

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

New Year Party

25th January 2003

Poetry Workshop Weekend

1st – 3rd August 2003

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

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Editorial

SOS I'm sorry to say that we remain teetering on the brink. Our membership numbers are barely sufficient to sustain our Society. As always we have lost some members over the year and gained an almost equal number, but remain about 30 members (or £500) short of the minimum needed to survive. This is mainly due to the absence of anyone with the time and enthusiasm to take on the Publicity Officer post, now vacant for well over a year, someone to advise the world, and our Armed Forces men and women in particular, that we await the pleasure of their company. In recognition of the seriousness of this problem, and on a temporary basis only, Ethel Corduff has agreed to assume this role in addition to her other duties. I'm sure members would like to join me in praising her action.

In the circumstances I regret that we must again come cap in hand to ask those members who are able to pay more than our annual membership fee of £15 to add what they can afford to keep us going. Of course it is also critical that all members renew their membership promptly on or before 1st January 2003, using the form in the middle of this magazine. Please help Louise by completing the whole form.

The idea of inviting members to select their favourite story from amongst those published that were not prize winning entries must wait until next year to ensure sufficient numbers. To this end will those who have not already had such work included in Author, work that they do not intend to enter in our future competitions, please send me such for possible inclusion next year.

My apologies to Alan Watts for failing to include his critique of Charles Neilson Gattey's latest work in the last edition of Author, it is included in this issue.

Your Committee and I wish everyone a happy Christmas and successful new year.

Guidance for Members

Sylvia Neumann has written a letter seeking advice on research – a good topic.

In my opinion the claim that a writer needs to be aged over 40 is simplistic but reflects the belief that one has too little experience on which to base one's writing at an earlier age. Clearly this depends upon the individual. Some 20 year-olds have had more experience than those who are retired. However, experience definitely helps with authenticity and accuracy, though this can also be based upon one's knowledge of the experiences of others, or newspapers, archives and other public records. Local history societies and the like may also provide a source of information.

Imagination is probably the single most important attribute of creative writers and it is the use of imagination based upon reality on which our work is based. How then can we apply reality if we lack experience?

Sylvia is right to mention research and question how much and where to go and there is no definitive answer. The one thing I would say is, don't worry if someone thinks you are ignorant and thus your work is rubbish. Such critics are, as often as not, ignorant themselves. Those who are more tolerant will usually try to help, e.g. our folios and reader's circles. A short story may not appear to justify a lot of research in aid of accuracy, yet the writer must be attracted by the subject and is therefore likely to gain from and probably enjoy some research. "Mother Knows Best" in edition 139 uses knowledge of 18th Century Scottish dialect, the Fleet Prison and Napoleonic Wars, reflecting the interests of the writer and the writer's reading material. Not that I, the writer, would claim it to be entirely historically accurate, yet good enough, I think, for a short story. I am certainly not aware of it being called rubbish, though some historians might do so if they ever have sight of it. I can say categorically that, I've never been incarcerated in the Fleet Prison, never met Napoleon and was definitely not alive in the 18th Century!

Sodium chloride, potassium cyanide – both sound familiar and it is tempting to risk quoting such familiar terms, but only too easy to forget that the former is common salt and the latter a popular poison in murder

novels. Professional writers, including scriptwriters, often pay researchers, but that is unlikely to be an option for us. What we can do is ask relevant acquaintances for advice, use reference books at the library, borrow books on relevant subjects, or use Internet search facilities. Some, such as those considering the current Froud Memorial competition, may not consider the subject attractive and for them I would not recommend research. Writing fact is clearly another matter altogether and research is vital. I believe interest in the subject is a basis for, if not essential to, good writing. I invite comment on this point and other ideas on research.

Letters

Dear Editor,

Should I accuse the Society of ageism and sexism? How can I, female and not old enough to remember the Second World War, possibly enter the WF and FG Froud Memorial Competition with its subject 'Life in the Services'? If I attempted to make it up, as the 'Author' suggests, those members with relevant experience would rightly cry 'this is a load of rubbish'. This brings me to a problem that has bothered me for a while. How much research does a writer need to do, and how does one go about it?

People have said to me 'write from experience' but I don't get very far this way. If I wanted to write a novel it might have to be an Aga saga, but even so I would get stuck. If one of my characters was, say, a solicitor, do I have to work in a solicitor's office to get the background right? If my civil servant heroine throws in her job to travel round the world, do I have to do likewise? It seems to me that before I embarked on my novel, I would have to spend some time doing detailed research.

This leaves the question how much research is justified for a short story. So far, I have cobbled together short stories from a mixture of imagination, personal experience and other peoples' tales. Even so, I have wondered whether people reading my stories might find mistakes of fact which would render them difficult to believe. Certainly, if I were to enter the WF and FG Froud Memorial Competition, I would have to pore over books and maps to produce anything remotely convincing. Would the effort be worth it for a short story? I doubt it.

Yours sincerely
SYLVIA NEUMANN

SCPSW Annual Competitions for 2002/3

THE 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 £4.00 per story. Total prize money for best seven entries £150.

THE 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 per entry. 1st prize £50, 2nd prize £30 & 3rd prize £15.

THE 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.

THE 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 and results returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Prize £25.

NOTES FOR ENTRANTS TO ALL COMPETITIONS

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

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

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 mainly for publicity purposes and society members' interest.) All entries should be sent to the Competition Secretary, R C

Jeffreys, 186 Lewis Flats, Lisgar Terrace, London, W14 8SQ not later than 28th February 2003.

R C Jeffreys,
Competition Secretary

Poetry Pages

Edited by Joyce Thornton

THE LAUGHTER OF GHOSTS

by Mike Boland

The laughter of ghosts
Is an echo in the attic;
Their presence felt,
But seldom seen.

A multi-storied stairway,
Reverberant and dim,
Winds down to cellared deeps.
Galleries of time-locked rooms
Warren off on every side.

In distant ringing passageways
A man's striding footsteps sound.
He marches on;
Pursuer and pursued.

My house is dark and shuttered;
Its name, "Sorrow", burnt
Upon the lintel of the door.
It is a strange, strange place.
Do not enter;
Leave it to the laughter of the ghosts.

WINTER NIGHT

by Anthony Roberts

I stand cocooned in darkness, waiting
For the unforgiving wind to blow
Inspissated clouds away
From the moon, which would reveal below
The secrets of snow-covered downs
Without the help of motorway sodium.
I feel the wind, and all at once
The ragged clouds divide, disclosing
The full moon, I can now perceive

Dotted below me, small black creatures
Moving slowly, these are starving sheep,
Digging to find some icy fodder.
I feel a touch of Nature; sheep below,
And me above, both starving with the cold.

