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Diary

Poetry Workshop Weekend
30th July – 1st August 2004

Closing Date for Bill Barnes Poetry
Competition
30th September 2004

Annual Lunch
23rd October 2004

Closing Date for W F & F G Froud
Memorial Open Competition
31st October 2004

DATA PROTECTION ACT

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

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Editorial

I recently saw on TV called “Ground Hog Day”, about a man who kept reliving the same 24 hours. I thought it rather far fetched until I moved house last year. I pack my papers and files into boxes, move, unpack, spend ages looking for things I thought were in the boxes and the futile search proves were not, then pack things into boxes again and repeat the whole process to accommodate the builder’s needs. Last week. As I was on the verge of insanity, it ended. The house is full of dust, my computer printer cable has gone missing, but I think I can now see the end of the tunnel.

This means I am late again and dependent upon the worthy Alan Gibb to compensate for my deficiencies. I hope I will have no reason to apologise again and that it will be my good fortune to enjoy something approaching normality in the near future.

A member who criticised of our efforts was invited to join the committee and offer her ideas as to how we might improve. Sadly she contributed nothing but her resignation. Of course this does not suggest that we are achieving the best that is possible, but it may indicate how difficult it is to improve with our limited resources. However, all members are invited to offer constructive criticism. The tabloid press demonstrate daily that it is so easy to make destructive criticism, yet even they apparently need to resort to fiction to maintain their flow of such.

Well you have a choice between fact and fiction, as do your aunts, uncles, sons and daughters, grandparents, grandchildren, friends and neighbours, by entering the next Froud Memorial Competition, as it is open to all. But you must pass on the message. (Details on page 7)

Because of my domestic problems the book prize has been in limbo for months, but I hope to sort it out in the next few weeks. Again my apologies to entrants for the lack of progress.

May I remind members that we are still lacking a Publicity Officer and whilst Ethel Corduff continues to do her best to meet our needs in this area as well as being Meeting Secretary, this really needs a working member who would thus have access to current addresses and titles of Departments and Agencies in the Civil Service. Our future depends upon new members to replace those who do not renew their membership each year. Although this is only about 20, such is our recent total number that the effect is that we barely survive. Publicity is obviously the key to such survival and serving members are the only ones who can effectively help.

May I also ask serving members to do all they can to encourage colleagues, eligible friends and relations to join. Those who are fortunate enough to be winners in our competitions are also encouraged to overcome their modesty and blow their own trumpet a little, in staff magazines etc

Market Information

Using the Blower

Gordon E Gompers

Many years ago before I ever joined the Inner London Magistrates' Courts Service I worked for a major society. Our departmental head was like a fly in amber. No one cared about the fly but the puzzle was: how the devil did it get there?

"Well," a colleague explained, "he is good on the blower."

This explains a lot. A good telephone technique can work wonders but it depends on how one goes about it. There are two popular attitudes to the use of the telephone practiced by freelance journalists that are both very wrong.

The first is never to use the telephone. If this was correct then why are telephone numbers given in the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*? The other is to contact the editor when ever an aspiring freelance gets an idea. Imagine it. The editor is a busy man. He has this call from a John Smith. Of course he knows the name but which one? The idea that is going to shake Fleet Street is hardly new. SLAM!!!

Whether I telephone an editor or not depends on several factors. I have never telephoned a mainstream editor. By mainstream I mean the kind of publication that appears on the shelves of W H Smith Ltd. County magazines I do, especially if I have had work appearing in them before. On one occasion I had an editor telephone me after I wrote him a letter soliciting work.

Although it might seem a bit callous I have telephoned an editor on the death of a distinguished artist on the possibility of doing an obituary. Not that this always works. When I telephoned the editor of *Musical Opinion* on the death of Segovia I was told that his obituary had been done ages ago. With the same publication I was luckier with the demise of Carl Dolmetsch. I knew him quite well.

When the obituary did not appear in the next edition I telephoned the editor.

"What about my obituary?" I asked.

"I did not know that you were dead," came the prompt reply.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Joyce Thornton

CHINESE LANTERN (or The Builder Wasps)

Barbara M Stewart

A Chinese lantern beneath the roof's beam,
beautiful in its construction,
clings to the gable, gathering dust.

A thousand fan-shaped paper whorls
painstakingly spun, contain
pupae, fed on sugar stolen from the bees.

Building in hedgerows away from the sun,
the Potter forms perfectly round pots
from clay. Caterpillars fill the larder.

In Provence, the Excavator cracks the stones,
digs underground chambers for her home,
keeping out ants with grains of sand.

Ammophila sabulosa, Sand Digger,
builds a flask-shaped hole in sandy places,
drags in stunned grasshoppers for lunch ...

Vespula vulgaris, the common wasp,
keeps my garden clear of pests and debris.
In Spring, Paper Wasp, works again on my roof.

TRYST

Roy D Stevens

He rows across the lake
on this stock-still,
Heatwaved day.
Digging his oars deep
into the molten glass,
Heading towards the island.

Tall fir trees ring
the lake's edge,
And the heady perfume
of their sap,
Riding the lazy air,
Stirs his senses.

Overhead,
Silhouetted black on blue,
A lone bird
circles on the thermals,
Watchful.

This journey of his
has a purpose,
For he knows that,
In the wild depths of the island,
Among the waist-high, musty ferns,
Someone is waiting.

THE DEAD PIRATE

Christine Hatton

It was a silhouette chased by the night
In pursuit of a crimson sunset,
Coloured of the flames that set it alight
This ship and all who sailed with it.

She fell to the thunder of the Crown,
She of proud strength and elegance,
Once adorned of splendid gown
Had even sailed beneath the flag of France.

But dark shadows of skull and cross bone
Billowed up high as an angel of death
To render her a vulgar clone
With a thirst for gold drawn on every breath.

Now submerged, this gold-laden wreck
Which fell a victim to concealed surprise
Is interred with the pirate across her deck
Both laid at peace beneath dormant skies.

He fought like a storm driven in a gale,
A rabid dog with a price on his head
Living as testimony to the awesome tale
That struck merchants cold with dread.

In his frenzies he was demented and wild,
Yet could calm as still as the sea
To become as docile as a child
Inspired by the laws of philosophy.

What turned this sensuous man she found
To be an animated thinker,
Set free his sins and let vice abound
From the idiocy of a hard rum drinker?

This was the captain who lived for piracy,
Lusted for women, blood and gold.
A lost advocate for the visions of John Dee,
Who allows the devil to claim the soul he sold.

Now all that is left us the soft sea spray
Lapping against rocks as black as jet
Stones, set in a jewel studded bay.
The legacy that filled an empty pocket.

W F & F G Froud Memorial Open Competition

Any short story, fact or fiction, based upon an event prior to 1970
Maximum 2000 words, entry fee £3, closing date 31st October.

SCPSW members are invited to enter their own short stories, but can also invite friends, relatives, fellow members of writing circles, next-door neighbours, etc., to send entries to Ron Jefferies and see their winning entries provided free of charge in Author. Sadly you will have to tell them that the entry for them is £5, but if they are eligible to join SCPSW and do so this year, their entry fee will be entirely reimbursed. Surely this will prove, "An offer they cannot refuse" but first **YOU** must pass them our offer.

