initially within the confines of the toilet where he would sit, imbibing port and reading the collective works of Dickens and thereafter in the arms of a lonely widow he met at the local library.

Regina was therefore left to cope alone with little Morag's ailments, a task she found distasteful, disgusting and debilitating. She and Morag made frequent sorties to the family doctor and post natal clinic but were soon hastily shooed away by staff unsympathetic to 'that stupid woman and her demon child'.

In her fourth year Morag apparently saw the light. Her crying, tantrums and bed-wetting reached acceptable levels but, alas, this came too late for Alfred. Having been refused his conjugal rights since his offspring's birth he had sought cuddles ... and more ... from the friendly widow and had departed from the family home months earlier.

For Regina, Morag's transformation at first brought bliss and relative contentment. She discarded the heap of cold-compress cloths she'd frequently applied to her aching brow, turfed the valium down the rubbish chute and re-ordered the *People's Friend* from her newsagent. Life was returning to normal. So, one would think that Morag's mummy would relax and look forward, albeit husbandless, to a happier future full of jolly mother and child bonding sessions and quality time. But no.

Such had been the misery of the last years that Regina's limited maternal instincts had withered on the vine. She wanted revenge. She wanted Little-Pain-In-The-Botty to suffer for the sheer distress and discomfort she'd caused to date. The screw began turning one evening when Morag, preparing for bed, piped 'Mummy, am I pretty?'

Mummy regarded her daughter with baleful eyes. ‘Pretty?’ she murmured softly, ‘No I don’t think so. Podgy and plain I’d say.’

This meant little to Morag ... she had to wait until she could read and have recourse to a dictionary to learn that those descriptive words were euphemisms for ‘fat’ and ‘without decoration’. By then, however, she’d already had suspicions about her looks, or rather lack of them. At the play-group the other children had teased her, poured milk over her tresses, laughed when her girth prevented a smooth glide down the chute and repeatedly called her Fatty McLean.

Morag’s torment continued into adolescence. Although Regina was not, according to neighbours, short of a bob or two, little money was expended on her daughter. Clothes were purchased second-hand from charity shops; school trips were classed as ‘far too expensive’; childhood comics, magazines and books were never bought and deodorants were banned as ‘completely useless ... frequent baths bring natural fragrance’.

Consequently Morag went through agonies at school. The ugly duckling had not, alas, blossomed into swanhood. Tatty clothes and a faint but nonetheless pervasive malodour ensured that she was partnerless at discos and, unlike Wendy Potter and Julie McAslan, she was never taken behind the bike shed for a quick kiss and fondle. Matters were not helped by the fact that, despite a lack of motivation at home, frequent trips to the school library and avid attentiveness in class had gained her excellent marks in virtually every subject. Her peers’ reaction had been to add the prefix ‘Swotty’ to Fatty McLean.

Regina’s powers over her daughter grew ever greater. To lack of love, to meanness and spite was added possessiveness. Morag was allowed no friends ... not that many sought her closer acquaintance ... and those few who tried were dissuaded by Regina’s folded arms, curled hair and sour visage.

Brownies and Guides had, of course, been a decided no-no. Regina likened them to the Hitler Youth, possibly because she herself had been cast forth from the Brownies for kicking Tawny Owl who’d had the temerity to refuse her a coveted cookery badge.

Outings, always accompanied by Mother McLean, were limited to bi-annual cinema trips (nothing salacious ... Certificate 12 maximum),

weekly tiresome treks to Tesco and periodic visitations to elderly, boring relatives . TV shows were naturally banned come the 9 p.m. watershed.

Not surprisingly Morag had long nurtured feelings of growing resentment. It was bad enough that her Maker had failed to bless her with a sylph-like figure and beauty but to saddle her with a mother who made Medusa seem like Tinker Bell and be raised in a fatherless, sterile, unhappy, loveless and prison-like environment was too, too much to bear. Yet, release from her misery at last seemed imminent.