BERGEN REMEMBERED

by Daphne McGrath

I recall one summertime
In a lovely northern town
When I only wished to climb
Steep cobbled lanes and then look down
On shining fjords and wooded hills.
But we were in an airless store
Noisy with the sound of tills
Because he wanted (what a bore)
To buy something he could not find.
Missing all this magic time
I thought – reluctant but resigned
And all the scent of rose and pine.

But now I only wish I could
Twice that loveliness decline
And have again those hours that would
Let me see him one more time.
Fløyens woods are dark and cool
With secret stream and marshy pool
But God! to be once more
In that overheated store.

FEEDING THE BIRDS

a triolet

by Terry Rickson

Winter birds whistle from the bough
their plaints, to the crumb outcaster;
how the rough winds shake and sough,
winter birds whistle from the bough,
and the lawn becomes a sough,
“Hurry, for the snow flies faster!”
winter birds whistle from the bough,

their complaints, to the crumb outcaster.

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 2003 – CHANGE OF DATE!

Would all PW members please note that the date of the Poetry Workshop Weekend has had to be changed to 1-3 August 2003, as the University can't accommodate us on our usual date.

Booking Forms for the Weekend will be enclosed with the Winter Newsletter.

Bill Barnes Competition 2002

The results of the Bill Barnes Competition will be announced in the Winter Newsletter. There will also be a special competition issue of the magazine containing the judges' report and all the poems entered this year. This may not appear until January, but will be sent to all members of the PW who subscribed for 2002.

Details and Rules for the 2003 competition will be given in the Spring Newsletter.

WAVES 2003

The closing date for submitting poems for our annual collection is 31 March 2003. Details will appear in the Winter Newsletter.

Winter Newsletter

The Winter Newsletter was due for issue on 30 November. It contains the amended text of Liz Rowland's talk on 'Keats and his Women' that she gave at the PW Weekend this year. There are also details of the Bill Barnes Competition, WAVES and PW 2003.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions for the PW will fall due on 1 January. The fee remains unchanged at £3 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. This gives you:

- Three lively Newsletters a year, plus a fourth Competition Special edition.
- The chance to submit poems for 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

Cheques for membership should be made payable to: Society of Civil & Public Service Writers Poetry Workshop Account, and sent to Terry Rickson at the address given above.

Dates to Remember

30 December 2002	Winter Newsletter
1 January 2003	Subscriptions due
31 March 2003	Closing date for submission to Waves
31 March 2003	Spring Newsletter
1-3 August 2003	Poetry Workshop Weekend
30 September 2003	Closing date, Bill Barnes Competition



Market Information

The Main Stream
Gordon E Gompers

The kind of world we live in has *The Beano* with a circulation of a quarter a million and, by contrast, *OUTPOSTS* and *STAND* having little more than a thousand a-piece. To me this is good news: it proves the sanity of the reading public.

Anthony Hope once wrote: "If you are not a genius it is best to aim at being intelligible."

Writing is about communication; and if you want to make the main stream publications you should be lucid. What is a main stream publication? If you find it at your local W. H. Smith, then that is as good as answer as any.

I give you a few main stream publication which I have made so that you, who are all so much brighter, should do so also.

The Lady,
39-40, Bedford Street,
Strand,
WC2E 9ER

This publication takes pieces on a variety of subjects. Most of my own published pieces in it has been on famous buildings, i.e. Blenheim Palace, Leeds Castle and Romsey. However, few of my pieces have been on places like Sark, Galdey Island and Christchurch. Published an article on the recorder renaissance and one on horses. Dosh: reasonable.

The Universe,
1st Floor,
St. James's Building,
Oxford Street,
Manchester M1 6FP

Reputed, to be the highest circulation of any religious publication. One does not have to be an RC to write for it. I sold them four travel articles. Dosh: fair,

The Teacher,
National Union of Teachers,
Hamilton House,
Mabledon Place,
LONDON,
WC1H 9BD

One does not have to be a teacher to write for this. One does not even have to be education: they have taken quite a lot of my stuff. Dosh: reasonable.

The In-flights and on boards.

You can find their addresses in the Overseas volume of *Willings' Press Guide*. For travel writers this is a rich seam. Dosh: brilliant to fair.

Further education publication.

Although hardly main stream some can hold the key to the big time. My work for *Morley Magazine* resulted in my being appointed the college's accredited critic which ultimately led me to being accredited to the Dolmetsch Festival at Haslemere.

So You Want To Get Published?

John Edwards

Getting published is easy – all you need is a computer and the right software. It's getting recognised that's difficult.

I would never advise going to one of these 'vanity' printers that advertise offers to publish anything. It can be extremely costly, and you will have little control over the appearance of the final book. Self-publishing is a much less costly route, and you have the added satisfaction of doing most of the work yourself.

I belong to a small local group of writers. We are the off-shoot of a local creative writing course run by the Yorkshire Art Circus in Castleford, West Yorkshire. When I joined the group they had already published a book of stories written by local schoolchildren. The typesetting and cover design was done outside the group, and the printing by a local firm. We decided we wanted to learn how to publish books ourselves.

We obtained an arts grant to take a course and learn desktop publishing techniques with the final objective of publishing our own collection of short stories.

The course was extremely helpful, and we learned two basic desktop software packages that I would recommend to any would-be self-publishing author:

Adobe Pagemaker 6.5 and Adobe Photoshop 5.0

There are later versions of Photoshop, but these just happened to be the versions we used, and I have them installed on my computer. Pagemaker is used to typeset the book and Photoshop to design the cover. Both packages are available – at a price – but the investment is well worth making, as using these two packages can cut the cost of publishing your own book

down from over a thousand pounds to just a couple of hundred pounds. These are the most useful packages I've found as most printers use them.

Acting as a group we purchased the software for common use, reducing the cost for each of us. After the course I prepared some notes in the form of 'an idiot's guide' on the use of Pagemaker 6.5, and I'm happy to send a copy to anybody who wants to use this package.*

Going to a printer with a book already typeset and ready for printing, and with a cover designed and ready to print can substantially reduce printing costs.

We published our book of short stories, and the 125 copies we had printed were sold out locally within a month. It was a 200 page book priced at £5. Receipts from the sales just about covered our expenses.

We learned a number of very useful lessons, and I think it may be helpful to pass them on.

One of the easiest and cheapest methods of publishing an A5 size book is a soft covered book perfect bound. This method involves the pages being printed consecutively as A5 size on A4 paper. They are then cut to separate them out as single A5 sheets, and glued into the spine of a thick card cover. When the glue has set, the book is then trimmed to give it a straight-edge finish.

