

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

## Former Presidents:

Humbert Wolfe (1935-40)  
Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
Sir George Rostrevor  
Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967-68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
Lord Snow (1975-80)

## President:

Charles Neilson Gattey

## Vice Presidents:

Richard Adams FRSL  
John le Carré  
Iain McIntyre

## Chairman:

Alan S Watts

## Vice Chairman:

Terry Rickson

## Membership Secretary:

Joan M Lewis  
17 The Green  
Corby Glen  
GRANTHAM  
NG33 4NP  
email: jhykin@talk21.com

## Meetings Secretary:

Ethel Corduff  
10 Malcolm Road  
Woodside  
South Norwood  
LONDON  
SE25 5HG  
email: ecorduff@hotmail.com

## Treasurer:

Louise Lloyd  
21 Woodpecker Close  
Bingham  
NOTTINGHAM  
NG13 8QL  
email:

louise.lloyd1@ntlworld.com

## Competition Secretary:

Ronald C Jeffreys  
186 Lewis Flats  
Lisgar Terrace  
LONDON  
W14 8SQ

## Publicity Officer:

Vacant

## Diary

Writer's Workshop

29<sup>th</sup> June 2002

Poetry Workshop Weekend

12-14 July 2002

Chairman's Awayday

10<sup>th</sup> August 2002

Annual Luncheon

26<sup>th</sup> October 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.**

## Poetry Editor:

Joyce Thornton  
129 Whitechapel Road  
CLECKHEATON  
West Yorkshire  
BD19 6HS

## Editor:

Adrian Danson  
38 Cumberland Road  
BROMLEY  
Kent  
BR2 0PQ  
email: adriand@onetel.net.uk

# The SCPSW Author

Number 158

Summer 2002

## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 5 Letters
- 8 Market Information *Gordon Gompers*
- 9 Poetry Pages
- 12 Poetry Workshop Pages
- 13 Short Story Postal Portfolios *Terry Rickson*
- 14 I Remember The Day That..... *Stephen Bibby*
- 19 William's Dilemma *Daphne Darking*
- 23 A Proper Charlie *Martin Kelly*
- 25 Stage *Jan Jeffries*
- 27 An Interesting Experience *Terry Rickson*
- 28 Two on the Greensward *R R Yearley*
- 30 Adolescent Years *Stanley Gunn-Matthews*
- 31 A Quiet Drink *Elvira Bridges*
- 33 The Verdict *Vivian Edwards*

## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

I have never suffered writer's block, i.e. the inability to create new work. Sometimes I wish I did. My excessively active imagination drives me to create more and diverts me from the more appropriate chore of improving past inadequate work. However, I recently experienced a similar problem, a reluctance to do any writing. In my role as editor this could make life difficult!

Since you are reading this I have obviously recovered, but it does mean that I have delayed responding to some members who have written to me. I hope I will be forgiven.

Not everyone finds computers superior to typewriters, but is this because they are not? (Would those who have a view on this please write to me Not every member has a computer, nor even a desire to own one, but to those who have I address the following. If you have a modem and thus access to e-mail, would you like to communicate with other members who share its benefit? I had no response to my Autumn invitation to contact me if you are interested in joining an e-mail folio of short stories, but I often have entertaining exchanges with members through this medium and think it could be extended. Being able to write a number of letters over a period of days, then send them all out for a total cost of 2p appeals to my Scottish ancestry (now I'm in trouble!).

As far as I am aware, mention of SCPSW in Soldier magazine has resulted in no new members, following extension of eligibility to all retired and serving members of the Armed Forces. We do have a problem in communicating this fact to such potential members. If any member has contact I would be grateful if they would let me know so that I can seek their help in this area.

## **Guidance for Members**

Computers have now been in common use for about 20 years, but many of our members had no experience of such before they retired. It is good to know that so many members have enjoyed retirement for so long, but age is no barrier. I have a friend who bought a computer 2 years and has been going to classes to develop his expertise ever since. He is aged 96 and last week he helped me to resolve the problem I was having with my scanner.

16 years ago when I bought my first computer it was called a microcomputer, but PC is the term now in common usage. The screen was only half the size of the one I have now, but the problems remain the same. One being the limited number of lines visible and thus it is easier to lose track than when the whole page is visible. I am not sure that this problem ever entirely goes away, but my suggested solution is to print a double-spaced hard copy at frequent intervals and annotate appropriate amendments. Another is the temptation to adjust sentence length to make the end product look neater, e.g. when a sentence overflows by one word on to the next line, to redraft it so that it ends on the previous line. This may sound ridiculous, but I assure you that is it common (when writing this, “common” would have had a line of its own if I had added a full stop!)

Cost can be inhibiting, yet the reward can be greater than many investments, e.g. do you really need a new digital wide-screen TV? Was my money spent wisely when going to sunny Portugal, only to be rained on for five of my six days there whilst England was bathed in sunshine?

If writing is your sole intended use, a second-hand computer for about £250 including a printer is an option. £1200 remains a substantial cost for a new computer with printer/scanner, but should include voice recognition software (talk to the computer and the words appear on the screen with near to 100% accuracy) and the ability to send and receive fax and e-mail messages to distant friends, 10 miles or 10,000 miles costs the same.

I think that is enough from me and I hope I will have varied opinions to add in future issues.

### **The Froud Memorial Competition**

May I thank those members who took the trouble to ask their local library to display our poster advertising this competition. The fact that we were too rushed in designing the poster and consequently included oversights and errors, including the misspelling of Caesar, was one reason why this method of advertising our existence was of limited success, but we may try again.

Of the 45 entries, 18 came from none members and some of these have subsequently joined. The judge had no idea if the writer was a member or not, thus ensuring impartiality. This was demonstrated when Stephen Bibby was the winner, with the 2 runners-up being none members.

Congratulations to Stephen, whose winning entry is included in this issue, and the runners-up, whose entries will be published at a later date.

## **Workshop**

Don't forget to bring your work and/or questions to our meeting at St Vincent Centre, just two minutes walk from Victoria Station. There is no specific agenda, so feel free to raise any issue and perhaps do a little shopping beforehand to make your visit to London really worth while.

## **New Year Party 2002**

### **Ethel Corduff**

The New Year party was held in the Civil Service club 26th January 2002 and attended by 21 members and guests, the highest number for some years which was encouraging. We welcomed new member Mr Peter Stock and his wife Andrea. They travelled from that distant and charming Dorset seaside resort of Swanage. The competition theme was Jubilee and prizes were the very sought after folio books, which were won by Sylvia Neumann and Ethel Corduff.

## **Letters**

Dear Editor,

May I compliment you as “Editor” and Terry James as writer, for the publication in above quoted magazine of article titled “Is Poetry Easier To Write Than Prose?”

Terry James’ descriptive, detailed context of a poet’s imaginative thought pattern was sheer brilliance in words. A thoroughly enjoyable read.

Full marks also to Joan Hykin for article “Can You Teach Me To Write”. This lady has obviously served her apprenticeship as a qualified, talented writer, also poet.

Writing needs dedication to duty; sometimes I wonder if the emotional stress is all worthwhile but then writers need to support each other as friends to appreciate the happiness and fulfilment psychologically that successful publication brings.

Similar to the sunshine beaming through suddenly without warning; to brighten a cloudy sky.

Yours sincerely

Stanley Gunn-Matthews

### **Getting Published - a cynic's tips**

You must first aim to grab the editor's attention. This can best be done by having the word Sex appear in the title of your piece whatever the subject.

Avoid verbiage. Remember that three adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'charming' and 'attractive' can be covered by one word – sexy. We now have sexy cars, sexy mirrors, sexy saucepans. (How do saucepans mate, I wonder.)

Don't waste time and effort searching your Thesaurus for the *mot juste*. The f..., sh.. and p... words will stand in for most of your verbs, nouns and adjectives.

And don't forget the whinge. Every part of life nowadays is worth a whinge. The poor standards to be seen by everyone everywhere (except in their own small corner) if sufficiently emphasised will make you popular with your readers. You will have given them a comforting sense of superiority.

Dorothy Shaw

[I don't entirely agree but ... – Ed.]

## **Guidance For Members: Correspondence Courses**

### **Clare Gaen**

I've done a few correspondence courses over the years, so offer my comments:

1. In 1995 I enrolled on a course with the Writing School. Halfway through my course this went into liquidation; however I consoled myself that the course material had included some excellent tips in a little book *Writing for Cash* and I had managed to earn in excess of the Course fees paid out largely through publication of reader's letters.