Alfred McLean had long since set up home in one of Paradise's many mansions, leaving Regina his half share in the apartment, the minimum legal monetary requirements and a codicil wherein, despite his earlier beneficence, he had soundly berated her and affixed a rough drawing of a clenched fist with two fingers upraised. To Morag, doubtless through belated remorse, he left the sum of £8000 to be used primarily for her tertiary education. This much a reluctant Regina had imparted the day her daughter had waved the letter of acceptance to St. Andrews' dreamy spires.

'Then I can go to St. Andrews, mummy ... and I can afford it, thanks to dear daddy,' trilled Morag, simultaneously thinking St. Andrews equals Distance equals Release from this old besom. Freedom loomed at last.

Regina was, however, well-prepared for such an eventuality and had the first of what she intended would be many 'bad turns'. Clutching her withered breast she staggered slightly then gasped 'go if you must ... let me linger here alone in great pain until my time comes.'

Dark clouds of woe enveloped Morag; this was the final straw. She knew enough to realise that, for years to come now, she would have to cope with an 'invalid' mother whose health would deteriorate rapidly at the slightest mention of the word 'independence'. This realisation led her to consider the only two possible courses of action available.

The first was to bring forward the day on which Regina's 'time' would, in fact, arrive. This idea she speedily squashed, being aware that, should her mother be blown up, poisoned, electrocuted, suffocated, knifed, shot or otherwise sent to the Afterworld, the constabulary would regard her, the nearest and apparently dearest, with grave suspicion. Besides, she hadn't the stomach for such dire action, however appealing it might be.

So the second alternative seemed best. She would depart this vale of tears forever. Join daddy in heaven, drink port and read Dickens or, better still, attend one of the many universities dotting the spiritual planes, be taught by Archimedes, Mozart, Descartes *et al* and acquire a celestial Honours Degree. So be it.

She waited until the following Tuesday evening when Regina, having survived another attack of the vapours, prepared to set off to the nearby Gospel Hall for her weekly dose of religion. Morag watched, unconcerned but with rising impatience as her mother set the TV controls so that, at 9 p.m. exactly, the words ‘Nighty-night’ would appear on the screen and the set would switch itself off. At last, umbrella in hand for it was raining outside, Regina departed with the customary lack of fond farewells.

Immediately, lest her courage evaporate, Morag opened the French windows and stepped out onto the rain-spattered balcony of the McLean’s third floor apartment. Shedding a few last-minute tears she then hefted her meaty legs over the rail, murmured ‘good-bye cruel world – free at last’ and dropped into space.

A split second later Regina McLean emerged from the building’s entrance, raised her umbrella and stepped forward, eagerly anticipating Pastor Broadbent’s sermon for the evening which, from the sect’s pamphlet, she knew to be ‘Beware, lest ye be smitten from on high’. Now, over the years she had indeed been oft smitten ... from the front, from behind and, during a spell of cystitis, from below and within ... but never, never, never from on high.

This omission was grievously rectified when 231 pounds of virginal maidenhood hurtled down upon her, compacting her neck bones and spinal vertebrae with calamitous effect.

* * *

Unlike her mother, Morag survived, albeit with minor bruising and a broken rib. As she lay in hospital, receiving commiserations and condolences galore from police and nursing staff, she felt at peace. The accident had been accepted as an act of God and there were no suggestions that she had set herself up as a human projectile. No indeed, an unfortunate slip on wet, balcony stone had led to a quite unforeseen fatality.

That evening, alone at last in her hospital room, she contentedly chuckled ‘free at last ... free, free, free’. Switching on the radio she put on her earphones. To her delight she heard the idyllic strains of *The Messiah*. Then, as if rejoicing at her new-found emancipation, the last thing she heard before drifting into the arms of Morpheus, was a chorus of jubilant, almost angelic voices, uttering a fervent and successive series of ‘Hallelujahs!’

Seasons Greetings