Understanding the method of production is key to ensuring that the typesetting and cover design you produce conform to the requirements of the printers in producing the final book.

Thus, in typesetting the pages you need to allow extra width on the inside of the pages for gluing them into the spine of the finished book, and extra width on the outside of the pages for trimming (known in the trade as cropping).

Don't forget that the appearance of the typeset page is important to any reader. A 'heavy' type without any leading (spacing between the lines) can be off-putting to the reader. I've found 12 point Garamond with 2 point leading gives an easy-to-read appearance, but the typeface, size and leading is largely a matter of personal preference. To avoid changing everything half-way through typesetting the book, set up a sample page in several different combinations of fonts, sizes and leading, and compare them to decide which you prefer.

In designing the cover you need to allow for a spine of sufficient width to accommodate the thickness of the book, and to extend the cover design beyond the double A5 size to allow for any cropping of the final book so that none of the design is lost. The spine should be centred in the overall design so that the front and back cover are equal in size, and any printing on the spine should be within the width of the book. The width of the printed book may vary, depending on the quality and thickness of the paper being used by the printer, so it is always best to allow a bit of extra space for the spine over your estimate of the book's thickness. Don't forget, of course, that in designing the cover, the front of the cover is on the right hand side of the page.

Putting the typeset book and the cover design on disk for the printers should not be a problem provided your computer has a Compact Disk Writer. A normal 3½" floppy disk will give a maximum of about 1.3 megabytes of space. Even a simple design in Photoshop will need 2 or 3 megabytes of disk space, so a CD Writer is essential. Rewriteable compact disks are available quite cheaply now at under £2 each.

Always discuss what the printer requires in advance of typesetting the book. It maybe that he doesn't have the particular typeface you want to use. You can get around this by copying the typeface on computer disk for him. Be sure you specify exactly which typeface you want the printer to use as there are often variations of the same typeface you want that will make your finished book look quite different from the appearance you expected. Many typefaces have normal, condensed, book condensed, medium condensed, heavy etc. variations.

Always get more than one quote for the printing. There are surprising variations. Some printers will insist on a minimum quantity being printed. That's understandable – short runs don't give much profit, and large businesses can't be bothered with small print runs which clog their production.

Check that if you want a reprint this can be done at the same cost within a reasonable period of time. Work out the unit cost, and set your price per book according to the unit cost.

I've recently published my own first solo book using these two packages. I had a short run costing just under £4 a copy. I seem to have given most away to relatives and friends, but I've sold a few as well. The

book is being sponsored by my local writing group, and that means most of my outlay (£119 for printing costs) will be recovered.

I hope these notes will encourage others to self-publish. My local writers' group is now fired with enthusiasm and we are already halfway through another publishing project, with more planned for the future.

* A stamped self-addressed envelope would be appreciated to: John Edwards, 38 Carleton Green Close, Pontefract, West Yorkshire WF8 3NN.

Review

CROWNING GLORY by Charles Neilson Gattey

Shepherd-Walwyn, London. 2002 pp 131 ISBN 0 85683 1964 £13.95

My wife took hold of this book and began to read it almost as soon as it arrived. As she could not put it down, I had to wait to review it. That is a measure of its interest. In Sir Philip Sidney's words, it is a book 'which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.'

And why should this be? There has been such a plethora of books about the Queen and the Royal Family that most readers are not only satiated but becoming bored by these subjects? Charles Neilson Gattey must have sensed that such might be the case. So his book is not about the Queen, it is about the British monarchy. Beginning as far back as Alfred the Great, he looks at the succession of occupants of the British throne and discusses what it was and is that has made monarchy survive in this country when so many other countries have become republics.

Although he starts with Alfred, he only glances briefly at monarchs prior to Victoria. With her and the Prince Consort he deals in some detail, and the details are fascinating. I had not realised what a writer Queen Victoria was. From the age of 13 until her death, she kept a Journal averaging 2,500 words a day. Its pages give intimate insights into the lives of the queen and prince. On the day after their wedding she wrote: 'When day dawned (for we did not sleep much) and I beheld that beautiful angelic face by my side, it was more than I can express! We got up at a quarter past eight. When I had laced, I went into dearest Albert's room, and we breakfasted together.'

Mr Gattey has done quite a service to refurbish reputations which have become somewhat tarnished. In his pre-Victoria chapter he demonstrates in

some detail the excellent work in many fields done by that black-sheep, ‘Prinny’, later George IV. In his chapter on Edward VII another much-criticised monarch, he shows how he fully deserved the title ‘The Peacemaker’. Edward’s tact and joviality enabled him to thaw the icy relations which had developed between France and Britain, then to place the Russian and British governments on good terms, and to find a peaceful solution to Venezuela’s claim to part of British Guiana which threatened to cause a rift with the United States.

One gains the impression from the chapter on George V and Queen Mary that the king spent most of his time looking after his stamp collection. It is his wife who is in the foreground. We are given all sorts of information about her, her clothes, her daily routine and the interest she took in her doll’s house. Prior to Edward VII’s death, she had been known as Princess Victoria Mary, but the new king disliked double names and as she could hardly be called Queen Victoria, she chose to be known as Queen Mary. She told her aunt: “It strikes me as curious to be rechristened at the age of 43.”

Her greatest trial after her husband’s death was the Abdication. She wrote angrily to her son: “It seemed inconceivable to those who had made such sacrifices during the war that you, their King, refused a lesser sacrifice.”

The final chapters bring the story up-to-date, telling of George VI’s and Queen Elizabeth’s refusal to leave London during the blitz, of their onerous duties, travels, and official engagements after the war, then how the Princess Elizabeth set out on a tour to Australia and New Zealand but cut it short to return home as Queen. The author attempts in these last pages to answer his own question: Why has this monarchy with all its traditions and questionable absurdities continued to flourish? To prepare his answer, he lists the incredible range of duties undertaken by the queen and her family, and points out that the candidate for a presidency would not have a lifetime of training for his job such as a royal heir-apparent receives. Moreover, he is likely to be in a hurry to make his mark before his term of office is over. On the other hand, a monarch does not have to divert his energy to seek re-election, and can concentrate on the long-term interests of the nation.

This answer may not be entirely satisfactory, but in reaching it, the author has produced a very interesting and thought-provoking volume.