2. I subsequently enrolled on a course with the Writer's Bureau. I found the course material useful, but was less impressed with the standard of comment offered. I also found it took a long time to do each assignment as

those set were sometimes tedious. BUT once I had earned enough to gain a certificate of competence I was allowed to choose which assignments I wanted to do (being sent a large batch to choose from!) and subsequently when after 6 assignments I pleaded for a transfer to the Poetry Course, this was also allowed without additional charge. Certainly this is an organisation that has been around for a long time and, unlike many other courses does not set a time limit on completion. My experience with the comments received may just have been down to the individual tutor.

3. In 1998 I enrolled on a Poetry Course with Writers' News. I was less impressed with the Course material than with other Poetry Courses undertaken, but found the standard of comment (tutored by Peggy Poole) exceptionally good. In fact I was so happy with the standard of comment offered that on completion of my course in 2000 I signed up for a further set of extended assignments of which I have just 1 remaining. One word of warning, however, these courses are generally limited to two years, although extensions can be gained for delays caused by major events (e.g. house moves – 3 in my case – or illness).

4. I also took a Poetry Course with the Open College of the Arts, having pleaded a special case to be allowed straight onto the Poetry Course rather than the more normal route via Starting to Write. The emphasis of this course seems to be more on sparking off ideas rather than Poetic Form and again I didn't spend so much time on the reading material (also not helped by the smallness of print on the Poetry Course material; I was sent the Coursebook for the previous stage and found this far easier on the eye). Tutored by Anna Crowe, comments were highly personal with plenty of suggestions on developing work and also helpful suggestions towards further reading but could sometimes be slow (up to five weeks for a response). I did half the course before arranging for my teenage daughter to take over the last 3 assignments (transfer fee of £30) not because I wasn't enjoying the course but because I had my hands full with one of my other children being ill and because my daughter had been begging to do a Course. My daughter found the comments excellent also and her poetry has come on by leaps and bounds. In fact she was a recent winner in the Poetry Society's Simon Elvin awards (National competition for under 18's). The poem she submitted to the competition was not one she had received comments on, but the course had definitely sharpened up Emma's poetic thinking leading to this accolade. The one drawback of the course (apart from the delay in receiving comments) perhaps is the price – and be

warned, although there is an option to pay in instalments if you add up both methods of payment, the instalment option is more expensive.

## Marketing

### Non-photographer's Guide to Illustrating

#### Gordon Gompers

There are kinds of writing that requires illustrations. This is very true of travel writing. The problem is that taking photographs of a required standard calls for special skills. Just pushing a button and hoping for the best is not good enough. No matter how much one spends on equipment, no matter how hard one studies the art, the necessary skills still evades one.

It took me a long time for me to develop these skills. Fortunately during the early days of my writing career there was no problem. My main subject was tape recording and illustrations were never required apart from diagrams. Then out of the blue I had a commission to write a series on tape recording from *The Meccano Magazine*; and that *had* to be illustrated by photographs. The editor of a tape recording magazine advised me to apply to the various tape recorder manufacturers. Results: marvellous. Grundig, Telefunken, Phillips and quite a few others supplied me with glossies. They were more interested in advertising their products than in any copyright nonsense.

As a travel writer I specialised on famous buildings. My progress as a photographer was really dismal and my being disaster prone hardly helped. When covering Broadlands (the home of the late Lord Louis Mountbatten) I ripped my film. When thanking the trustee for his co-operation I mentioned this disaster. He promptly sent me two magnificent glossies. I had no difficulty placing the article. Blenheim Palace, Leeds Castle and Samaurez Manor (Guernsey) were also helpful this way.

Museums can be helpful. Once when writing on Cambridge the Fitzwilliam Museum permitted me to reproduce a Titian in *The Lady*. A series on flight I wrote for *Look & Learn* was supplied with photographs from The National Science Museum and the RAF museums at Hendon with the understanding that they could be used as artistic reference only. This series has not been published yet because the magazine folded up. However, *Look & Learn* had already published a series by me on the Channel Islands using photographs as artistic reference from a very different source. I had formed an agreement with Carel Toms, a distinguished Guernsey photographer and author of the best seller "*Hitler's Fortress Islands*". Since he was more famous than I was his name helped to sell our stuff. We split the dosh 2:1 in my favour.



Even when I had developed my photographic skills to a point that I no longer needed his services we still remained firm friends and exchanged Xmas cards.

[Whilst this might be seen as more about Gordon than the subject, I trust members agree with me that it is interesting anyway and points to the benefit of photography to travel writers – Ed.]

## **Poetry Pages**

**Edited by Joyce Thornton**

### **ECLIPSE AT COMPIEGNE**

Sylvia Neumann

We stood among seeding grasses  
In the forest ride, binoculars in hand,  
Watching as cloud unravelled  
And darkness broke the sun's bright heart.

Ancestral fears of devouring dragons  
To be driven off with drums and dancing  
No longer seemed unreasonable  
And the shadow stepping on clouds  
Was not of this familiar world.

Watchers stood in reverential silence  
Until night time darkness closed on noon  
Cool air breathed through August warmth  
And owls hooted in benighted trees.

The sun king's servants understood  
Strange coincidence of size and distance  
Movement of the moon's shadow,  
Yet all that stood there felt a primitive emotion.

At the millennium's cusp we revel  
In our power to make or mar.  
But we are weak before cosmic forces  
That turn earth and moon in ancient orbit  
And light the sun's fusion furnace.

### **MILTON KEYNES**

Dorothy Shaw

Comedians – denizens of tight-knit city flats –  
amuse the nation with their taunts and sneers;  
Cotswold lovers raise a shoulder in disdain.  
They cannot have known us in our springtime;  
a myriad budding trees colour the unpolluted air  
with many hues; daffodils are everywhere,  
swathing with brightness the clean-swept pathways;  
thrusting spears of crocus make of their grassy beds  
carpets of mottled gold.

Then, flowering trees (pink, yellow and white) hold sway  
until the time of the roses, the beds of summer blooms.

Who would trade this vernal beauty, this spaciousness,  
this comeliness, for an architect's prize?

LATE AFTERNOON

D. M. Abbott

Domestic routine throughout the suburbs –  
Collection of children from school and returning workers  
Reflect on the worth of their multifarious days.

Happy those times when, rank set aside,  
All work together to a common end.  
Too soon self-interest, *leal* or not, takes over.

When the Berlin wall, brick by brick came down  
And the calendar turned a thousand years  
Were the hopes false for greater human peace?

[*leal* – (Scottish) = loyal, honest]

EVERYDAY A HOLIDAY!

Ethel Corduff

I wish every day was a holiday  
I would like to be a Hemingway  
And spend most of my time in literary endeavour  
But I could never be that clever.

To sit serenely in a book-lined room  
Quietly waiting for inspiration to come  
Mont Blanc pen poised at the ready  
While a glass of brandy makes my hand unsteady.

To have the day ahead free of chore  
I could hark back to days of yore  
Helped along with some *uisce baugh*  
It might help me to write like Waugh.

But who would pay for this holiday  
So I need not face another Monday  
But fill my days in wondrous ways  
With papers, books and reject trays?

[*Uisce baugh* = Gaelic for whiskey]

## THE ETCH OF YEARS

Mike Boland

The etch of years against the edifice  
Of Time matures to dust about our feet,  
And Man, in awe, erects a carapace  
Of Myth to dull the chronologic beat.  
Science told that Time is like an arrow,  
And we're all drawn upon that dreadful bow,  
But now it's known the idea is too narrow,  
And Time is in a constant flux and flow.  
The past is, in essence, always with us;  
Tomorrow casts its shadow on today.  
Terrors that this thought awakens in us

Are more than gods or science can allay.  
A poet lifts his song against the night,  
And dreams he sees a small, faint glint of light.

## **Poetry Workshop**

### **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 Weekend**

The Poetry Workshop's annual Weekend takes place on 12-14 July at Birmingham University. During the Weekend, the AGM of the Poetry Workshop will be held. A report of the Weekend's activities, plus Minutes of the AGM will appear in the Autumn Newsletter.

### **Bill Barnes Competition**

The winners of the 2001 Bill Barnes Competition were:

- First Prize: Patricia Elvidge
- Second Prize: Barbara M Stewart
- Third Prize: Doreen Fay

Congratulations to them, and our thanks to Bill Douglas, who judged the competition. A special Newsletter containing all the entries for the 2001 competition has been produced and sent to all members of the Poetry Workshop. If anyone didn't receive a copy, let me know and I'll post one to you.