All entries must be sent to Ron Jefferies, payment addressed to SCPSW and any requests for information about joining should be sent to Joan Lewis, enclosing s.a.e.

Now off you go - start knocking on doors - spread the good word.

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

Spring Newsletter

All members of the Poetry Workshop should have received the Spring Newsletter; if not, let me know and I'll drop a copy in the post for you.

Bill Barnes Competition 2004

Don't forget that the closing date for this year's Bill Barnes Poetry Competition is 30 September. The rules for the 2004 competition appeared in the Spring Newsletter, but if you have lost your copy, or are a new member, contact me (Mike Boland) at the above address and I'll send you a copy. This year's Competition will be for rhyming poetry only, in accordance with our policy to hold such an event on alternate years.

PW Weekend

This is the last call for members who are interested in attending this year's Poetry Workshop Weekend on 30 July - 1 August 2004. The venue is Elgar Court, University of Birmingham. A booking form was included with the Winter Newsletter- if you didn't receive (or have lost) your form, or if you are a new member and are interested in joining us, let me know and I'll post one to you.

The cost of the Weekend is £127, which includes full board and conference facilities.

At the time of writing, Pat Brindle is busy preparing the programme for the Weekend. The theme for this year's opening session(s) will be "Trees". During the course of this session we will examine the different ways that poets have approached the subject. The theme will be taken up again during the impromptu writing session on Saturday. Three talks are planned, and there will be the usual workshop session on Saturday morning. A crowded programme, but there will be room for free time and of course the ever-popular Quiz evening.

AGM

As usual, the Annual General Meeting of the Poetry Workshop will be held during the Birmingham Weekend. A full report of proceedings will appear in the Autumn Newsletter, due out on 30 September. If any members wish to submit Motions for discussion at the AGM, please send them to me at the above address by 31 July.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop for 2004 fell due on 1 January. If you have not already renewed, the Spring Newsletter will be the last one you will receive, so if you haven't already done so, get your cheque/PO to Terry Rickson (address above) as soon as possible.

The membership fee remains unchanged for yet another year, being **£3** for members of the SCPSW. **Please** remember to make out cheques correctly; they should be made payable to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop A/C**.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- three lively Newsletters each year, plus a fourth, Competition Special issue
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (exclusive to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

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

Dates to Remember

30 July-1 August 2004

30 September 2004

30 September 2004

December 2004

PW Weekend 2004

Autumn Newsletter

Closing Date for Bill Barnes Poetry Competition

Winter Newsletter

It is with regret that we announce the death of long standing member Neil Glover, whose name will be known to many of you. His daughter advised us that he died on 9 April after a short battle with cancer. He was a prominent member of Poetry Workshop in past years, attended Birmingham weekends and his poems appeared in Focus. His family used his writings at the funeral and at a celebration of his life.

SCPSW: 3rd Prize Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2002/03

Dog Days

Terry Rickson

I am sunk in August indolence.

The days drift light as
a dandelion seed on
warm air. Summer lightning

licks along the horizon;
beneath the dark overhang
of trees, the green river
appears as motionless as I.

In the morning,
at first light,
a cry, a beat of wing;
geese fly south.

* * * * *

Alienation

Brian Scott

The Aliens from Homeworld had been visiting the planet Earth for a million years before they noticed the emergence of a single dominant species. Thereafter they reduced the interval between visits to a mere thousand of the Earth's orbits around its little sun, in order to monitor the development of the Dominant's civilisation, for the aliens were an ancient and lonely race and had long sought contact with other cultures. Those chosen for the visit of 2100 A.D. (by the Dominants' reckoning) had great hopes that their long search would be rewarded.

How great was their disappointment when they found that the once-beautiful Earth had been ravaged by unidentified invaders from an unknown world! That was the only possible explanation for the fatal damage which had been inflicted on the unfortunate planet. Lowland areas had been flooded by seawater because the polar ice-caps had melted. Lush forests had been replaced by arid deserts. Mountains had

been stripped of their soil by erosion. Abandoned cities and ruined buildings disfigured the landscape.

Hideous though this physical damage was, there was worse to come. It was all too clear that the unknown invaders had stopped at nothing to destroy the Dominants, wiping out millions of other sentient species in the process, for they had poisoned the Earth beyond hope of recovery. The atmosphere was full of poisonous gases, the sea and rivers with cocktails of toxic chemicals, the soil, where it had not been washed away, polluted by heavy metals. Even the cleansing rain still had a high acid content. As if this were not enough, atomic radiation was at lethal levels in many areas, especially near the derelict cities. A peaceful race themselves, the Aliens could not imagine the evil minds which had wreaked this havoc on a defenceless planet. They could not see what the invaders had gained by their attack, since the impoverished Earth could scarcely support its own diminished and dwindling life-forms, far less colonists from another world.

Eventually, after scouring the entire planet the Aliens managed to find a handful of Dominants surviving in caves in the southern continent. With their advanced technology the Aliens had no difficulty in communicating with these survivors, but they were surprised and disappointed to find that the Dominants appeared to know nothing about the invaders who had despoiled their planet. Indeed, they did not seem even to understand the Aliens' questions about the invasion and were extremely reluctant to talk about the devastation of the Earth. The Aliens were sympathetic. It was obviously a psychological defence against the memory of their sufferings.

The Aliens were a kindly people. Seeing that Earth was beyond redemption, they took the Dominants back to Homeworld with them and in their generous way gave them an entire continent, teeming with natural resources, where they could redevelop their civilisation just as they had on Earth. The Dominants elected a woman named Eva to be their first leader in their new home. But they never did tell their hosts the true story of the Earth's destruction.

The Aliens never knew that they themselves were observed at regular intervals by an even older and more advanced race, who called themselves the Masters. One thousand orbits after the Dominants had been brought to Homeworld, the Masters came to pay their routine visit to the Aliens' planet.

How great was their horror when they found that once-beautiful Homeworld had been devastated by visitors from an unknown world!

SCPSW: 2nd Prize Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2002/03

Person Required

Ann Froggatt

Invisible among the morning crowd,
this man defers his living one more day
quite willingly, at present, while he's proud
that someone wants his skills, that he can pay
his way again, buy proper cigarettes —
the simple pleasures. All the public hell
of cashing giro's over now, he gets
a kind of comfort from a private cell.

No matter that they've bought him on the cheap,
experience like his commanding more
by honest standards — lifted from the heap
of dying bodies, grateful for a door
not shown him, now he sweats his days
in wringing profits they will never share,
too insecure to challenge all the ways
they cheat him. Worse, perhaps: too tired to care.

He's just a means to someone else's end —
no union permitted, so his case
will not be argued — but he wants to spend
his final years at this corrupted place.
Too old, too anxious now to make a stand,
he'll settle for subsistence, for a state
that seems predictable — though not as planned.
He needs to work; he can't just hope, and wait.

There's no-one left at home for him to keep
that might explain his dark, obsessive fear,
although a tribal memory runs deep —
the workhouse, and the hated overseer.
His name and number, contributions made,
identified in long, official lists,
are most of the equation: he has paid
his dues; he's working; therefore, he exists.

Swiss Break

Peter Stock

3rd Prize Vincent Brennan Competition

‘To me high mountains are a feeling ...’ — Byron

“You’ll love it,” I declared firmly. “The Alps are just down the road, and there’s lots to see — even in the city.”