Alan S Watts

Ten Tips for Writing Readers' Letters

Clare Gaen

As the writer of over 100 paid letters and short fillers to a wide range of general interest and specialist magazines, I have tried to set down a little of my experience in this field as there are a number of common pitfalls to avoid:

1. Readers' letters and tips can be butchered by editors. Sometimes the original message is completely lost as an editor "lifts" from copy one particular angle to hone in on. Or a piece may get chopped to meet stringent space requirements. The magazine's not the writer's needs are paramount. So, if you're precious about copy, readers' letters may not be the best route into publication. Writers are rarely, if ever, consulted about change.
2. To guard against your main message getting lost, try and ensure letters are single message and have a clear focus. If you want to make more than one point, consider sending separate letters some days apart – or to different publications.
3. Keep letters concise and use at least 1.5 spacing for the main text (but I single space addresses) to allow editors space for marking up copy. If your letter covers more than one page with this spacing it is too long for many commercial publications. You can verify requirements by checking the word count of the longest letters in previous issues.
4. Check all spelling, grammar and punctuation at least twice before sending your letter out. A quick read through followed by a more

detailed check half an hour or so later, if time allows. Even the best proofreaders only pick up 90 percent of errors and the most difficult material to proofread is always one's own.

5. Do not expect a reply to letters and fillers, even when you have enclosed an SAE. Some magazines (notably those run by IPC Media) can even be unreliable about returning photos submitted with return envelopes. For this reason NEVER EVER send precious originals.
6. Although the lead times, i.e. time from submission to publication, are very short where newspapers are concerned, weekly and monthly magazines take an average 2-3 months from submission to publication. In some instances the time delay can be much longer. One tip I submitted to *Take A Break* magazine was held for 8 months for a Summer Special. I was never informed of anything until I happened to spot the item in print. For this reason, it is unwise to submit the same letter or tip to more than one magazine, even if months have elapsed. But if after 6-8 months, you're desperate to do so, then do at least rewrite anything you send to avoid any possible embarrassment over duplication – the ultimate crime (c.f. magazine warning print that all material submitted must be original and not duplicated to other magazines).
7. Keep a written record of all letters sent out noting date of submission, subject matter, where you've sent it, any response and payments received. This is essential for several reasons, e.g. if the taxman ever demands details (they can pick out names at random from publishers' account files); to avoid duplication; to monitor progress. Don't rely on computer records unless you're doing a proper back-up every night.
8. Remember no news can be good news. Publications such as *Best*, *Bella*, *That's Life* tend to reply "Sorry we can't publish your letter but thanks for writing ..." when they can't use material while acceptances merit no reply. But this isn't a hard and fast rule.
9. Payment rarely arrives before publication – the only instance I can recall of receiving an early payment was for a letter published in *Personal Finance Magazine* – they've definitely got their finances sorted there! The average time delay is about 5 weeks after publication. If you haven't heard anything within 2 months of publication, a polite

chaser to the Accounts Department is a good idea, referencing publication name, date, issue and page number wherein your contribution appeared.

10. Don't take rejection personally. Many good letters get rejected through lack of space or because an editor already has other letters on the same subject. Perseverance and market study will often pay (eventually). My own acceptance rate is approximately 1 in 4. Just think how many unsuccessful letters I've submitted to make my hundred.

Three Boots Between Two

Terry Austen

My daughter suggested we should join a group of our fellow walkers on a climb. We were enjoying a holiday in Ireland with our local Ramblers Club, whilst staying in Killarney and loving the breath-taking scenery, good food and excellent Guinness.

I had done a little hill walking in the Lake District and Wales but had never managed to climb a mountain before apart from an aborted attempt at Snowdon one foggy day. Helen, my daughter, hadn't been hill walking before this holiday. Our guide for the week was a genial Cork man called Packie O'Callaghan and remains to this day one of the most revered characters I have ever met, a great teller of yarns and poetry and full to the brim with a mischievous sense of humour (just the sort of bloke to have on a night shift).

On the morning of our encounter with Carrantuohill (Ireland's highest mountain at 3,414 feet) we attended a briefing in the hotel dining room. Packie gave us a rough idea of the terrain and the local weather forecast before we collected our boots and backpacks from the drying-room, which had been well used the previous two days, and boarded our coach (owned by a fellow walker from the club) to the drop-off point.

Because of the size of the coach and the rock-lined narrow road, which continued narrowing, we disembarked at the gates of Gortbu School, an isolated seat of learning set among the hills. Alan, the coach driver, was barely able to turn in the driveway to return to the hotel-where my wife

and a few other walkers were waiting for transport to another walking venue. We sat on the well trimmed verge of the school drive and waved as the coach drove off without any harm to its bodywork, then started to get geared up – then I made an unsettling discovery – I had picked up the wrong boots from the drying room, the ones I had were two sizes smaller. There was nothing I could do now but go on with what I had. Although my toes were quite restricted I found a little comfort by keeping the laces loose.

We set off along a metalled lane towards a farm for about two miles, there was a plaque on the wall of the kitchen garden in memory of the crew of an American bomber which crashed into the mountain during the Second World War, killing all on board. While the rest of the group spent a few moments reading this, I took off my thick woollen socks and replaced them with a pair of cotton ones. My heels were sticky where blisters had formed and burst so I put some plasters on and gained a little comfort before we set off again.

We walked through a desolate piece of land called Hag's Glen, an eerie place, I don't recall any birdsong until we reached the lower of two loughs set high in the shadow of Caher and Carrantuohill mountains about two hours later. We had lunch there, a blessed relief for me as I was now in considerable pain in heel and toe.

There was a wide gully nearby, in flood as it sluiced water off the mountains into the glen below, there had been heavy rainfall for several days previously and we had to cross this to get on to the mountain path. Packie strode off ahead of the group for a mile or so to locate a safe crossing point. When we caught up with him he was sitting on a rock uncoiling two lengths of rope from his backpack.

“We have to cross here, it's the only place where we can run a safety line without too much trouble. There are three large boulders to use for anchor points but the current between them is dangerous. You'll need to wear the harness, it'll have to be clipped on to the rope as you wade over one at a time – I'll need two guys to position themselves downstream to catch anyone who might be swept away, that means that one will have to try this contraption out when I'm across – just to see if it works.”

Two of the younger men volunteered, Packie showed them where he wanted them and helped get the harness on one of them. With that he took his boots off and with one end of the rope looped over his shoulder, leapt from one rock to another with the dexterity of a mountain goat, until he reached the last one before the steep, rocky bank. He had to wade up to his waist for a few feet and we watched in awe as the torrent almost took his legs from under him. He lost a boot when the water loosened the knot tied in his laces, we stared aghast as it traversed past us at a good thirty miles an hour. The 'keeper' remaining on our side of the gully ran after it but it was soon lost from view. There was a stunned silence as we realised that this could be the end of our jaunt.