Don't forget that the closing date for the 2002 competition is 30 September. The committee of the Poetry Workshop has agreed that on alternate years, starting with 2002, the competition will be for rhyming poetry only. Rules were published in the Spring Newsletter, but if you are a new member, or if you lost your copy, write to me at the address above.

### **To Rhyme or Not**

Those of you who have seen the Spring Newsletter will be aware of the ongoing controversy concerning the question of whether poetry should

rhyme or not. There are heated views on both sides, expressed in the Letters section of the Newsletter, and several members have contributed articles in support of their side of the argument. If you are not already a member of the Poetry Workshop, don't forget that for only a £3 subscription, you too can join in this lively discussion, and in addition receive four Newsletters a year and have access to the popular Postal Folio scheme. You will also be eligible for the Bill Barnes Competition (exclusively for Poetry Workshop members) and the annual Weekend at Birmingham, and can submit work for Waves, the annual anthology of members' poetry. If you have any interest in poetry, the Poetry Workshop is the place to be.

Best wishes to everyone,  
Mike Boland

#### Dates to Remember

PW 2002:	12-14 July 2002
PW Competition:	Closing date 30 September 2002
Autumn Newsletter:	30 September 2002
Winter Newsletter:	30 November 2002



### **Short Story Postal Folios**

#### **Terry Rickson**

There is more to the Society than paying your subscription each year.

You've only to dip into the Author or read the 'blurb' printed on its back, for the preceding statement to be self-evident.

If you are beavering away on your own writing short stories – you might be quite happy to do so, of course – there is no substitute for having your efforts read and commented upon, than by like-minded fellow writers. This is where the Short Story Postal Folios come into their own. They are there for support, criticism (positive) and above all, encouragement and we all need the latter, especially when the muse appears to have departed for ever!

Folio members have had books published, success in journals and magazines and their stories read on local radio. There are those too who just enjoy writing for its own sake and are content for their work to be read

by their folio group. Friendships are formed through letters and cards, though you may never meet.

If you think this sort of activity is of interest, drop me a line; I'll be pleased to forward Guidelines.

Oh, and by the way, folio membership is FREE!

If that doesn't tempt you, I'm a Dutchman, as my grandmother would have said.

## **I Remember The Day That.....**

**Stephen Bibby**

(Winner of the Froud Memorial Competition 2001)

**I** saw the highest waterfall in the world. I remember that headlong plunge of the rushing cascade angrily tumbling over a 3,000 foot cliff, and then the amazing slow descent as the torrent calmed and dissipated into a fine rain, sprinkling on the river bed below. I remember the trek through the dense and clinging jungle, the physical struggle with the rapids, the long canoe voyage. I remember the cancelled booking and the verbal struggle with officialdom.

In fact I remember the day more vividly for those agonising, critical moments when I felt myself fated never to see Angel Falls at all.

To visit the Falls you first need to travel deep into the south of Venezuela to the heart of the Canaima National Park. The visitors' lodge is literally at the end of the airstrip as it is owned and run by the domestic airline which has a daily morning flight from Caracas. My London travel agent had arranged a package with the airline to include flight and accommodation.

Caracas Airport is a long, low, hot building of gesticulation and confusion. Some officials wear uniforms and epaulettes; some appear casual in the extreme, their bona fides apparent only from indecipherable identity badges. Presenting my ticket at what appeared to be the correct check-in desk, I looked on at the unexceptional tap tapping on the computer keyboard. The bored check-in girl looked up and muttered some incomprehensible Spanish. It was her shrug of indifference that told me something was wrong. The tickets were thrust back at me accompanied by emphatic sounds and a lazy hand flap waving me away. My trip to the

remarkable falls, discovered only in 1932 by the pioneering American aviator, Jimmie Angel, looked set to end before it had started.

Fortunately the local tour operator, with whom I had booked the journey upriver from Canaima, weighed in, no doubt fearful of loss of commission if I had to cancel. We created our own pocket of loud arm waving; complaints and demands flying backwards and forwards in rapid Spanish and a staccato English of irredeemably butchered translations for my benefit. The local agent, who had appeared merely capable when outlining her trip, now revealed herself as truly formidable. A young man arrived, propelled by his own importance - signified by the braid shoulder buttons of his crisp white shirt. She grabbed his arm and with a 'You a waita here!' barked at me, marched him off through a door marked 'No entrada'.

Ten minutes later they were back, the young man now visibly crumpled, proffering newly validated tickets.

'It was a nonsense,' explained my indomitable saviour with rising Latin vowel sounds. 'London had confirmed the tickets, but instead of confirming these stupidos cancelled! Now you go!'

I barely had time to mumble my thanks as the check-in was closing and I still had to negotiate the security guards and maze of passageways before being the last through the departure gates and onto the remaining seat on the flight to the interior.

Canaima itself is a sympathetically designed encampment on the shore of the vast Carrao River at a wide lagoon. It has small villas constructed with overhanging loose thatched roofs to blend in with the environment. The lagoon is spectacular, filled from the creamy cascades of several waterfalls that froth and foam with a constant roar over its eastern side. At first glance it appears as if the lagoon consists of cold tea or ale, not water because the tannin from the lush vegetation upstream gives a distinct brownish hue to the river.

But I had little time to admire the surroundings. There was a briefing session to attend at which I met a handful of fellow explorers from various parts of the world, and Tomas, our local Venezuelan guide, wiry and weather beaten but blessed with natural charisma. We were advised to have an early night and to be ready for a 4.30 a.m. wake up call and a 5 a.m. start the following morning.

I remember being barely awake the next morning, shivering in the clinging gloom as we were jerked and jolted on a trailer to a point upriver of the beery waterfalls, whose presence we perceived only from the nearby gushing sound magnified in the damp pre-dawn air. We gingerly boarded a long dugout canoe, a traditional craft modernised by the installation of plank seating and an outboard motor. Tomas introduced our boatman and his young assistant who immediately held us off the bank against the force of river rushing towards the Canaima falls. Thus we commenced the long voyage, cold and crouched uncomfortably inches from the brown water, now eerily exhaling wisps of grey mist.

For three hours the canoe sped along the broad waterway. On the banks we saw mile after mile of thick green rainforest. Occasionally an exotic parakeet or macaw would come squawking out of the greenery. Once a large water snake zigzagged across our prow. Above us the sky was covered in banks of long flat low cloud, the dawn grey changing to pink then bronze as the sun rose and the penetrating chill began to fade. Beneath this canopy the prehistoric landscape of the Venezuelan tepuys was revealed. These colossal mountains rise almost vertically from the plain, their sides carved and gouged by primeval tempests into fantastical and fearsome configurations. We were skirting the foot of the most awesome, a huge scarred rugged upthrust of rock, justly named the Devil's Tepuy, though at that hour its most diabolic features were still camouflaged by the spreading cloud.

Our boatman made a landfall at about 8 o'clock and we dragged our stiffened limbs ashore for a hasty makeshift breakfast of coffee and bread. Then it was back into the canoe to take the right turn into the Rio Churun.

Now we entered a narrower channel and very quickly encountered a series of rapids, some long, shallow and apparently benign, others threatening, the curling water funnelling through steep walls of rock. The young lad perched hazardously on the narrow prow, paddling furiously while the helmsman gripped the motor on full throttle and we pitched and jolted through the waves, water flooding round our feet. There was just time to bale out before the next sweeping curve and the prospect of a fresh encounter with another Scylla and Charybdis.



But it was on a deceptive, slow-moving rocky stretch that we came to grief. The little craft bumped and grated on the barely submerged boulders, the rudder useless with no depth beneath, the engine retracted for safety.

'All men out!' cried Tomas.

The choice was between sitting stranded and being sucked inexorably backward into the foam, or risking whatever unpleasant creatures inhabited the water and pushing the craft to safety. We chose the latter and the men hauled themselves over the side leaving three alarmed ladies to bale out and cry encouragement.

With considerable effort we pulled and dragged the canoe off the rocks until suddenly it shot into a channel and we found ourselves chest deep in water. The crew, mightily amused, assisted an ungainly scramble back aboard. Catastrophe averted, we continued on our way. I was beginning to feel that despite the gesticulating minions at Caracas, despite the hidden rocks and eddies of the Churn, despite being soaked to the skin, perhaps I was after all destined to see the world's highest waterfall.