I could tell, by the look on her face, that my wife did not regard Berne as first choice for a holiday, but I persuaded her that a few days tacked on to my business trip might not be so bad.

The propeller engined plane had taxied to a halt before a low, single-storey building — the Berne/Belp airport terminus. Flowers everywhere, buttercups along the narrow runway, window boxes in the airport building, cowbells sounding softly, the sun shone.

‘Immigration’ was a solemn, uniformed Swiss who would gaze intently at passports and wish their owners a pleasant visit. ‘Customs’ — a clone of Immigration’ — peered hopefully into ‘duty-free’ bags and muttered “In Ordnung”.

Margaret emerged into the tiny lounge smiling. “Bit quaint, darling — sort of ... rural even.”

A coach took us to the city centre from where we made our way to the Belle Vue Palace, an hotel of Edwardian elegance — with a concierge from the same era. He was ‘ageless’, polite, supremely confident and, as I had cause to know, ‘omniscient’.

“Le Carre has stayed here,” I announced. Margaret was unimpressed. “So has Sophia Loren.” This produced a ‘That’s more like it’ look.

From our room we could see the fast-flowing, greeney-blue River Aare surging around the Old City. From the terrace below floated the notes of a tinkling piano.

I was smiled upon, again. We relaxed.

In the morning we walked the mediaeval cobbled streets and strolled along the arcades. There were more than six kilometres of them I was proudly told by a smiling shopkeeper in perfect English. The Swiss are obsessed by quantitative facts.

The shops are impressive — small and tasteful.

Outstanding are the jewellers — displays of exquisite, unique pieces and adjacent are the tiny workshops where we watched their creation.

We settled for some Swiss chocolates from a stall in the market in the main square.

Everyone spoke ‘Swiss-German’ — a soft dialect of adulterated German — familiar but irritatingly difficult to catch.

That evening we ate Bratwurst and drank Swiss beer with the locals in the Kornhauskeller while listening to a talented amateur jazz band. Afterwards we sauntered along the Parliament Terrace from where the snow-covered Alps, twenty-five miles away, were clearly visible in the moonlight. We fell asleep to the chimes of the distant cathedral — and the muffled clang of a late tram.

One of the best ways to see Switzerland is by train and boat.

The next day a comfortable half-an-hour on an enormous train took us to the western end of Lake Thun. Off the train and onto a elegant, old-fashioned lake steamer bound for Interlaken. The steamer zig-zagged its way across the twenty-five miles long lake calling at tiny villages with names like Faulensee and Oberhofen. Some boasted castles, some tiny vineyards, all are graced with picturesque churches. They are immaculate — almost unreal.

We lunched on board — grilled lake perch with soft local wine — and gazed at the distant soaring mountains.

Interlaken, lying between Lakes Thun and Brienz, is a busy, cosmopolitan crossroads — a base for excursions into the alpine world but with a culture and traditions of its own.

The main event of our evening was a visit to an open-air theatre (Freilichtspiele) adjacent to the town.

The ‘stage’ was a clearing in the forest, the audience sits on wooden seats in a vast, covered stand. The show? Wilhelm Tell, the Schiller version. The duration? Three hours plus. Intervals? One — for soft drinks only. The language? German — clear hoch-Deutsch.

From time to time ‘knights’, on real horses cantered across the clearing. Tell spoke forcefully and at length, on Freiheit and Brüderschaft.

The climax? Yes — he shot the apple (suspiciously) cleanly in two. The children loved it, so did the hundreds of tourists — most of whom

seemed to be Japanese armed with the most impressive array of photographic hardware we had ever seen.

In Berne, crossing the Aare on the impressively high Kirchenfeldbrücke ('good for bungee jumping at weekends' we were earnestly informed) we visited the Alpine Museum.

The attendant was suitably ruddy-faced and gnarled — every inch an old mountain guide — but he turned out to be a retired schoolmaster.

Inside the smell was of ski wax and old leather. The exhibits — ancient toboggans, wooden skis, prototype alpenstocks and sepia photographs of bearded heroes — left us wondering how only a few generations ago people climbed high, snowy peaks in plus-fours and tweed skirts carrying only walking sticks.

The highlight of our itinerary was a trip to the summit of the Jungfrauoch. An early train took us to Grindelwald where the Eiger, a huge, menacing, slab of a mountain dominates the town. A mountain train with cogwheel drive brought us to Kleine-Scheidegg: then across ever bleaker terrain, through the Eiger glacier — intensely cold — impressive engineering — to the highest railway station in Europe — on the Jungfrauoch, 3454 metres above sea level.

The atmosphere was crystal clear and the views across the formidable range of alpine peaks to the distant dark, blue horizon were spectacular. The air was cold, pure and thin.

To the west and lower and attracting much attention was the Hotel Piz Gloria — a vulgar concrete construction which featured in the Bond film '*On Her Majesty's Secret Service*'. Standing that day on 'top of the world' in the pale spring sun we experienced a frisson of what Byron might have had in mind.

The return journey has its own charm. If you are young you will be impatient with the slowly rumbling train as it crosses areas of rocky scree and last year's sun-browned meadows into the old world village of Wengen. If you are not so young, after two hours at high altitude, you will be feeling weary and enjoying the pace and even a quiet doze.

Wengen has been a favoured winter sports rendezvous for the Brits since the last century and it is easy to see why — it exudes Gemütlichkeit, totally 'Swiss' — and a bit tacky. It's also the 'home' of the 'Downhill Club'.

“Members” I carefully explained, “are mostly Brits dedicated to skiing once a year down a local, suicidally steep slope.” Margaret yawned. “This is in maintenance of a tradition established by some plus-four clad, ex-pat in a flat cap over a century ago.” I was about to continue, but I had lost my audience. My wife was asleep.

We changed trains again at Grindelwald with a sense of relief as we walked along a windswept platform easing our aching legs. Mountain trains have hard wooden seats. Also we found that the Swiss do not like open windows — even in spring. Warmth (fug) is a cherished commodity at high altitudes.

Our route back to England was by intercity express via Lausanne and Geneva. From Lausanne the line winds its way high above the great blue expanse of Lake Geneva — known locally as Lak Lemman, past vineyards with names like Saint Saphorin and Féchy, eventually to arrive in Geneva’s bustling airport terminus.

Here among the crowds, bizarre in this holiday atmosphere, are small contingents of uniformed, Swiss militia en route to training camps to carry out their three weeks’ annual service. Each citizen soldier nonchalantly carries a huge assault rifle. Visitors, depending on their nationality, eye them with amusement or alarm.

At Gatwick it’s raining; we discover our unposted cards, hunt for the car — and it all seems unreal. This time yesterday we were standing on top of the Alps!

And Switzerland?

Well, the trains do tend to run on time — largely because there is plenty of ‘slop’ in the timetables.

The food? For a gastronomic treat there is nowhere to beat France but Switzerland can be very good and the hotels are a treat — different and pleasurable.

The countryside is truly spectacular — no brochure or poster can capture the glorious combination of lake and high mountain.

The people? Bit dour in the German-speaking north, around Zurich; quite different in the largely French-speaking south, around Geneva, and almost frivolous in Ticino near the Italian border.

Margaret and I thought we might just go again — and we did — many times.

Fight Night

Peter Stock

Froud Memorial Competition — Runner-up

‘Boxing’s just showbusiness with blood’ — Frank Bruno.