Packie held the remaining boot above his head and scrambled up the steep bank, wedging himself and his end of the rope between two boulders and called the other keeper over. He waded through the white mass with stealth, there were also small, unstable rocks hidden from view and it was difficult to find a good foothold, but he managed it without mishap and sent the harness back with a light line tied on it for retrieval to the other side.

Helen was the next one to go over, possibly because she was the lightest in the group, she managed very well after depositing her boots with me to put in the backpack. She squealed at the coldness of the water as she steadily went in up to her waist, but luckily that was as far as the water reached before Packie caught the webbing and helped her up the bank amid cheers from those who were to follow.

It took about half an hour to get everyone across apart from the remaining keeper. Packie got one of the stouter men to take his place on the main rope, then once again made his famous leaps to secure the rope the other side for the last man, paying out the harness line until he was over, then coiling both ropes up as he landed on each rock before getting wet for the third time in the gap. It was good entertainment as we sat in the sun on the right side of the gully, and it gave us a chance to dry out a little, thankful that someone with a strong arm had thrown all of our backpacks over from the boulders without seeing them float away or break any of the flasks inside.

The dilemma of the lost boot was solved during this time, as I had a pair of socks I wasn't using I donated them to Packie, who had a notion of

continuing in whatever alternative footwear was available. So it was that half an hour later he was prancing about with one leather boot and a 'slipper' consisting of three plastic shopping bags encased in three woollen socks – with ample bags held in reserve. We were soon on our feet once again and as we walked past the top lough we were able to see the next part of our little trip rising in height before us. We lost the sun then and the clouds were looming above and shrouding the summits.

We reached our access to the mountains in about an hour. We all looked up at the daunting spectacle of the 'Devil's Staircase' which was our route to the ridge that spanned the two mountains. To get there we were to pick our way up an obscure path of giant boulders and slippery rocks for a thousand feet or so, we couldn't see further than the top of the ridge, the mountains had disappeared as we stood.

We slowly made our climb among the rocks, with frequent cries of 'below' as a slipping boot sent scree and larger bits of rock cascading, accompanied by gusts of wind which threatened to pluck us from the rocks and in answer to the wind's efforts these same rocks turned into mini waterfalls, sluicing down from great heights as they tried to relieve the mountain of rainwater.

I found this part very hard going, getting tired with trying to keep balance with the backpack, but at last we reached the ridge and I belatedly joined the others for a welcome coffee.

As we sat the cloud lifted briefly, but just enough to take some shots of the vista below, in the foreground an excellent view of the loughs shimmering in the sun and further away, possibly fifteen to twenty miles of sheer heaven known as Kerry.

The cloud enveloped us all again far too soon as we set off for the summit of Carrantuohill. Packie advised us to walk in single file directly behind (no more than a yard) of the person in front and to keep a check on the one behind, with instructions to yell if either disappeared from view. The visibility was less than five yards.

Reaching the summit was a bit of an anti-climax because all we saw was a semi-circular dry-stone wall which was to be our shelter while Packie

reconnoitred the next stage – the way down. He returned a few moments later with some bad news.

“Our original route was to follow a path on the shoulder of the mountain, but because of the wind picking up, and the possibility of it strengthening, I’m taking you back to the ridge for a shorter and safe descent – but we have to change our pick-up point which will mean walking a few extra miles.”

“Why can’t we go the usual route then?” one of our dedicated fell walkers asked.

“There are places on the path that have eroded, perhaps even more over the past few days, besides having a five hundred feet or more drop over the edge for most of the way. No go in this mist, as far as I’m concerned.”

There were no more queries after that as Packie sat down for a moment or two to inspect his footwear, which had survived very well and he told me in passing that it was very comfortable knowing that he could feel which type of terrain we were walking on.

We inched our way back down to the ridge with the visibility improving the nearer we got to it, then we saw the harsh, inhospitable multi cleft sides of Caher, we couldn’t see any way down there in an emergency, an awesome sight. We turned to look back at Carrantuohill but it was still shielding its secret places from us.

The following stage was fraught with apprehension and pain for me. The way down consisted of a steep slope, dotted with small boulders and interspersed with wet turf and lichen, at an angle of around forty degrees for as far as the eye could see. My damaged heels had some respite, but now the pressure was on my toes, which felt as if they were caught in a hydraulic press. I slipped on the grass as I struggled down the first few yards, sliding downwards about fifty feet before being caught by two of my rearguard companions and twisting my left ankle on the way. I was winded but soon recovered, progressing crab-like in a zigzag pattern across the slope in order to ease the weight a little. I saw that Helen and the rest of the party had reached the bottom and were sitting on some rocks for a breather. I was hoping the flasks were still intact in the backpack and was

very much relieved a short time afterwards as I sat on those blessed rocks pouring the coffee for Helen and myself.

We had barely finished our drinks before we were urged on again. Helen offered to wear the backpack when she heard of my fall, for which I was very grateful. We glanced back up to the ridge as we started walking again, great billows of cloud were racing across the rock faces and crags obliterating every feature above us and we all realised that we could have still been stuck up there somewhere if things had gone wrong.

The party set off through a piece of boggy ground and were all very amused at the sight of Packie striding out and sending a great volume of spray before him, his woollen sock flicking the stuff up with every step, everyone decided to be behind him. I was greatly relieved of discomfort on this part, the soft ground was kind to me and the dampness eased the pain of my ankle and toes.

We reached the Kerry Way footpath about an hour later, crossed it and made for a nearby farmhouse, in which Packie was hoping to make a phone call. There was nobody at home except for a very noisy dog. There was a metalled lane leading away between the McGillicuddy's Reeks and Packie asked two of our most experienced fell walkers to take a short cut over the top of one of the hills and make a call from a mountain lodge to the hotel. They set off after Packie checked the route on their maps while the rest of us walked a further five miles till we reached a larger road some three hours later. We sat on the grass verge for a while, even though it had started raining, that rest was a godsend because by this time every step on that solid road was a nightmare. I took my boots off – and off they stayed.

Fifteen minutes passed and two very battered Mazda and Toyota cars came into view. One of the drivers got out and asked for Packie. They offered to shuttle us to where the coach was waiting a further two miles down the road – it had tried to get closer but had got jammed between some rocks on a bend in the road.