A short time later we beached on a pebble bank and alighted, wet but with renewed eagerness to explore further. By now it was mid morning and the rising temperature set us steaming as we followed Tomas from the river along a path and into dense jungle.

I remember well that walk. I remember the squelch of my sodden trainers and the slipping and sliding on the brown earth of the forest floor. It was dark and heavy - a green darkness of dense foliage, heavy with the drip of moisture. There were trees of enormous height and girth, creepers and vines dividing the ascent with fibrous curtains and twisting roots to catch the unwary foot. Large bright butterflies appeared to perch lazily on broad leaves, nonchalantly ignorant of the dishevelled band of sweating, grunting humans clawing their way through this alien environment in search of a glimpse of a remote skein of falling water. Eager, vicious mosquitoes feasted on the their new visitors each of course laden with a cargo of fresh and pure blood.

At the point of exhaustion, we paused a few yards in front of what appeared to be a clearing.

Tomas made his big announcement. 'Here is the viewpoint - Mirador Laime. From here you can see Angel Falls. We have half an hour only, then we have to travel back.'

With a dramatic gesture he pulled back the last few branches and showed us onto a rocky outcrop.

We could see nothing. In front of us there was a vista of nondescript cloud, like a Dover fog on a damp day.

'There - that is Angel Falls. We must hope the mist will clear.'

Way in the distance we could see what appeared to be a light smoke drifting from the thin grey cloud. My heart sank. I had survived the officious incompetents of Caracas, the numbing canoe voyage, the battle with the rocks and rapids and now the muddy ascent through a malarious jungle. My reward was a few grey droplets falling onto a distant riverbed.

Then a small miracle occurred. A hint of sunlight appeared in the thinning cloud; a warming breath brushed our faces. The heat of the day was building up at the base of the tepuy. There was a sudden warming updraft and the veil in front of us began to part. The updraft became a breeze, the breeze an enchanting zephyr. In an instant the mist dissolved before our eyes and there in front was the highest waterfall in the world.

Our eyes followed the lifting morning cloud as it swirled upward and away. At the lip of the Devil's Tepuy we could see a roaring cataract as the river, oblivious of its fate, plunged over the mountainside. But then it has 3,213 feet to fall. The rushing cascade holds its shape for several seconds and about a thousand feet. Then it spreads into a widening white beard for another thousand feet. Finally it loses form altogether, the separating plume becoming once again a collection of droplets which hit the river bed as a shower of rain. The view is serene, the swirls of water gently floating downwards into dissolution as if in slow motion.

I remember standing there and in an instant more recalling some lines of Tennyson which sounded like a refrain in my brain:

'And like a downward smoke, the slender stream

Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.'

For indeed that was exactly what we were seeing, except that the pause and fall was infinitely more prolonged and more sedately beautiful than the poet could ever have imagined.

What an apt name had aviator Jimmie. The water may spring from the mountain of the devil but the falls are surely the handiwork of an angel.

Then, our reverie over, it was back down the slope of the dark damp jungle, back through the rapids, back to the tannin lake and, in the gathering gloom of chirruping crickets, back to Canaima.

We eat our meal tired and triumphant but then hardly needed the torches and hurricane lamps provided for our evening illumination; for last of all I remember an overwhelming weariness and drifting downwards like the long slow dissolving which is Angel Falls, into a sleep of satisfaction.

## **William's Dilemma**

### **Daphne Darking**

**W**illiam was in a spot, he knew it. He was pinned down under the weight of his horse Mickey, who had literally dropped him and fallen on him, and here he had been since noon. He was lying on a path bordered by a hedge with a road on the other side of it, and a field to his right, Harper's field in fact, on his farm. William, flat on his back gazed at the sky; it was incredibly beautiful, an arc of blue mystery. He was a man of 54 with a farm to run and was not given to too much contemplation, but now he was forced to lie still and think. Why did this have to happen now? And how was he going to get out of this uncomfortable not to say, painful, situation?

William tried to shift his position but it was impossible. He looked up into the green leaves of the hedgerow and inspected the pattern; he felt with his right hand the prickly stubble of the field after harvest; he smelt the warm dry air of high Summer. He noticed everything as never before. Everything was so lovely. William suddenly felt very sad; he realised he was thinking of death. If someone did not come soon the circulation in his legs would stop. What then? He felt so helpless, and a bit sorry for himself. Then he began to feel ashamed. Poor Mickey; he must be dead. There had been no movement from the first moment William had felt himself lurch helplessly sideways, his right leg under the dead weight of the horse. The

obvious conclusion pressed in upon his thoughts again. He knew he had to have help soon. Ah! school-leaving time, that was it; hope stirred in his breast, students from the 6th Form College sometimes used this path. Time passed, the sun was still warm on his face so school had not yet finished.

Some time later, he did not know how long, he heard voices. William shouted with all his might but the youngsters yelling and teasing one another on the other side of the hedge did not hear him. Despondency overtook him. He racked his brains for something to do. But what? He was not used to being out of control of any situation, but he just could not move. He consulted his watch; 4.27, the date 27 July; lighting up time 8.35, he noted methodically. Ah, Friday, perhaps boys would be going back to school for cricket practice; they sometimes did. But no one came. Dog walkers! that was it; hope stirred again in William's breast. He had sometimes seen a woman with a small terrier on this path. She lived in the bungalow at the Harper's Road end of the field. Time was getting on, it would be dusk soon, then no one would come. He began to doze off; he was so tired,

A sharp bark revived him. It was the terrier belonging to the woman he had sometimes seen before. Hope rushed up in William like a physical force; was the owner nearby? He couldn't shout for the rush of emotion which constricted his throat.

"Here, boy," he said weakly. The dog pranced excitedly, then half circled around him with yapping barks and short steps toward him and away, then back again.

"Stand still you idiot dog," William said, exasperated. What could he do? There was no sign of the owner. Could he get the dog's collar off to attract attention? No, the animal would not stand still. Could he get him to 'take' something? Desperately William tried to reach his handkerchief but it was held fast in his breeches pocket. His wallet? The dog became friendlier and fussed around. Painfully William eased his arms up to reach his inside pocket. He managed to get to his wallet and meanwhile made encouraging sounds toward the dog. He tried to quieten the animal. A voice from behind the hedge was calling, "Oscar, Oscar, come on."

Oscar! What a stupid name for a dog thought William. He summoned all his strength and shouted – "Help" but the footsteps had faded and the dog

was gone. William nearly cried. Minutes later, or so he thought, Oscar was back curious and friendly now.

“Hello Oscar,” said William, really glad to see the little dog. “Here, Oscar, take ...” It was a wild hope. He waved his wallet toward the dog. Oscar pranced around William and the dead horse. He would not stand still. William flung the wallet a few feet. “Take,” he said despairingly. The dog stood still a moment and looked at him. “Fetch, then,” said William, “Good dog!” The happy animal delightedly ‘fetched’ the wallet, twice! then went away. William groaned. It was getting dark now; the situation was serious he realised, but there was nothing he could do, except resign himself, but to what?

The evening sky cast a faint tinge of pink from behind dark blue clouds over Harper’s Field. Elsa Peters looked out from her kitchen window over the silent scene. The changing colours of the sky never ceased to amaze her and she loved the view of the field throughout the seasons. She loved her neat little bungalow too; it was a bit isolated but she did not mind. She had Oscar for company, her only company really since Jim had died. Elsa was quite content with her lot most of the time, but the beauty of the evening brought a pang of sadness to her heart. She sighed as she took down Oscar’s dish for his food. ‘Well, yes,’ she admitted to herself, ‘it was a bit lonely at times.’ She’d left the door open for the dog to follow her in, where was he? She went into the lounge to switch on her favourite quiz programme. The dog followed her in, and barked at her.

“Eat your dinner, silly,” said Elsa, but Oscar would not settle. He took a turn round the kitchen then back to her side, then to the kitchen again. Finally he mooched off to his bed.

“What is the capital of Cuba?” came a voice from the television.

“Hava... Oh! what’s the matter Oscar?” said Elsa. The dog was back by her chair, then he ran to the kitchen door.

“So you want to go out again then, do you?” said Elsa and she reached for a torch which was hanging on the kitchen wall. She opened the door then started back in surprise. Coming down the path from the wicket gate was the paper boy, Terry Noakes. He was holding his hand to his face, a little blood trickled from his nose.

“Quick,” he said, “I’ve fell off my bike ... there’s something in the path ... I nearly went over the handlebars.”

“What is it?” asked Elsa.