“Fancy going down to the city tomorrow night, Ian.” Tony Marshall stared at Ian over his tankard. “Bank Holiday — big fair in the old marketplace — got the lot, wrestling, headless woman ...”

“Can’t afford it, mate — end of the month — I’m skint. Return bus fare is about all I’ve got.”

“And there’s a boxing booth down there.” Marshall persevered. “They’re paying ten quid just for staying on your feet for a couple of minutes with this broken down old pro.” He looked hard at Ian.

“Piss off, Marshall!” Ian grinned. “I know what you’re thinking — I’m not getting beaten senseless for a tenner by some vicious old pro. And not many are going to win anyway — not if they’re paying that sort of money ... Ten quid ... you said?”

Saturday evening they were on the old Wilts and Dorset double-decker. Salisbury was about ten miles away — a long walk home if you missed the last bus.

Ian had met Marshall when they were cadets. Now they were newly commissioned and doing their basic training at the School of Artillery on The Plain.

Tony was sturdily built, carried himself well with an enviable self confidence some people seem born with. Perhaps being an Old Etonian had something to do with it.

Ian Hunter was big and a ‘fighter’. Marshall was light middle-weight and an ‘instinctive’ boxer. They had both boxed at Sandhurst — big tick in the ‘moral fibre’ box.

There were occasions when Ian could beat Marshall — he could hit harder, but careless, and Tony would move in close and Ian suffered. They were fit, cocky, competitive — good mates.

The vintage bus smelling of diesel and humanity lurched through the crowded streets of the Saturday night city.

“Glad I’m not on late shift,” muttered a cadaverous conductor. “Gonna be trouble later.” He stood on the rear platform shaking his head and spat into the road.

In the old market square the Whit Fair was in full swing. Gas lamps and naked bulbs provided a harsh illumination in the growing dusk. From the fairground engines clouds of steam mixed with sooty smoke swirled into the warm May evening.

Raucous music came from all directions. There was hoarse shouting from the showmen and stallholders and a great noise and bustle created by the dozens of fairgoers/ mainly beefy farm workers — and their beefy female companions.

“Wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of her,” Ian muttered nodding in the direction of a strapping blonde.

She was standing four square at a coconut shy shrieking at a brood of tough looking children. The wooden ball looked very small in her huge hand. When she scored a hit the coconut didn’t just fall off it split open. “Look at that!” she screamed. “Annie Oakley, with balls, that’s me! Gimme another one!”

The stallholder looked on uneasily, helplessly, as her children helped themselves to his coconuts.

The boxing booth was a big scruffy marquee. In the centre was a garishly lit ring, its blue and red corners faded, the material torn, ropes sagging.

Anyone who could survive two minutes with Bill Bates — former world middle-weight champion, so the elaborately painted poster read — would win a ten pounds. It had cost them tenpence each — Ian’s last — to get in.

The smells of tobacco, sweat and beer were overpowering — intoxicating.

Bill Bates, still muscular but balding, a slightly paunchy old ‘pro’ was dispatching another brawny, bloodied son of the soil. The cheerful, raucous crowd was loving it. “Give it to ’im, champ! Knock ’im out! Kill ’im!”

Two more big lads were lining up to have a go, their girl-friends pushing them forward. The marquee was full and buzzing with excitement.

The proprietor, Mr Perkins so the signboard said, bald head shining in the bright lights, was a small, Dickensian creature with rimless glasses perched on the end of a long veiny nose. He sat on a high stool at one side of the ring.

Beside him stood a very large man indeed. From his battered face and vacant look he was another old pro — probably the bouncer or just a stand-in when Bill got tired, Ian thought.

Marshall and Hunter watched for a while before Tony said, as Ian knew he would, “I reckon I could go two minutes with that old bugger — we could do with a tenner.”

“Don’t be bloody daft, Marshall — if you even look like a threat Bates’ll take you apart — he’s a mean fighter, I’ve been watching, he’ll really hurt you.”

Marshall wasn’t listening. “Look after my clothes — and get yourself into that red corner — I might need a hand.”

A few minutes later, stripped to the waist — “Don’t want to get blood on my clean shirt” — barefoot and wearing a pair of stuffingless boxing gloves Tony was face to face with a confident Bill Bates.

Ian was squatting in Tony’s corner, no-one seemed to mind but he was aware the ‘big man’ had his eye on him.

Mr Perkins acted as ‘referee’, timekeeper and master of ceremonies. He announced Tony Marshall several times, very loudly. Ian hoped none of their senior officers were watching — plus points for ‘character’ — or minus for ‘conduct unbecoming’.

“Don’t fall down too soon, laddie. Play along with Bill. He won’t hurt you,” Ian heard Perkins hiss loudly. Marshall grinned. He had no intention of falling down, neither sooner nor later.

For the first minute they swapped noisy punches. Bates had instantly recognised Tony as a ‘bit of a boxer’. They were about the same size. Tony kept his head down and his guard up but enough of Bates’ solid, well-timed blows were getting through to make him blink.

The crowd was loving it — it looked like a hard, well matched fight, but Ian knew Marshall was losing.

Bates moved up a gear and his punches were getting vicious — Ian could tell by the sharp thwack as they landed they were really hurting and he was wincing as each one struck home.

Bates began to push a bloody-nosed Tony around the ring — a satisfied sneer on his face as he measured him up, considering when to finish it off.

“Come on, Marshall, hit the bugger — like you do me!” Ian yelled. He saw defeat — and a hungry evening ahead.

Bill Bates grinned and for one unprofessional instant allowed his concentration to wander. Tony, still strong and fast seized his chance. He caught Bates with a hard straight left — text book stuff — between the eyes and a good right cross, smack on his chin.

The pro was on his back foot and instinctively ‘covering up’, but Marshall went for him, piling in lefts and rights to the head and body. The big crowd was on its feet screaming encouragement.

The bouncer was climbing into the ring and Ian was moving towards the bouncer when Perkins frantically banged his gong for the end of the fight.

Pandemonium. Bates had retired, puffy-eyed and sulking to in his corner; the bouncer stood looking nonplussed — his usual expression — while Marshall just grinned and waved his hands wildly above his head.

Perkins grabbed one arm and announced him through his tin megaphone as ‘the brave young winner’. Bates continued to scowl and mutter to himself.

Ian put an arm round Tony’s shoulders. “Come on mate, you’ve done your stuff — I’m proud of you. Well done. I thought you were going to lose that one.” Ian grinned. “No supper and a long walk home.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. Made me concentrate.” Tony tried to laugh but it hurt too much — they both knew he’d been lucky.

Perkins was shaking Tony's hand and waving a ten pound note around like a banner. Tony grabbed it, passed it to Ian. "Better have a good look at that — it's our supper."

They got out of the ring. Bates, his scarred face unsmiling moved over, the big man at his shoulder.

"I'm only supposed to let one silly bugger a night win," he said gritting his teeth, "I choose who and I don't expect to git hurt doin' it." He fingered his jaw, his eyes cold. "If I see you round 'ere agin, either of you, I'll knock your bloody teeth in. Now ... orff."

The pair left, taking their time, grinning at the applauding crowd.

Outside a familiar figure walked up, grabbed Tony's hand, shook it vigorously.