The group's baggage, Helen, myself, two other walkers and the farmer's dog travelled in the first car, the second one followed with six others (two in the open boot) until we reached our own battered vehicle with some nasty dents in the side panelling. We thanked those farmers vigorously and pleaded with them to come back to the hotel to join us in a drink and a

meal the next evening with their wives. Packie and two others walked back, the fell walkers who had gone ahead were already on the coach, having helped Alan, the driver, in his hour of need.

We got back to the hotel about ten o'clock that evening – too late for dinner but some of the staff stayed on and prepared something hot for us. Had it not been for the farmers and the latter we would have been in a far worse state. We were so appreciative of these wonderful people of Kerry that made our holiday one to remember.

I couldn't do any more walking for the rest of the time in Ireland, it took three weeks for my heels to mend, at the end of which time I had lost all of my toe-nails.

The group has had more great walking holidays with Packie as guide, he and his wife have also been over in England walking with us. The latest I heard was that he was involved with a comedy show with Telefis Eirann (RTE1 as it's now known) which doesn't surprise me. I never asked for the socks back.

The Healing Touch

Vivian Edwards

The day my friend Sara came to see me remains unforgotten. The memory is evergreen. Arising early, my beloved dog Kim and I went for our morning walk down by the seashore. Happily we live in a little home overlooking the beauty of a busy harbour. There we can watch small fishing boats going out to sea in the early morning light; the ferry with its waving passengers; and sometimes our lifeboat out on its mission of mercy. We hear the cries of the swooping seagulls searching for food, echoing weirdly. Kim, a Belgian sheepdog, a Tervuren, weighing around fifty five pounds, was full of boundless energy on that day. His walk completed, Kim engulfed his breakfast with gusto, before settling down quietly to rest. Protective by nature, his ears remained constantly erect; quivering gently, even in sleep.

Suddenly the silence was disrupted. The door bell rang persistently. Kim's golden brown eyes opened inquisitively. I welcomed inside an old friend; Kim's eyes closed again. Speechless, she slumped into a chair. We

sat holding hands. I bided my time; leaning forward to catch the softly whispered words eventually emerging reluctantly from her lips. Her husband for nearly fifty years had died suddenly. An hour slowly passed by in total silence. Then it emerged that her doctor had visited. Nothing, not even his prescription, had helped. Seemingly I too could give no comfort.

Offers of drink and food were refused. I looked across at Kim. His eyes were open; fixed expectantly upon mine. Silently his powerful body rose, positioned itself at my friend's feet. Rising up upon his rear legs, raising his front paws, he gently circled her waist, his eyes fixated upon her face. Slowly Sara's slumped body responded. Hands caressed Kim's ears. Straightening her back, she pressed her cheeks against his head. The tears slowly came. I watched them flow; watched her arms tightening around him. Time passed whilst they hugged each other. Later my friend and I shared some sustaining soup. Kim was still beside her, when she asked pleadingly whether she could join us on our daily seaside walks.

Together Sara and I watched the whiteness of the waves breaking on the sandy shores, whilst Kim swam strongly out to sea, towards the seagulls, swooping in play.

The power of healing lies not only in human hands.

Lunch at the Club

Alan Watts

It was an unpleasant day, grey sky, drizzling rain, and gusts of cold penetrating wind.

I saw a man getting out of the taxi and paying the driver, but it was not until I was abreast of him and the taxi was moving away that I was quite sure it was Border.

"It *is* you, Border? I thought I wasn't mistaken. It's years since we've met."

"It's me, all right. A bit older. Not so fit. Not at all wiser, I'm afraid."

He laughed. Rather nervously, I thought.

"Been away?" I asked innocently, as if Roger had not given me a full account of his activities.

“Perhaps a bit longer than usual. I don’t see much of London nowadays, not that a day like today has anything to recommend it. But – nice to see you, Quilley. Were you coming to the Club?”

We had reached the foot of the Club steps and it was obvious we were both going there. “Still come here often?” he asked me casually as we mounted the steps.

“Once or twice a week, I suppose.”

“Mm!”

He had his hand on the polished brass bar of the door.

“Tell me, Quilley. Do you know a chap called Diamond?”

“Can’t say I do. A member of the Club?”

“Seems to be.”

“Lots of men, especially new members, I don’t know.”

“Mm!” Again he made this musing murmur.

We went into the carpeted foyer with its impressive portraits of nineteenth century club-members, and continued down to the cloakroom.

“Are you expecting him – Diamond – today?” I wondered for a moment whether he might notice some resemblance between my voice and that of Diamond’s on the telephone.

“Oh, no. No, no.”

“You could leave word at the desk. They could page you.”

“Yes. I know. But I am not expecting him. Not today.”

“Will you join me for lunch?”

It was Roger in his comfortable Thames-side office which the IRA had taken a shot at who had suggested I offer the invitation.

“I’d be absolutely delighted.” And this was the first remark I thought typical of the Border I used to know. Then he added: “What about a drink first?”

A half of beer was quite sufficient for me, but Border had a double whisky – Glenfinnan – with very little water. We finished the drinks so quickly that there was little chance for conversation, and Border’s demeanour was so untypical of the man I remembered that I wondered

whether he was not ill in some way. He reminded me very much of a refugee from a totalitarian state still suspecting that his conversation was being monitored.

“Shall we go into the dining room?”

He seemed relieved at the suggestion as if the area around the bar was becoming unbearable to him. Like him, I looked around to see whether there were any strangers there. One man was quite unknown to me. His appearance made him conspicuous, although he would hardly have attracted attention anywhere else. He was wearing a rather loud sports jacket, contrasting very much with the sober business suits of most of the other men. I was sure he had not been to the Club at any time I had been there.

We made our way to the dining-room and I did my best to make conversation, although I was aware Border was far from being at ease. He was not really interested in anything I said.

“I don’t know whether you’ve been here since we opened up this new lounge,” I tried.

“No. I haven’t seen it before.”

The dining-room seemed sparsely occupied, and we were asked where we would prefer to sit.

“There’s a table by the window,” I suggested.

“Bit too bright there, don’t you think?”

I thought to myself “Bright? On a day like today?”

“What about this table, sir?”

Border thought it was much better, and we sat down. As he was spreading his napkin over his knees, he smiled at me.

“Jolly nice to be in the Club again, Quilley, old chap. Like old times. Do you find the hours hang heavily, now you’ve retired?”

I thought things were coming back to normal.

“Well,” I pondered the question. “At times they do. It’s a bit of a bore no longer being at the centre of things. But I go for walks and wrestle with the Times crossword – and sleep, of course. I find myself dropping asleep after

meals, or during the television news. And how do you find life, now you're back after all your foreign adventures?"

"I wouldn't call them adventures."