“A dead horse,” came the reply.

Elsa’s stomach lurched. It wasn’t like Terry to play games, but ... she moved to close the door. “No really, you must come, someone’s hurt, get the police,” and he put his foot in the door. Oscar was yapping and prancing madly. The little dog ran down the path and back again. Elsa paused for only a few more moments, then fetched her coat and keys and ran after him. The boy was already yards ahead. Elsa followed as fast as she could. Within minutes the flashlight shone on an extraordinary scene. Elsa could see the huge mound of the horse over what seemed like the top half of a man. It was William. He was still alive but drifted off into a semi-conscious state. Elsa felt for a pulse. She could see there was no chance of moving him.

“Here, Terry, phone the police,” she said and thrust her keys into the boy’s hand. He ran off and Elsa took off her coat and put it over William. As she sat back on her heels a moment, Oscar rushed in and began licking William’s face. To her huge relief Elsa saw the man wake up and try to fend off the dog with his free hand.

“Oh, good!” said Elsa looking down at William.

“Glad you think so!” said William faintly.

“I mean, don’t worry, help is coming,” she answered, and not knowing what to do next, held his hand firmly.

William gazed up at the anxious face above him. Nice eyes, he thought, and drifted off again. “Hold on,” said Elsa. “The ambulance will be here in a minute.” She desperately hoped so.

The police did arrive very shortly after that and took charge. Poor old Mickey was moved with ropes and a tractor and William was taken to hospital and treated for shock. Amazingly he had no other injuries.

The event merited two and a half columns in the local newspaper with a picture of young Terry Noakes, his bicycle and Oscar the dog. William,

when he had recovered did not buy himself another horse straight away but took to walking through his fields instead, very often through Harper's field. He often met Elsa and Oscar, and the little dog always greeted him madly. He was that kind of dog. In fact, his behaviour served to make both William and Elsa laugh and delight in these not infrequent encounters. William's experience of being trapped and helpless for a period of time had taught him there is no great merit in being too self-sufficient. And Elsa? Well, she was happy to have made two new friends. Terry Noakes often stayed for tea after his paper round, and eventually so did William.

## **A Proper Charlie** **Martin Kelly**

“Hold my hand,” she whispered.

I was startled by her voice which intruded into my concerned thoughts. Moreover, I was surprised that a complete stranger should make such an intimate request. But in view of our current predicament perhaps it was understandable. Clumsily and with embarrassment I obliged.

It was clear to me that she was distressed. I could imagine the feeling of apprehension, anxiety and even terror that must be welling up in her mind. My own thoughts were certainly of that nature.

I immediately realised that it was incumbent on me to console her, in what was a disturbing set of circumstances. I had suffered from claustrophobia from childhood, ever since the time I was lost in underground caves for an hour before being rescued. I screamed my head off and was traumatically scarred for life by that ordeal. Now here we were, two strangers suspended in a lift midway between floors for the past ten minutes. Beads of sweat on my forehead had turned into rivulets that were running down my face and diverging into separate streams on contact with my nose. I could taste the saline mixture as it entered the corners of my mouth.

To conceal my panic from my companion I groped for a handkerchief, with my free hand, to wipe my face. Scared though I was, I had to give the

impression of composure. My co-captive had become *my* responsibility. I mustn't fail her.

She pressed my hand gently as if to say *thank you my hero*. A hero I certainly was not, a fact I had to conceal from her. I looked down to see how she was reacting. In spite of our plight she smiled stoically. Her face showed none of the turmoil in her mind. I believed that was a testimony to her unwavering confidence in me. I was determined not to fail her. We waited in silence, for what seemed like an hour but in all probability was no more than a few minutes. Nothing happened. I wondered how long more I could hold out.

How long would it be before the alarm is raised? I had no idea. There has to be a set procedure in these circumstances – once the problem is realised. Surely somebody must be aware of our predicament by now? The feeling of claustrophobia was becoming unbearable.

There were only the two of us in the lift but already I had the feeling that our air supply was reducing. If it hadn't been for the concern felt for my companion I think I would have screamed even louder than in those caves years ago.

“My name is Charles. Please forgive my untidy dress. You see I have been decorating my bedroom and had to break off to get a new paint brush.”

Totally irrelevant information I realised as soon as I said it but at least it was one way of breaking the tension. I took the brush from my pocket to show her. This time her smile said, *yes I know what a paint brush looks like but thank you just the same*. I felt an absolute fool.

After a few minutes she spoke.

“My name is Martha.”

Whenever I looked at her she smiled as if to show her total confidence in me. At the same time I was praying that I could demonstrate my feigned machismo if only to justify her belief in me as her benefactor. Her heroic display made me feel ashamed. My hands were sweating but I didn't want to release my grip – a grip that was a source of such comfort to her. If it hadn't been for my strongly felt obligation to Martha I think I would have freaked by now.

Again I tried to encourage her.



“I’m sure it won’t be long until our release,” I said without much conviction. The pressure of Martha’s hand on mine signalled agreement.

In desperation I struggled to conjure up some topic of conversation to take her mind away from our plight. Any subsequent conversation consisted of trivia, mostly introduced by me and with only sporadic comments by her. Perhaps my attempts to involve her in conversation were doing more harm than good. Her courageous demeanour conveyed nothing to that effect. I marvelled at her apparent composure and thought that if I got married and had a daughter I would call her Martha.

Over twenty minutes more elapsed before we heard encouraging noises outside – from above and below. An amplified voice offered words of encouragement and an assurance that we would be free in minutes.

“The cavalry has arrived,” I said with relief. I was so glad that, if only for Martha’s sake, I managed to control my anxiety and total lack of composure.

Out of confinement we were given some refreshments with profuse apologies for our ordeal. We walked together into the open air. When we were about to go our separate ways Martha gripped my hand once more and, in an undertone, she said, “There you are. It’s all over now. I could see you were in a bad state that is why I asked you to hold my hand. I must say I believe the fresh air has brought the colour back to your cheeks.”

In amazement I gasped and looked down at this frail old lady. The manager of the store was at the entrance waving good bye. Martha winked at me and in a louder voice she said,

“Good bye Charlie, it was lucky that you were there to look after me. I’m ever so thankful for that.”

As she walked away, again she winked – cheekily. I experienced a pang of sadness at the thought of losing my friend. I watched until she was out of sight before heading back home, feeling a *Proper Charlie*.



**Stage**  
**Jan Jefferies**

“You’ll be great, I know you will,” said Bee, adding the final touches to Joannie’s hair.

“Suppose I go blank – What’ll I do? I’ll fluff my lines ...” Joannie gesticulated with her hands at her image in the mirror. “I couldn’t bear it if I messed it up.”

“You won’t. You did all right last night at rehearsal and I could see Peter was impressed.”

“Do you really think so? Really? I thought he looked a bit, well ...”

“Oh that’s just Peter. He gets moody at times. Take a deep breath then have another drink. It’ll relax you.”

Joannie took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Bee pinned up a stray wisp of hair, then smoothed the sides of Joannie’s head with the palms of her hands. She picked up a can of hairspray and used it in short bursts over the blonde curls.

“Why didn’t Peter pick you for the part?”

There was an uncomfortable pause at the sudden question and Joannie noticed the strange look on Bee’s face.

“You *are* Lizzie Holden, the heroine. The part was made for you. Why shouldn’t he?” said Bee. She turned away and fetched the silk scarf. Joannie frowned.

“But, but Peter did offer you the part first, surely?”

“Well, I turned it down,” said Bee, a little too sharply, then forced a smile as she settled the scarf about Joannie’s neck. “And anyway I’m quite busy at the moment so I wouldn’t have been able to do it justice.”

“It’s a brilliant script. Peter’s very talented don’t you think?” Joannie paused, “He’s such a gentleman, so considerate and I really couldn’t believe it when he asked me out to dinner, let alone give me the main part in his play.”

“Let’s have a look at you now. Stand up, I want to make sure the dress is okay.”

Joannie took another gulp of whisky before moving away from the dressing table to stand in front of the full length mirror. Bee bent to remove a pin from the hem of the sequined dress then stood up to look at the effect.

“Oh you really have been a help. I don’t know how I would have managed it on my own.” Joannie clasped her hands together like an excited child just as a knock came at the door.

“One minute, beginners please,” boomed a voice.

Joannie looked aghast.

“Oh dear, I feel sick.”

“No you don’t. Off you go and remember what I told you.”