"Well done, Sir! That was worth watching. Haven't enjoyed myself so much for a long time."

They recognised one of the sergeant-major instructors on their course. The story would be round the School in no time.

Tony cleaned up in a public lavatory, then, on a wave of euphoria wanted to go back in and watch a couple more fights.

Madness, Ian thought. He earnestly suggested the Market Inn and a couple of pints as a safer idea. But he was bit curious himself so ... they went back in.

There was no sign of Bates. The big man, billed as 'Fred Symes, British Heavyweight Champion' was in the ring playing around with a squat, red-faced farmer's boy.

"Your turn, Ian! Why don't you take on that big bugger — you're almost the same size?"

This was not true — Symes was huge. Ian consoled himself with the thought he might be fitter. Tony grinned wickedly, painfully. "And they're offering fifteen quid now."

"Shut up, Marshall. I'm not going in there with that ... that bloody monster. He'd kill me — especially after what you did to his mate. Let's go and have that beer while we can enjoy it."

“I think you’re scared, aren’t you! Don’t forget — ‘the bigger they are’ ...” Marshall could be very provocative and Ian couldn’t resist a challenge.

Perkins looked a bit surprised to see them again and even more surprised when Ian said he wanted a go at the big fellow. But Perkins didn’t argue — business was slacking off and he was looking for volunteers.

Ian lost, of course. The trouble was that Symes was just too big. Ian landed a few punches which made Symes grin as he pawed him around. Then at a nod from Perkins and with about thirty seconds to go he stopped grinning and started to hit Ian hard, like a pile driver and he was on the floor. He could taste sawdust and blood.

Marshall was yelling at him. “Get up, Ian. You’ve only got another ten seconds. Get up!” But Ian wasn’t going to get up — not to be hit like that again.

With his head still ringing he sat outside the Market Inn, an overdue pint in his shaking hands. Tony, now cheerful to the point of arrogance, was at the same time all solace.

“You nearly had him y’know. I thought you were going to topple him.” Liar, Ian thought. “Hold him off anyway. Pity you just couldn’t get off the floor in those last few seconds — we could have gone to ‘The Haunch’ for supper and ...”

“Shut up, Marshall,” Ian ground out through aching jaws. “Just shut up and get me another drink.”

Tony came back smiling happily. Ian leaned across the small table and poked him in the chest. “And another thing ...” Ian grinned unsympathetically as Tony winced. “And another thing ... the big ones may fall harder, Marshall, but in the meantime, just you remember, they hit you a f...g sight harder.” Ian pushed him down into his seat.

They caught the last bus. It was full, mainly happy soldiers going back to camp. One or two grinned at Ian and Tony recognising them from their fights earlier. On the upper deck there was scuffling and shouting. Someone was being ill, noisily.

It was the same old conductor. He'd got lumbered for the late shift. He stared at their battered faces.

"You bin fightin' then, 'ave yer? I don't want no trouble on this bus. Bad enough with all these ..." He jerked his head towards the stairs.

Tony put an arm round his bent shoulders. "Don't you worry about all that 'low life' up there, dad." He smiled confidently. "There won't be any trouble on this bus — not with us on it will there, Ian — we'll look after you."

Ian thought this benevolence might be misplaced but said nothing.

At that moment there was a great clattering as someone came down the stairs from the upper deck. It was Fred Symes, worse for wear and malevolent.

He saw them, grinned. "'Allo then, gents, come back for some more, 'ave yer ..." The voice was a slurred snarl.

The old double-decker lurched as the driver changed gear to crawl up a hill.

The conductor disappeared. There were just the three of them on the rear platform. Symes lumbered closer.

"Move over, Tony. I'll handle this."

Ian ducked easily under Symes's first drunken swing. While he tried to regain his balance the bus lurched again, violently. Ian hit him with a powerful right to the side of the head and arms flailing he toppled off the platform. There was a loud crash as he fell into the road.

"I'll ... kill you two snotty bastards ... I'll knock your bloody teef art ... I'll ..." The threats and the noise of pounding feet dwindled into the receding darkness as the bus gathered speed.

Like a little rodent coming out of its hole the old conductor emerged from inside the lower deck.

"That big bloke." He eyed them both. "Did he fall orff then?"

"Yeah, he sort of fell." Ian grinned. "And the bigger they are ... not stopping again for a bit, are we?"

Where Truth Lies

An anecdote of childhood

Peter Stock

Lewis Wright Competition 3rd Prize

During the 1930s my father spent a lot of time at home as he didn't have a job and this meant we spent a lot of time together. When I was about five we would go for long rides on his bike. He had fitted a small saddle onto the cross-bar and on a fine afternoon off we went.

Sometimes we rode to a village called Sandy to watch express trains, like the Flying Scotsman, roaring northwards through the green countryside, a great trail of steam and smoke in its wake and sometimes we went to see his old aunts at Ravensden.

The rides were often very long ones and I would get sore and have to walk for a while. This would make my father cross — he always wanted to hurry on.

The country roads were usually empty, except for horse-drawn farm carts and sometimes a slow-moving, smoke-puffing traction engine — which we would have to stop and watch — my father liked steam engines.

Now and then a shiny motorcar would go past in a cloud of dust and a funny smell. There would be a grumble about new-fangled machines. I thought they were wonderful.

Ravensden, even to my young eyes, was an 'old-fashioned' village. There was no running water and no proper lavatory.

Aunty Alice and Aunty May lived at the top of a steep hill in an old cottage, its wispy straw roof full of sparrows. We always walked up this hill with my father puffing and perspiring as he pushed the bike and pulled me. Close by the cottage was a small church. In the middle of the graveyard was a huge, spreading yew tree. Like the moss covered stones it looked timeless. I thought it must have been there forever.

Outside the front door of the aunts' cottage was a deep well with a heavy wooden lid and a wooden winding drum with an iron handle. One day my father, holding my hand tightly, opened the lid and dropped a stone. I heard the splash a long time later and was frightened when I realised how deep it must be. After that I always kept as far away as I could.

Aunty Alice and Aunty May seemed very old. They wore black, rustly clothes and smelled of flowers. Both had red, watery eyes and were always sniffing.

In their front room was the little, village sweet shop. It was always stuffy in there. Two or three sticky brown strips of paper covered in dead and dying black flies hung from the ceiling but there still lots of other flies zooming about. I never fancied the dusty-looking old sweets, even those in jars looked grey.

In the parlour, as they called the room they lived in, winter or summer there was always a smoky fire in big black fireplace. There were no pictures on the dark walls, only a big old coppery coloured thing like a long handled frying pan with a lid. My father said it was a warming pan. The old ladies, he said, filled it with hot cinders from the fire and then put it into their bed. I thought it seemed to me a dangerous thing to do and I wondered if their bedroom was as smoky as downstairs but I don't suppose they even noticed it.

In the stone floored kitchen there was an rusty iron pump over a big old china sink. It didn't work, although my father was always trying to mend it, so all the water came in a bucket from that well. I wondered how the old ladies managed to carry it. Did they ever have a bath? I didn't dare ask.

In the garden I remember only the noise of the bees. There were a lot of bees and wasps too especially in the late summer when they came to eat the fallen pears. The lavatory was in the garden — a little shed with a wooden bench and a bucket. It was full of flies and the smell was horrid. There was only old, torn-up newspaper to wipe your bottom and unless I really, really had to I didn't go there.