As he said this, I saw him stiffen – almost imperceptibly – but undoubtedly. Then I saw that the man in the loud sports-jacket had come into the room.

"Have you studied the menu, Quilley? What do you fancy?"

But while I looked at the menu which the waiter had just given me, I was fairly sure Border wasn't looking at his. However, I made my choice and gave my order to the waiter, while I looked out of the corner of my eye at the man in the sports-coat.

"What about some wine?" asked Border.

"I want to keep a clear head this afternoon. Perhaps, just a glass?"

"Nonsense! A bottle. Claret?"

He ran his finger down the wine-list and whispered his selection to the wine-waiter.

"You want to keep a clear head, eh?" laughed Border.

"I have a few things to do," I tried to explain. "And I get confused. I'm getting on in years, you know."

The waiter returned nursing a bottle and displayed its label to Border before turning aside, deftly withdrawing the cork and showing that also to the diner. He then poured a sample for Border to taste, after which our glasses were filled and we drank to one another's health.

Then, suddenly, to our surprise, the man in the sports-coat stood up and came round to our table.

"Mr Quilley, isn't it?"

I was very relieved he had recognised my modest tie.

"It is. And you are ...?"

"Ralph Diamond – Rough Diamond they used to call me at school."

"Well, it's nice to meet you. Do you know Patrick Border?"

"I don't think we've met."

We were all standing up, shaking hands with one another. It was a bit silly and, I hoped, bewildering. It reminded me of those stratagems used by conjurors.

“Won’t you join us, Mr Diamond?” I suggested.

We sat down again and the waiter replaced napkins and re-arranged the glasses.

I watched Border closely. How strange that a man of his wide experience should not realise he was drinking from what had been my wine-glass!

“Weren’t you asking me about Mr Diamond, Border?”

“Was I?” He seemed distraught.

I turned to Diamond.

“Have you been a member here long?”

“About a year.”

“You’ll find it a nice cosy little club. Excellent cuisine. And if you have to stay the night any time ...”

Border had placed his napkin on the table again.

“Will you just excuse me a minute?”

We watched him as he went out of the room. He seemed a little unsteady.

“Is he all right, do you think?” Diamond asked me.

“Oh, I think so. He’s only had a whisky and this one glass of wine.”

“He goes abroad a lot, doesn’t he?”

“He’s hardly ever in England.”

At this point the waiter came across to me.

“Excuse me, sir, but I think your friend isn’t very well.”

“Oh, dear! I’d better go and see if he needs any help.”

I went as quickly as I could to the Gents, and there was Border quite unconscious lying prone on the floor.

“Border, old chap! Border! Can I help you sit up?”

But it was no use. I could do nothing to assist him. Nor did I expect to. When the paramedics and the police came they found him dead.

“What a dreadful thing to happen!” exclaimed Diamond who was standing with me and the other diners at the end of the dining room where the steward on police instructions had shepherded us.

“Very dreadful, Mr Diamond,” said I in a low voice which would not have been overheard. “You wouldn’t have liked anything like this to happen, eh, Mr Diamond?”

He looked at me with fear in his eyes as I continued: “Legerdemain, they call it, don’t they?”

At that moment, the man leading the enquiry came up to us.

“Chief Inspector,” I said to him. “Mr Diamond is your case now. Pity I didn’t spot him earlier.”

I knew I would have things to do that afternoon and must keep a clear head.

[Readers are invited to explain, who did what to whom and why? – Ed]

Look At Me When I’m Talking To You

Elvira Bridges

What have you got to say to that? Yes, that’s right, I’m going. Yep, I’m leaving you! I’ve had enough. Stanley, look at me when I’m talking to you. Can’t meet my eyes, can you? Not to be trusted. It’s true, isn’t it? I know for sure now. I’ve had my suspicions for some time but now I have proof. You didn’t know I found the letter, the one in your coat pocket. You trusted ME. And quite rightly but it didn’t occur to you that I had to clear your pockets when I took your jacket to the cleaners, did it?

No, you can’t even look at me. Sitting there staring out of the window. Too ashamed to look me in the eye, are you? Guilty conscience, eh? I’m not sure why I’ve stayed with you for so long. Scared of being alone I suppose. Can’t be more lonely than I am now, living with you. You don’t give a damn for me, do you? Always out. If it isn’t football it’s golf. And if you’re not playing you’re watching it on TV. Shouldn’t have agreed to have that sport satellite.

You've never been there for me, have you, Stan? Go on, admit it. I should have listened to my mother. She summed you up years ago. He never looks you in the eye, she said, never trust a man who won't meet your eye. That was her opinion. You'll rue the day, that's what she told me when we got married.

I remember crying to her, "How can you say such a thing, Mum, and on my wedding day." She said, "I don't like him, I never have liked him and he'll be no good for you. You'll never be happy with a man like that."

I was so upset. But she was right, wasn't she? Wasn't she? Stanley, are you listening to me? Look at me when I'm talking to you.

And another thing, I found out who she is, your fancy woman. She works at the golf club, doesn't she? One of the stewards serving drinks. Posh name for a barmaid. One sniff of her apron and you couldn't resist her, could you? Always liked your tippie, didn't you, eh? Like father like son. Mum warned me that you'd finish up being a boozier like your old man, but I couldn't see it, or rather I didn't want to, didn't want to admit it. I should have seen that you'd follow in his footsteps. He was one for the ladies too, wasn't he? Stanley! Are you listening? No, can't face up to that, can you?

Now I'll tell you something you don't know ... he made a pass at me. Your father ... yes, he did, didn't know that. No, that'll be a shock. When I told Mum, she said she wasn't surprised. Know what she said? He'd tried it on with her. He's a proper lech. My mum told him where to go. Well she would, you know what she's like. Calls a spade a spade. I'd love to have been a fly on the wall that day.

When he tried to touch me up I couldn't believe it. I'd heard rumours of what he was like but he was my father-in-law for God's sake. I showed him though. You know how he always took his shoes off indoors? I didn't say a word. I was wearing my stilettos, I just stood on his foot ... he never tried it again. Sounded like a stuck pig ... come to think of it, that's exactly what he was!

As you can see I've got my case, so I'm off. Don't try to stop me, I wouldn't stay now if you begged me. No, don't bother trying to deny it ... your affair. Don't forget I read the letter. What did she call you? 'Darling Possum.' Possum! Where the hell did she find a name like that? Ahh, of course, I get it, she's Australian. YES! I'm right. I am, aren't I? Stanley, stop being a coward. Come on, look me in the eye. Oh well, please yourself.