“I ... I can’t.” Joannie flopped down onto the stool and stared up at Bee. “I can’t, I really can’t.”

Bee sighed. “Come on, once you’ve said your first line everything’ll come together and you won’t have time to be nervous. Finish your drink.”

She handed the glass to Joannie who dutifully finished it, then helped her to her feet and led her to the door.

“Peter won’t be very pleased if you don’t go on and you don’t want to disappoint him do you?” She almost pulled the reluctant woman through the door and up the few steps to the side of the stage. Joannie stood swaying slightly, feeling very peculiar. Bee left her there and made her way to the back of the hall. Every seat was occupied. She’d watch Joannie make a fool of herself and Peter’s play a disaster.

Bee smiled her satisfaction as the curtain rose.

## **An Interesting Experience**

### **Terry Rickson**

**R**eturning from a holiday in Dorset some years ago, we made a detour on our homeward journey to visit the henge monument of Knowlton Rings, near Wimborne. This monument is not on the usual tourist path and an effort has to be made to locate its whereabouts.

Knowlton Rings comprises three large aligned circles, each slightly smaller than the other. They are best seen from the air, for at ground level only the centre one is observable, the other two being obscured by farm buildings and trees. The visible henge consists of a shallow ditch and bank, encompassing a large circular area with two entrances roughly in the directions east north east and west south west; these may indicate alignment to a star or group of stars at a particular season of the year.

A ruined medieval church is contained within the enclosure. It was interesting to observe that church appeared to block effectively the view from one entrance to the other – deliberate? It could have been so, in order to nullify any magical or pagan rites associated with the site.

We spent time wandering around. One or two other visitors arrived, one a man with a camera. Quite dramatically the sky darkened and we were overtaken within minutes by a violent thunderstorm and lashing rain. My comment on reaching the car was that we must have offended the ancient gods, much to the amazement of my family!

A short time after the visit, I came across and read Tom Graves' book and theories on dowsing – the connection between ancient sites and water/electrical currents – in which he remarked upon the phenomena of sudden and violent storms occurring at places such as Knowlton. There are people/mystics who believe the 'site guardians' – fairies, ghosts, fearsome beasts or what you will – are highly displeased by intrusions of things such as cameras and invoke storms.

It was a startling and dramatic experience, not one to dismiss out of hand lightly nor one to forget.

## **Two On The Greensward** **R R Yearley**

“Which one's yours?”

“The tall fellow in the sports jacket. Keeps himself very upright with his stomach pulled in. Great on discipline. What about yours?”

“She's the plumpish lady with the elaborate hair-style and the expensive complexion.”

“That must be her sitting over there with mine. What does she call you?”

“Don't laugh but it's 'Mimsie'.”

“That's a nice name. Mine calls me 'Rover'. Ridiculous. About fifty years out of date. Makes me feel like an advert for 'Winalot'.”

“Oh, it's old-fashioned but it's solid and dependable. It suits you. How long have you had him?”

“Nine years now. And he never learns. He's trained me to run away if I get into trouble by fighting, which I must admit I often do, and to hide

until he whistles. One of these days, when he annoys me, I shall come back before the coast is clear and really let him down. What about you?"

"I've had her eight years and she spoils me horribly. Always stuffing me with tit-bits. Look how stout I've got."

"No, you're just well-shaped. I like my lady-friends to be well-upholstered. Look out, here's that silly French poodle who thinks I fancy her. My fault, I suppose, but whenever I see her I have to go through the motions of rushing at her and sniffing as though I've gone out of my mind with desire. If I may say so without offence, you're more my type. Do you ever have to put on that sort of show?"

"Yes, when she offers me a 'chocky-chock' I have to roll over and slobber. Sick-making. I hate chocolate but if I don't perform she assumes I'm ill and rushes me off to the vet."

"Did you have any little ones?"

"Yes, I had a family but they did something to me so that I didn't have any more. Not much chance with old glamour pants keeping a close eye on me. What about you?"

"Sex never worried me – well it's a long time since. I pretend sometimes just to get him bothered."

"Are you kept on a lead?"

"Oh, no. In spite of all the notices about the bye-laws on the greensward he never has a lead on me. Says he has control at all times. I show him up by ignoring his commands. ('Heel, Sir' he shouts. What a clot.) He goes berserk. I can't spell it but that's what he goes. Chases after me, silly old man, and I run rings round him till I finally take pity on him and let him beat me until he feels better. But he keeps me on a lead for several days as a punishment so I don't do it too often. Do you play tricks, Mimsie, if I may call you so?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I hate these tidy bags. So undignified. I always go when she's just given up and put the bag away. She doesn't bother me because she doesn't want to use her little shovel. Then I run away so she's torn

between catching me and cleaning up the mess. Generally I won't go when we're out – I make a mess in her garden or get very constipated.”

“My chap won't carry a tidy bag. His view is that he pays his rates and the Council should employ a warden to clear up. So he lets me go when I fancy.”

“Do you keep well?”

“Yes. I keep pretty fit but he won't let me talk to the opposite sex. Here he comes now. He's just noticed I'm chatting to you, Mimsie, and he's going to stop it. But he'll have to chase me all over the green. I'll have him down on the beach before I let him catch me. But don't go away if you can help it. If you can't stay perhaps I may see you tomorrow. As he says to all his lady friends, ‘Lovely to see you, dear’.”

“Good-bye, Rover dear. Lovely to have met you.”

## **Adolescent Years**

### **Stanley Gunn-Matthews**

**M**y bad dream character came to life after I passed an eleven plus examination, placed second in the year and was accepted with four other boys to attend Tottenham Grammar school in north London.

At first the selection was met with my being congratulated by my close family and friends, the purchasing of the school uniform and the six week holiday period to unwind before commencing the rigours of senior school life.

I was presented with a huge school satchel and told that this would be necessary to carry my books for the five years of intensive study and the unknown ogre of hours consumed by homework exercises covering the many subjects that were a necessary part of the education curriculum.

When commencing Grammar school at the beginning of the autumnal term I averaged at least four hours evening homework covering at least three subjects every day.

The satchel that had been purchased for me was very necessary and bulged with various books that needed carrying two miles to school and the same distance home again, this was before the nightmare of the homework routine was commenced.

What have I let myself in for I thought, I wanted to escape, I wanted my very important freedom of living but to no avail.

My father was very strict, Victorian styled and self centred, my mother was subservient to my father's wishes, he ruled the family but he never did my bloody homework.

How I hated that homework all the seasons round, a prisoner to study, deprived of wonderful sunny weather including weekends, if only I had known the consequences, I would have deliberately failed that examination.

A school that numbered some 650 boys; no girls. Girls were beings I looked at with fantasia thought, girls were beings that encouraged spots on my face, girls were beings that were subject to my dream release.

Leaving school was wonderful – no bloody homework.

## **A Quiet drink** **Elvira Bridges**

A smoky haze polluted the bar of the recently renamed 'Rat and Parrot'. Henry Butcher, at 92 the oldest customer, was holding forth, as usual, as to why they should have kept the suitably named 'O'Sullivan's'.

"Poor old Seamus O'Sullivan would turn in his grave if he knew what they've done to his hostelry." Henry's rheumy eyes trickled tears of sadness and too much strong beer.

"Rat and Parrot!" He tapped on the table with his almost empty glass, looking expectantly around at the other drinkers, to no avail. He put it down with ill grace and shrugged. "S'not a proper name for a public house."

Paddy Maguire, sitting next to him nodded in agreement, “Now what’s wrong with a good Irish name like O’Sullivan’s. Rolled off your tongue, smooth as Guinness, so it did.”

The rest of the table’s occupants, nodded sagely. A discreet cough made them look up. A newcomer nearby watched them. Dressed in casual clothes he indicated the only empty chair, “Any one sitting here?” Before one of the wags could say the inevitable “No, not unless it’s a ghost,” he added, “Can I join you?”

Paddy nodded, “Haven’t seen you in here before.” The Irish man patted the unoccupied seat. “New around here, are you?”

“No. Used to go to the Duke of Wellington in Market Street.” He looked towards the bar door.

“What made you stop going there?” Henry thought the new man looked good for a pint. He emptied his glass and grinned his gappy smile. “Beer’s gone orf there, has it?”

The stranger shook his head, “No, thought I’d like a change.” His eyes strayed to the door again.

Vince across the table looked at the door and said, “Looking for someone, mate?”

The newcomer changed the subject, put out his hand and introduced himself, “I’m Jack Peters, by the way.” Glancing around the group of three regulars, he said, “Drink, anyone?”