The old aunts would always say the same thing to me. "Hallo Peter, my how you've grown, you do look well!"

They said this even on a visit when I felt awful just after I had had whooping cough.

The best bit was the ride home. We would whiz down the steep hill. I would shout, "Faster daddy, faster!" One day a dog shot across the road and we hit it and we both fell off. I hurt my head and my arm. My father pretended not to be hurt but he was because he was limping as we walked home pushing the damaged bike.

My mother was angry and the next time we went on a bumpy old bus and I was sick all over the floor. The driver was very cross. After that my mother said, "All right, you can go on the bike again but don't hit any dogs!" I

thought that was silly — we hardly ever saw a dog — but I was very glad to get back on the bike after that horrible old bus.

One day when we arrived a great to-do was going on outside the cottage. Lots of people were standing round that well, nodding and shaking their heads. A fat policeman stood to one side, looking hot and bothered. Notebook in hand he was trying to listen to a very old man, he kept licking a short pencil.

“And just when was it Mr Lidster that you ... er ... thought you heard a shout?”

“Warn’t no shout, ’twas a scream ...”

I slid away from my father’s side and found Stella, one of the village girls. She was a year older than me and my ‘special friend’.

“That old aunt — Alice, she fell down the well ... this morning ...”

I couldn’t believe it. I thought of the well, the low wall round it, the lid, how narrow that black hole was; a child could fall in ... I could fall in ... but not Aunty Alice, she wasn’t small enough.

“Some say that other old aunt — May — she pushed her — to get all the money, like ...” She gave me a knowing look. “Trouble is no-one can get down there to get her up — supposing of course she *is* down there — well’s too narrow.”

This was the stuff of nightmares — someone hurtling headfirst down that narrow shaft into that distant water ... and being stuck there ... upside-down probably. No-one would choose to do that. She was pushed. I gulped. Without a word I ran back to my father.

“Daddy! Daddy! She was pushed. Aunty May pushed her in. Aunty May pushed her down the well ... to get the money!”

The conversation stopped. The policeman stopped writing.

“Do we actually know that my Aunty Alice *is* down that well?” my father asked, his voice loud in the surrounding silence.

“Well, no, sir.” The policeman spoke slowly. “All we know is that this lady, Miss Alice, she was a bit of a cripple, is not to be found. Her sister says she hasn’t seen her since last night. Mr Lidster here, says he heard a female shout, perhaps a scream, and a sort of scuffle.” He looked at his notes. “Early this morning. The lid on the well was found open ...”

I was hanging on to my father’s hand. “Daddy, if we dropped a stone down and there was a splash ...”

The policeman dropped the first stone. There was no splash.

It was a long time later I discovered, covertly, indirectly, from quickly terminated adult conversations, that it had taken two weeks to find someone able and willing to go down that well to have a look.

They had found a man — Aunty May had suggested him — a tiny, wiry, dark-skinned thatcher from a nearby village. For five pounds, I heard, Darky, as he was known, went down ‘in the bucket’ with a torch and a coil of rope — but he couldn’t find any trace of Aunty Alice.

After that we didn’t go to Ravensden any more. Aunty May, I was told, had ‘gone away’.

Three years later my father had managed to get a job and we were on holiday, the first I could remember, at a cheap hotel in Clacton. One wet day I was reading a comic in what served as the lounge when an elderly, respectably dressed woman walked in.

I glanced up ... and stared. The woman stopped, put a hand to her throat. “It’s Peter, isn’t it ... Peter Marshall. Ted’s boy.” I noticed she had gone white.

“Yes, yes it is ... and, and ... I kn ... know who you are.” I stuttered, feeling my face going red. “You ... you look. You look d-different ... but ... you’re Aunty May, aren’t you?”

She sat down at a small table, reached in her handbag and produced a small glass bottle. She sniffed and her eyes started to water. I thought she might be crying. I felt uncomfortable but I went on staring.

“You were the one ...”

At that moment my parents walked in. Aunty May didn’t move. “Hello, Ted ... Edith. Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again.” Her voice was low, husky. My parents, lost for words, looked at one another and back at the pale woman.

My father was about to speak when a shadow fell across the small table. Aunty May looked up. “This is my husband, Frank. Frank this is ...” She stopped, caught her breath.

Although I’d never met him I knew at once who this small, wiry, dark-skinned man was.

“You’re Darky, aren’t you,” I blurted.

Brown Bomber

A nostalgic indulgence

Peter Stock

Lewis Wright Competition 3rd Prize

“Hiyah, sonny, who’re y’ looking for?”

I stared. He was well built, dark face, black hair, American Air Force uniform, lots of medal ribbons. He smiled, his face lit up.

“Er, um ... Keith. I said I’d call ...” Who *was* this man? I glanced at the jeep parked in the road.

“Oh yeah, he’s out just now. Who’d I say called?” The voice was soft, friendly. He was the stuff of Hollywood heroes.

“Peter, just ... Peter.”

“Hiyah, Peter I’m Dave Winters, on the base at Thurleigh — up the road a stretch.” He jerked his head, indicating direction and held out a big brown hand. “Glad to meet yah.”

It was 1943. I was fourteen. Keith Marshall was one of my best friends. He lived with his mum a few houses down the street from me. She had lost her husband few years earlier. She was a nice woman, quite young — even to my critical teenager’s eyes — and still pretty — in a grown-up sort of way, but wary and private.

Keith and I were close but he’d never mentioned Dave Winters who had seemed pretty much at home when he answered the door.

“Oh, Dave.” Keith grinned. “He’s mum’s boy-friend. He’s great — flies a B17 — a Flying-Fortress. He’s a squadron leader — out bombing over Germany two or three times a week. He’s on his second tour now.”

I told my mother about Dave. She made funny, disapproving noises, shook her head, so I didn’t say any more.

We got used to the jeep parked outside the Marshall’s house, it was often there — sometimes overnight. There was a lot of gossip, nodding heads, and lowered voices when I was around.

The Fortresses took off most mornings and by eight o’clock hundreds of silvery planes would be circling overhead at twenty thousand feet, their myriad vapour trails filling the sky. At a given moment they would turn eastwards and fly into the rising sun, the immense but distant noise of thousands of engines gradually fading.

In the afternoon they would come limping home, one by one, flying low, holes in their wings, engines trailing smoke. And sometimes one would

crash and there would be a faraway explosion and a cloud of black smoke on the horizon.

We would sit in the Marshall's kitchen chewing the gum Dave provided and sometimes he would tell us about his home in Alabama but mostly he talked about the raids.

"We fly in box formations y'see, about twenty to a box and we all stick pretty close together." He moved matchsticks around on the table. "We got maximum firepower in every direction and when the Fockers^{*} come at us they meet a wall of lead. There's twelve, point five calibre machine guns on every Fort — we could do with some fighter cover, though."

"But you lose some Forts on every raid," Keith said.

"Aw, they're just the old lame ducks. Lose formation and y' get hacked out of the sky." He smiled his easy, lazy smile.

Keith and I grinned. We called him the 'Brown Bomber', after Joe Louis, the world heavy-weight boxing champion. He liked that.

We didn't say anything but we used to wonder sometimes when we heard the American losses on the radio news after another deep penetration raid. There must have been an awful lot of 'lame ducks'.