Right, I'm off. I won't be able to take all my stuff with me now. I'll come back for the rest and I want you to make sure you are out. I'll ring you and let you know what day. Stan, are you listening? I said I'll let you know ... God, you're just like your father ... ignorant. Look at me when I'm talking to you.

Stan ... I said, Look at me. Come on, stand up and face me, like a man. I won't be ignored. Are you all right? Stan? STANLEY... Oh my God!



Words, Words, Words

Betty Westcott

I thought my murder story just right for their magazine. The Editor didn't, it had "too many words". I showed the rejection slip to a journalist friend. "I agree," said he, "needs pruning." So I cut it down and sent it to another magazine. Another rejection slip. "Stories should not exceed 2,000 words, preferably less." What is it about modern editors and the number of words. I bet no one ever told Dickens, or Thackeray, or Jane Austin to use less words.

I do realise that space is limited but you need a certain number of words to tell a story – or do you? Here is my effort to tell a story in 50 words and not a word more.

Apples

John outwardly mourned, inwardly gloated when his twin, Richard fell from a broken ladder whilst picking apples. Verdict – accidental death. The farm was now his.

Two months later he opened Richard's home-made apple chutney. As he lay dying he reflected; "Richard was always slower than me, but just as efficient."

Through A Glass Darkly

Alan S Watts

Of course, I don't believe in ghosts. Me? The hard-headed recently-retired chairman of the Arquebus Group of Armament Industries? Believe in ghosts? Ridiculous!

I had been attending the palatial headquarters of the Group for a meeting. They still need me as a consultant, and I drive up to the City once or twice a month for various meetings. This one went on rather late. Then Merriwether invited me to his room for a drink. We were talking when his telephone rang.

After speaking for a moment or two he covered the mouthpiece with his palm.

“I think this’ll take me a while, old chap. Sir Tom has one of his little problems.”

“I’ll say goodnight, then. It’s getting late.”

I made my way among the marble corridor. The whole vast building was almost silent – and, well, eerie for imaginative people. There were only a few lights burning for the benefit of the security staff and cleaners, one of whom was whistling in some distant room like a banshee.

I went down in the lift to the great foyer, normally brilliantly lit to display the Corinthian pillars surrounding the central garden with its fountain and ornamental goldfish pond, but now in half-gloom.

Then, as I stepped out of the lift, there was the clatter of falling mops and utensils. One of the cleaning women rushed towards me, her face distorted with horror, while her pail rolled in a wet circle behind her.

“Hold it! Let me out of the place! Oh, blessed saints and holy Mary! I’ve seen the devil himself! And if I live to be a hundred, sir ...”

The rest of what she said was incoherent, but I took her by the arm and shook her.

“Pull yourself together, woman! What’s going on?”

My thoughts ran to burglars and the need to give the alarm.

“He came out of the wall over there,” she pointed. “Straight, clean, directly out of the marble wall.”

I was about to say ‘Nonsense’ when she went on:

“And his face – it was all blood! And his hands was blood! And his scalp was hanging off his skull – raw!”

“You actually *saw* that?”

“As plain as I see you.”

“But where is he? Is he still here? Where did he go?”

Her eyes opened in a wild maniacal stare.

“That’s the divil of it. He went into one of the pictures.”

“He *what?*”

“He went into one of the pictures. He sort of – he sort of *glided*. He *became* the picture.”

“Nonsense, woman! You’ve been drinking. What d’you mean when you say he *became* the picture? Is the picture all blood and raw scalp?”

“No, sir. See for yourself. But it either was, or will be. That’s the picture over there. In the big gilt frame. And the old feller’s standin’ as he always does. But when he glided into it, sir ...”

I pushed her away from me.

“Go home,” I told her angrily. “I’ll see the office-keeper about you tomorrow.”

She left me. I went right up to the picture and found it quite unchanged.

It was my own portrait, the one which had been unveiled on the occasion of my retirement.

Mistletoe For Mr. Badger

Terry Rickson

Mr. Badger had been busy all day.

In the morning, he cleaned and swept his kitchen, then his bedroom and finally his hall. Next, he washed the cups, plates and mugs on the dresser, along with the saucepans, then polished them until they sparkled and shone.

He wanted his house to be neat and tidy in time for Yule and Christmas.

Mr. Badger left his house, carefully shutting and locking his front door and ambled off into the wood.

As he went along he sniffed the air, “Ah, hurrum, hurrumph,” he muttered to himself, “it will snow before long.”

Mr. Badger collected wood for his fire and carried it back to his house, to add to the neat stack outside his front door. He set off again, as the first fine flakes of snow began to blow through the branches of the trees.

He collected some holly and stood looking up into an old crab-apple tree, where he could see a large bunch of mistletoe growing.

“Oh, dear,” he sighed, “I would like a sprig of mistletoe for my decorations but it is just out of reach.”

He got up on his back legs and waved his front paws but it was no good, as well he knew, he couldn’t reach the mistletoe.

While he was wondering what to do, he heard chitter-chattering and squeaky laughter coming from the oak tree growing nearby. He caught sight of two pairs of bright eyes watching him, bushy grey tails flicking; it was Susie and Selina, the Squirrel twins.

“I wonder ...” Mr. Badger said to himself and called out to the twins.

They skittered away laughing and chattering, climbing higher up the oak tree and peeped at Mr. Badger from a branch.

“I wonder,” called Mr. Badger, “if you would be kind enough to pick a sprig of mistletoe for me, please?”

“Hee, hee, hee,” they laughed, “we will, Mr. Badger.”

The sisters ran down the trunk of the tree, along a branch and then leapt into the crab-apple tree. They moved and jumped so quickly, that Mr. Badger felt quite dizzy just watching them.

In no time at all, Susie and Selina snapped off not one but two sprigs of mistletoe with their sharp teeth, sending them twirling down to Mr. Badger waiting below. He caught the sprigs in his strong paws before they touched the ground, which was, as he knew, the right and proper thing to do.

“Thank you, thank you,” Mr. Badger called.

Laughing and chattering, Susie and Selina raced away back to the oak tree.

Mr. Badger spent the afternoon decorating his kitchen with the holly, mistletoe and some ivy, which he had pulled from the roots of the tree growing above his house.

That evening, with his front door shut tightly against the dark winter's night, he poured himself a glass of his favourite blackberry wine and cut himself a slice of Jenny Wren's best cherry cake. He settled into his comfortable old chair by the fire, supped the wine and enjoyed his cake, while the cups and plates and the pots and pans, twinkled and winked at him in the firelight.

Mr. Badger sighed happily and dozed contentedly in his chair.

Outside, the wind and snow blew coldly through the wood.