Henry Butcher eagerly shoved his glass at the new man. “Yeah. Ta, pint please.”

Vincent, the local greengrocer said quietly, “Watch him, Jack. Our old Henry never says no. You’ll soon be skint.”

Jack laughed with good grace, “That’s OK. Have one yourself.”

A few drinks later the four men were having a noisy time and Jack got up unsteadily from the table. “Same again, boys?” He spluttered with merriment as he looked at Henry.” Boys!”

The old man peered back, his pale, moist eyes barely focusing. “I’ll have another pint, ta.”

Paddy touched his cap and hiccuped, “An’ it’ll be another Guinness for me, if you please, sir. Smooth nectar of the gods.”



“Same here,” Vince nodded slowly. “My round next, Jack.”

“Right you are, lads.” Jack stood unsteadily and slurred again, “Right you are, lads.” Pulling back the sleeve of his jacket, he screwed up his eyes and tried to see his watch. Failing to register the time he looked up at the clock on the wall. “Does that clock say twenty past seven?”

The remaining three chorused, “No, it says tick tock.”

Jack staggered to the bar, muttering to himself in a sing song voice, “Sss’pose I should be getting home.”

The pub door crashed open and a figure huddled in a black coat stood surveying the scene.

“Jack Peters!” the voice creaked, “thought you’d hide in here, did you?” The elderly figure pointed a walking stick accusingly.

The 65 year old Jack visibly shrunk. “I’m coming.”

The stick struck a blow on the pensioner’s shoulder. “Right. NOW!” The newcomer’s voice got stronger and bellowed, “Get out of this pub, get home and get my dinner.”

“All right, Dad. I’m coming.” The younger man scuttled out of the bar. “Don’t hit me, Dad.”

Open mouthed and silent the remaining drinkers stared after the departing couple.

Vince was the first to recover his voice. “Poor sod. Think we should phone child line?”

## **The Verdict**

### **Vivian Edwards**

**I** smiled. Staring straight into the eyes of the esteemed physician. How else does a man like me act when he hears such a verdict. There was silence between us. A sustained silence whilst I brooded upon the situation.

One month to live. Maybe three. Who knows how far luck can stretch.

Such terrible luck for me; David Kosby. Born in the East End of London of Jewish immigrant parents. Awarded a Military Medal. Rising from the depths of poverty into relative richness. Yes ... I’d faced some prejudice in the land that gave me both shelter and succour; fed me with the milk of human kindness; but then Jews must always battle against prejudice. Now a self made successful business man in a home of his own in the heart of London; two children in

exclusive boarding schools; a golden glittering bejewelled wife. A man still fighting all the way.

A man who had never lacked courage.

It had been an increasing exhaustion; a sickly debility that compelled *me* to cease working, forced *me* to the door of the finest physician in that Mecca of British medicine, Harley Street. It had been my first real illness in the fifty long years of my life. Strange how oddly vulnerable one feels stripped of all one's clothes. Robbed of dignity.

Urbanely the great physician had extracted from me all my symptoms. I'd felt embarrassed. Not being used to even thinking about my health, speaking about it had made me feel like a hypochondriac. He'd listened inscrutably whilst I'd talked:

“Seemed like a kind of 'flu at first. Kept feeling hot and giddy. Couldn't concentrate on my work, and then began to wake up stone cold and shivering at night. It kept my wife awake.”

I almost wept at that memory. I'd not told him that Marcia had taken herself to another bed; in another room. No wifely ministrations there.

Then I'd continued. “Pains ... all over me. Headaches too. Excruciating headaches. Yes ... a cough ... but not much of one at first ... till it started keeping me awake at night. At first I kept on working ... tried to shake it off ...”

Suavely, smoothly, he'd encouraged me to keep on talking. He'd towered in his tallness above me, elbows splayed out on the vastness of his desk, finger tips gracefully opposed. Sometimes he had frowned, closing his eyes in concentration. I felt I could trust him implicitly.

Education. That's what it did for a man. It was something I'd never had. How I'd admired his grave demeanour. The feeling that he imparted to me that all his senses, all his skills, a lifetime of experience, were focused solely upon me. At that point in time, only I was of any importance to him.

“Lost my appetite. Couldn't eat. Lost weight. Nearly two stone.”

A short square man, I'd not looked a pretty sight.

“Lost all my energy. I couldn't even work.”

Yes, that had really worried my wife Marcia. Without work, the money supply failed. Most of my capital was tied up in my business. I'd always had energy in abundance. I needed that to keep my family satisfied. It was nothing but the best for them. And my gorgeous Gentile wife knew best how to extract that. A pity really; I let my orthodox background fade far away when I'd

married. Marcia never held to any beliefs; and so somehow our marriage became built upon the shifting sands.

The real truth was that I was afraid of my wife; could deny her nothing. I was afraid of her haughty demeanour; afraid to hear the words she used; afraid of her education. Her family had rejected me.

Dr. Manson had meticulously examined my body. Then he'd turned his head away from me, saying, "Your family doctor showed me your X-rays. I've seen the results of all your tests. My examination is now finished; you may get dressed."

A royal command, which I'd obeyed.

"So what's the verdict?" How truculent my voice had sounded. That had covered an underlying fear. There had been no answer.

Bleakly I'd gazed at the broadness of his back, stooping low over a wash basin, scrupulously hand-washing.

Was he deaf?

Well ... two could play at that game. I'd taken my time. Finished dressing slowly; carefully slicked back the untidy tumble of black hair. Shuddered when I saw my shrivelled skin pallid against the shagginess of a black beard; the mournful brown eyes sunk deep within their bony sockets.

"Sit down, Mr Kosby, if you please."

At last. Still he'd towered over me, starting to elaborate on my X-Rays; the other various tests. I'd grown impatient. That esteemed physician would be paid good money to sort out those technicalities. Fluid on the lung and spreading shadows didn't interest me ... or was I underplaying their significance? His patience was extraordinary.

"Well ... *what's the verdict?*" I'd repeated yet again.

Had he sensed that undercurrent of anguish beneath my brusque voice. His look had been wary: "Are you absolutely positive that you *never ever* smoked?"

Was the man trying to tell me something. I remember shifting uneasily. That aching pain in my back had returned in full force. I'd mused over his question. Smoked ...? Never. Waste of time and of money. But smoking meant lung cancer. Was *that* the verdict?

"Lung cancer?" I'd asked casually. Tone even and controlled. "Operable?" And I'd looked him straight in the eye. As I've said, I've never lacked courage.

"I'm sure that *is* the diagnosis," he'd said slowly. "If so ... then certainly it is ... *extremely* serious ... however a very small operative procedure would clarify

my diagnosis ... a surgical colleague could take a biopsy ... removing a minute piece of the lung ... then the cells could be viewed under the microscope by a pathologist ...”

So ... there was even more money to be spent.

“If it is cancer, how long have I got?” I’d interrupted.

“Doctors are not divine. Two months ... maybe three ... perhaps longer.”

As I said, a *horrible* verdict.

That is why I’d smiled. Meditated on the situation. Took my time.

His patience was really wonderful. Suddenly my mind was made up. Plans materialised. My course of action was clear:

“I’m off on a cruise. Tomorrow.”

“Alright ... perhaps a sound idea in the circumstances ... but I want you to see me again in three weeks. I’ll arrange for some more X-rays and also for that biopsy on your return ... the delay will be of no significance ...”

“I’ll be back. I’ll make an appointment with your secretary ... might as well pay her today ... while my money is still good.”

We smiled together. A joke shared.

Recollections of that consultation spurred me on to battle. At last I found an unexpected vacancy on the Cunard Line. It suited me well. Lucky for me that no-one demanded a medical certificate. My early arrival home was greeted with some dismay. Marcia my wife was already dressed in a silvery velvet dress that firmly sheathed the still youthful fullness of her figure. Flaxen hair was piled high above a cream coloured complexion; the brightness of blue eyes. Hers was a Nordic beauty.

Had she married me because she knew that her beauty bewitched me; that I would accede to her every wish? I couldn’t remember any romance between us after marriage; any tenderness. Only the rashness of an enraptured young man already rich in worldly goods; uneducated; naive; trapped like a fly in a spider’s web by such a heavenly vision.

A Daimler arrived, complete with chauffeur. Then a black bow tie on a sleekly handsome form emerged. Marcia’s companion. She left without a backward glance.