I came back after a week away at half term and the jeep wasn't there anymore. My mother sniffed when I mentioned it. "Been posted, I expect. Good thing too!"

When I called on Keith there was no answer. Next day when I knocked he came to the door.

"Hi, I ... just got back from scout camp, I ..."

He stared at me, face red, blotchy — he was crying.

I knew immediately, with a dreadful certainty what had happened. "Dave ... he's gone, hasn't he ... he's missing ..."

Keith nodded, gulped, recovered. "Three days ago. Schweinfurt. The fighters cut 'em to pieces. Sixty-three didn't come back ..."

Pale, biting her lip, Diana Marshall came out of the kitchen behind him and put an arm round his shoulders. They looked at me. I moved to join them and we stood together for some minutes, heads down, holding one another, I was sobbing with them.

And then one day in late autumn the jeep was back.

Again, with a total certainty I knew what had happened — Dave had been shot down — captured and escaped. I rushed home. "Mum! Mum! He's back! He's back! The jeep's there. Dave's back!"

* Fockers: Focke-Wulf 190 high performance German fighter planes armed with 20mm cannon.

“Is he?” She stared at me. “Oh well, that’s good then, isn’t it?”

“It’s fantastic! Fantastic!”

Keith’s god, my hero and Diana’s glamorous boyfriend had come back.

I rushed off down the street, rang the bell and there he was — but it wasn’t Dave Winters. It was someone else. Same uniform. Same medal ribbons. But he was taller and not so dark, although the smile and the voice were almost the same.

“Hiyah, I’m Mel Sanders. You lookin’ for Keith?”

I nodded, taking his outstretched hand.

“He’ll be back in a while, why don’t you come on in?”

But I couldn’t go in. I ran home and shut myself in my bedroom.

I met up with Keith next day. We had a long, ‘grown-up’ talk.

“It was mum. She was so lonely. She couldn’t believe she’d lost him. Mel ... he’s a sort of Dave substitute ... but she’s smiling again.” He looked at me, wanly. “But ... he’s not ... he’s not Dave Winters.” He smiled. “He’s not the ... Brown Bomber.”

Some years later I was visiting Cambridge and went to the American Air Force cemetery just outside the city.

It is a vast, solemn place. It is like one of those World War I graveyards in northern France, but somehow bleaker, even in summer. The immensity of the recent sacrifice is awesome.

On the headstone was engraved “Major D. Winters. United States 8th Air Force. Killed in Action. 14 October 1943.”

I placed a small wreath and for a few vivid seconds I remembered Dave Winters, the big brown bomber from Alabama with the easy smile, the lazy voice, the way he looked at Diana Marshall ...

I stepped back and bumped into a small, dark, grey-haired old lady.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see ...”

“That’s OK, I shouldn’t be standing so close.” Her accent was American, deep south. “Did you know him?” She nodded at the grave.

“Yes ... I knew him ... for a short while ... I was very young. He was my hero — I was fourteen.” I smiled.

“Tell me about him ... what you remember.”

I stared at her.

“I’m Maisie.” She put out her hand. “I was his wife. He never wrote.”

Gentleman Ruffles of Hertingfordbury

John Buchanan

I am Simon Ruffles. You haven't heard of me? Few people have, but then I want it that way. Just recently the White Horse in Hertingfordbury has been providing me with a chance to relax whilst on a short holiday. I went for a walk round the village and one particular property caught my eye. It was really no more than a cottage in a decent sized piece of land. I would like to have seen inside.

However this seemed unlikely until I met Dorothea Hartman. She seemed an outgoing type of person who I felt I could get on with, if given the chance. The opportunity to do this came sooner than I had thought it would. We were to meet again at County Hall in nearby Hertford. I had not realised that she was a fellow member of the Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire. I found myself sitting next to her at the AGM. It was fairly easy to ingratiate myself with her due to our having met already.

By this time she was of a friendly disposition towards myself. She even offered to take me back to my hotel in her car. Naturally I took full advantage of the situation by continuing the process of getting to know my new acquaintance. I asked her if I could have the pleasure of her company at dinner in the hotel. I was a little surprised at the apparent ease with which Dorothea Hartman said yes. I am a good enough judge of character to realise that there was nothing wrong. In fact I felt that my new companion simply liked being flattered.

I could tell I was almost certainly on to a good thing. One has to be wary of possible snags on these occasions, but things seemed to be well in my favour. Anyway angling for a visit to the cottage was not a problem. Dorothea Hartman was quite willing to invite me back to the cottage. We agreed to have lunch together on the day I was due to return home. This automatically threw up in my mind the possibility of checking out the security system, if any. Then I pushed this thought back in my mind. I doubted if Dorothea Hartman would have anything to interest someone like me, but you can never be sure.

There are times when an opportunity to obtain a piece of value crops up in a surprising way. People like myself should always be on the look out for the odd item coming their way when least expected. Yes, I am a

thief. Now don't use the word 'robber' please. That makes me sound like a bank robber. I am not like that because I believe it is possible to achieve what's required without excessive violence. Mind you, I'm not sure what I would do if confronted by an angry home owner when attempting to acquire one of their valuable antiques.

I make my living this way, you see. I succeed because I am clever at it. There are ways of disposing of these things. Those dealing with people like myself are willing to take into account that they have been acquired in an unusual way. Obviously they do not want me to bring to them something which has been prominent in the media.

The type of dealer I am in contact with would not touch that sort of thing with a barge-pole. This of course is why I am so successful. The police would never dream of visiting such places in search of stolen property.

This time I was not, however, expecting to do that kind of business. My visit to the Hartman cottage was a convivial occasion, with meat and potato pie as the main course. It was a pleasant meal. I was shown round the ground floor of the cottage by my hostess. I noticed the way she spoke about the place. It was almost as if it was more important than the contents. Mind you, I don't blame her. If I were to move from my two bedroom flat, I wouldn't mind living here, I thought. The ground floor had beams running across every ceiling, and was divided into several rooms in such a way that, despite moving from one room to another, it was only a subtle change. It was cleverly done. If Dorothea Hartman hadn't thought of it, she knew a good idea when she saw one.

However I did find myself taking a special interest in a fairly small, but still lovely, piece of porcelain china. If you are in my kind of business you get to sense what could be valuable. The more I thought about this small piece of china, the more I felt I could sell it to Anne Chandler. She was a most useful contact. My usual thing was silverware and miniature paintings, but then sometimes an item comes along which you know is just right. I could not resist the china in front of me. There was of course the security system, but that was nothing special. Someone in my line of work gets to know what to look for, and it comes as second nature. There was the alarm, but I knew how to deal with it.

I did eventually relieve Dorothea Hartman of her porcelain china piece. Relieve is a much nicer word than steal, don't you think? If it was

reported in the press, then it was only of sufficient importance to make the local papers. The trick there, you see, is that the amount of publicity may not even get to the attention of the people with whom I chose to do business. When I eventually did meet Anne Chandler about the piece of porcelain she seemed quite taken with it. It appeared she was making a big thing about showing it to her companion. He was a big bruiser type. I'm sure you know the sort I mean. His face seemed familiar. I remembered it from the sports pages, I think. Anyway I was sitting back in my armchair believing I was on to a good thing.

“Do you recognise this, Jonathan?” said Anne.