“Poor old Dad. You arrived home far too early. But you do neglect mother. She likes a little glitter. Don’t all women.”

That was Nigel my son. Insolent young pup with his world weary voice. Eighteen. Top public school, and he acted it. Flaxen hair and the deep blue eyes of his mother; just like his sister Julia.

What did I know about either of them?

Nigel spoke. "I say Dad. You couldn't advance us some money. Ready cash. Julia and I both have dates."

So why not. Wasn't the end of my life going to be a vast spending spree. Casually I reached for my wallet, and carefully counted out four fifty pound notes into his outstretched hands. Most likely the last he'd ever get from me.

"I say. Thank you Sir."

Such a deferential voice. Such a sophisticated lout.

Soft lips pressed themselves against my cheeks. My daughter Julia. She had seen the transaction.

"You're a pet, Dad."

"I am indeed. And I'll not be seeing you all for a while. I'm off ... on a cruise." Suddenly I wanted the point pressed home. Just for once, money was being lavished; *upon me*. "A luxury cruise on the Queen Elisabeth Two. Signal deck. My own veranda. New York; Washington ... *Doctor's orders*." Surely the good God would forgive that slight exaggeration.

The hushed silence lasted some seconds.

"Mother *won't like* that," said Nigel in a colourless tone.

It was Julia who giggled. "*Good old Dad*. Didn't know you had it in you. Double rooms on the signal deck too ..."

The young think they know everything.

I laughed along with her. Someone would have to start thinking when I'd gone. All my available capital going on that cruise. How my mother would have scolded. In Yiddish of course. She never quite took to the English language. But my father ... he would have chuckled along with me. I remembered his chagrin when I announced my marriage plans:

"Marry a goyisch girl? What's got into you son?"

Prejudice wasn't confined to Gentiles.

What indeed. But then it was too late for regrets. For the evergreen memories of that plain little dark eyed daughter of our neighbours; the arranged marriage of my childhood days ... my rejection of that family tradition.

Yes. She had been so very plain.

The front door clanged. Disturbed my cogitation. The young had departed without a farewell. Marcia would arrive home in the early hours to a separate room. And so I departed. A chauffeur driven car took me to Southampton. Such luxury hadn't been mine before. An obsequious steward ushered me to a sumptuous cabin on the top deck. I knew then that it wasn't me. Not all this deferential service. I longed for home. The home of my childhood days. Mother's spiced pickled herrings; apple strudel and cream. But that could never be again ...

Instead I slept. Exhausted. Missed the fancy dinner, and woke up some twelve hours later. Blissfully confused; totally rested; absolutely at peace. Took my place at the exclusive Queen's grill. Blue and gold it gleamed. Too posh for me by far. And I didn't like the company. A class well above me. I became lost in the vastness of New York; its total anonymity. It was the same with the hotel life; the Broadway. Washington was a little better. But what did a man whose life was setting up strings of little grocery stores want with the White House; memorials to Jefferson and Lincoln.

Maybe I was lonely, but it wasn't for me.

Across the Potomac in Virginia, I saw the Kennedy graves. They stopped me in my tracks. Reminded me of my death sentence. That's why I asked to be taken back to the ship. There were still some passengers on board. Some were sick; others were just content with the utter peace of the sea and the sky; the weird ceaseless cries of the circling gulls.

One such person was Peggy. A working widow, she had scraped together every penny for the adventure of a lifetime.

"Henry would have wanted that; wanted me to enjoy life."

Henry was her dead husband. I grew to like him. Fell in to joining Peggy for meals; down in the lower decks of course. Peggy was plain, with work worn hands and face. Nothing to look at really, except that she had the most beautiful, the kindest of hazel eyes; the gentlest of natures.

"You would have got on well with Henry," she said happily one day. "Very like him you are too." How naturally she brought her dead husband into her conversation.

They had both run a small pub together down by the River Thames; had been true Cockneys. Peggy and I swam together. I told her about my death sentence. Doubtfully she looked at the faint bronze glow on my face, the flesh already

beginning to fill out. “Your doctor is wrong. *He* has made a mistake,” she said simply.

I thought on the man’s prestige. All the money I had paid him.

“Impossible,” I said. “Harley street specialists are *never* wrong.”

I told her all about Marcia, Nigel and Julia. All about those aristocratic schools. The feeling I’d always had that my own flesh and blood were ashamed of me. Quite ashamed. Explained that however hard I worked to get money, my family somehow never seemed satisfied.

I’d never in my life talked to anyone like that before.

Then I told her that I’d spent much of my available capital upon the cruise. There was but little left. The rest was tied up in my grocery stores. Well, I was insured, wasn’t I. The family could have that when I was dead.

Peggy only chuckled; laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks, and her soft brown hair, loosed from its pins, fell down to the narrowness of her shoulders.

I failed to see the joke, and told her so.

“You wait,” she gasped, still laughing. “Wait until you see your great specialist, and find out it was all a *mistake*.”

There was something strangely childlike about Peggy; but then like me, she was uneducated.

The remainder of the days passed like hours. Yet we both wanted the seconds to stretch out to eternity. It was a second honeymoon without the connubial bliss.

“My Henry wouldn’t like that. Not Henry.”

No. Nor would my Victorian morality.

Peggy gave me her telephone number before we parted, our tears mingling in that last embrace. Her love gave me strength. England seemed like an alien world, and the elegance of Harley Street a dreary reality. As arranged, I had more blood tests, and more X-rays; then came that biopsy undertaken by an expensive surgeon, before my physician saw me again. At last all those investigations were over, and I faced him once more in his consulting room, still near naked, still with that odd loss of dignity.

Smiling, Dr. Manson faced me. There was a wary look in his eyes.

“Excellent. You’ve put on weight. Appetite good?”

I nodded. "But it cost me nearly all I've got. Worth it though ..." I was still thinking of Peggy, even though I was returning to a confirmation of my death sentence.

"The results of your tests ..."

But I cut across aggressively. Would the man never learn? "That's your province ... all I want to know is ... how much time have I got?"

The silence between us was momentary, although it seemed to stretch to an infinity.

"Years I trust," he replied, with still that watchful look in his eyes.

Was I hearing strange utterings. What was it called ... hallucinations. A cancer in my brain perhaps?

Dr. Manson persisted: "We ... all of us were misled. Your X-rays are now clear. Three months since your initial illness, isn't it. And your blood tests are certainly within the limits of normality ... well ... one came through positive ... the last one you had taken just before you left for your cruise ..." and he went off into a lot of medical jargon that I just didn't follow ... shock I suppose ... he seemed to say I'd had something called 'Legionnaires' disease. A kind of pneumonia ... which he said, had resolved.

"All that money spent ... and *you* made a mistake ..."

Dr. Manson placed the tips of his fingers together, then leant towards me over the width of his desk. "I've already told you ... doctors are not divine. *You* should be delighted."

I thought on those exorbitant fees. Then I thought upon Peggy. And I laughed along with her, till the tears streamed down my cheeks, and my breath came in gasps. Silently the physician handed me a whisky. And another. Then intimated that another patient awaited his attentions. Time for him was money. That I understood.

I went home still laughing. Did I detect almost a hidden anger when I told Marcia my good news. Of course. No insurance money. Little in my bank account. A common grocery man would be no consolation.

"And what now do you propose?" she asked coldly.

"No problem. Work harder than ever. Four new shops to open. A chain across the length of England."

Yes. I had someone to work for, now I'd got my reprieve. In my excitement, the old cockney twang crept back to my voice.



“Then we go on as before. Nothing has changed?” That was Nigel.

It was a new man who replied. A man no longer in awe of his family. A David who had slain his Goliath.

“Oh but it has. For me it has. You see how I am now. I must continue to obey my doctor’s orders.” I paused dramatically. May the good God forgive me. “I must take such a holiday ... alone ... twice a year ... free from *all* responsibility ... perhaps even more frequently. Who knows? As I said; doctor’s orders. So, I must begin to save money. For myself.”

Not for nothing had I memorised that telephone number. And even on the lower decks, holidays for two come expensive. Yes. I dreamt on holidays for two ... cruising with my Peggy in the sun.

I’m not an educated man, but wasn’t it Robert Browning who said:

‘Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be;

The last of life, for which the first was made.’

There was a new life ahead of me. A tender love would grow; stretch out its roots over the years. A love that in our old age would bind us together; entwine our souls. Beloved. I can hear your laughter. It fills me with joy.

My great physician; to you I owe everything.

Humbly I thank my God for your mistaken verdict.