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

At that point my suspicions were aroused by the way he said it. The way he was walking across towards me was somewhat menacing, wasn't it?

“I'm Jonathan Hartman, the son of Dorothea Hartman of Hertingfordbury. I'm fighting Mike Tyson next month for the World Heavyweight title. Am I glad to see you!”

* * * * *

The War to End War

Brian Scott

It was, they said, the war to end all wars,
To settle human discord once for all,
But though it caused three great empires to fall,
And death, destruction, horror without pause
As every nation battled for its cause,
Misguided people rallied to the call;
They came, they fought, they gave their bloody all.
It was, they said, for international laws.
Four years of desperate struggle rent the Earth.
At last one side contrived the means to win.
Of magnanimity there was a dearth;
The victors looked on mercy as a sin.
Two decades later they will see the birth
Of horrors greater still, as battles new begin

Opening Doors

Brian Lockett

Susan opens the door to me.

“Yes, Dad?” she says patiently, unsmilingly.

“I just thought I’d call round.”

“You were in the neighbourhood, I suppose!”

“Something like that.”

“I’m the only one here.”

“Can I come in?”

“What would be the point? Anyway, I’m doing my homework.”

“You can spare the time to make me a cup of tea, can’t you? We could have a bit of a chat.”

Susan looks at me. She is only fifteen, but she seems much older. Even when she was younger — eight or nine perhaps — I used to detect something condescending, cynical, superior in the way she looked at people. She never seemed to believe anything anyone ever said to her. Sometimes I had the feeling she wasn’t really related to either her mother or to me. Whenever my wife and I argued, she seemed to regard the whole thing as some kind of boring ritual, like going to school or brushing her teeth.

“Chat?” she says now. “About what exactly?”

“You know, things at school, what you and your friends have been up to.”

“Dad, this is pathetic. You’ve left home, remember? Mum doesn’t want to see you again. Charlie and Julia have already forgotten you. You were always in the way here. Go away and get a life. Find somebody. Anybody.”

She is looking at her watch. I bought her that watch. For her birthday. “Thanks,” she had said and she had checked the time before putting it on. Now she was beginning to close the door.

But it wasn’t like that at all.

Charlie opens the door. Wide. With a smile.

“Hi, Dad. Look, come round the back I’ve got the Harley-Davison in bits on the back lawn.”

I go round the back of the house. A large blue tarpaulin covers most of the grass. Bits of motor-bike are spread out on it. A radio is blaring from a tree stump. Charlie is already telling me what he’s done, what needs to be done, what he’s going to do. He doesn’t stop talking until he realises that we haven’t seen each other for some time. He remembers why and suddenly looks awkward, embarrassed.

“What’ve you been up to, Dad? You’ve moved to Worplesden, Mum says. Got a nice flat, have you?”

“Janice and I have bought a house. I gave your mother the address. I thought she might have passed it on. I said I’d love to see any of you.”

“Been a bit busy, Dad. You know what it’s like. I’ve been doing up people’s bikes. Nice little earner.”

“You still at the electronics firm in Haslemere?”

“Yeah. Not for much longer. You know me. Perfectionist. I do a good job there, but I don’t get on with the others. Had a few rows. Told people what I thought of them. Can’t stand sloppy work. It’s the way I’m made.”

“So what are your plans?”

“Might move into bike repair at home full time. Mum doesn’t mind. Julia and Susan don’t like the idea of turning the place into a workshop. Still that’s their problem, not mine. Girls!”

He shrugs resignedly and surveys the scene. I am interrupting him.

“Look,” I say, “your mother and I ...”

He waves a screwdriver and grimaces.

“Your business, Dad, not mine. No excuses, no explanations. These things happen. Can’t be helped. No-one’s to blame.”

A thought seems to strike him.

“Wanna cuppa tea? Sorry, Forgetting my manners.”

“No,” I say. “That’s all right. Just wondered what you were doing, that’s all.”

“Me? I’m fine. Look, I’ll get the address off Mum and give you a bell so that we can arrange a visit. But I want to finish this off first. Can’t stop till I’ve finished a job. You know me. Is that OK?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Whenever.”

But it wasn’t like that either.

Julia opens the door. She comes out to hug me.

“You mad bugger,” she says, stroking my head. “Why did you have to go? She’s the one who should have moved out. You should have kicked the old slag out years ago. Come in. I’m making lunch. Mum’s gone to a meeting of this potty church she’s joined. I think Charlie is helping the police with their enquiries, as they say. Susan’s in the library writing her book. Can you peel some spuds for us?”

Julia drags me through to the kitchen. With her I have never felt the need to say a great deal. She tells me all I want to know without being asked. She gets all the information she wants from me with a few spare, well-directed questions.

We sit over coffee.

“I like Janice,” she says. “She’s good for you. Stops you being a complete doormat. But then you like being a doormat, don’t you?”

“What else is there to be?”

“I despair of you, Dad. Thank God none of us is like you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t forget: it’s spineless people like me who are the backbone of the country.”

“Still coming out with your one-liners, are you? Mum never appreciated them.”

“She doesn’t have much of a sense of humour. Even though she married me.”

“Why did you two get married, Dad? And don’t say you don’t know.”

“All right. I won’t. But it’s probably true.”

But that’s not what happened.

It’s true I knocked at the door. But nobody was at home.

Who Is Without Sin?

Brian Scott

The American lieutenant and his sergeant were sitting in their makeshift office in the village hall, sifting through the papers taken from the German soldiers killed in the short, sharp battle for the French village. Suddenly the bored sergeant gave an exclamation and passed a wallet across the desk to the officer. “Take a look at these, lootenant,” he said.

The lieutenant took out a photograph and a letter from the wallet. The photo showed a typically blond German of nineteen or twenty wearing the hated uniform, with a pretty girl with long black hair holding his hand and smiling shyly at the camera. At first the lieutenant assumed it was the soldier’s wife, but when he read the letter he saw that it was from a local girl. It was a simple love-letter, asking the soldier to meet her “at the usual place” and reminding him to wear civilian clothes so nobody would know she was having an affair with a German soldier.

The lieutenant reflected for a minute, then passed the documents back to the sergeant. “Burn them,” he said.

The sergeant looked at him indignantly. “No Sir, I will not burn them,” he said, “this is evidence of treason.” He almost threw the offending documents back across the desk.

“Very well, soldier,” said the lieutenant. “What do you think we should do with them then?”

“Why, hand them over to the village authorities of course,” said the sergeant. “They’ll know what to do with a jerrybag like that.”

“So you want her to be put against a wall and shot by self-appointed executioners, do you sergeant?” asked the lieutenant.

“It’s not likely to come to that, Sir,” replied the sergeant.

“No, I agree it’s not likely, but it is possible. It’s more likely they’ll just cut off all that beautiful long hair and treat her with contempt for the rest of her life.”

“Well, she asked for it by consorting with the enemy,” said the sergeant stubbornly.

The lieutenant thought for a moment. “You are married, aren’t you Joe?” he asked.

“Yes Sir, I sure am!” the sergeant replied proudly, “and I’ve got me a little son I haven’t even seen yet ‘cos he was born after we left the good old U.S. of A.”

The lieutenant paused, and then he said quietly, “What about the girl you were seeing back in London?”

The sergeant’s jaw dropped. “Uh, well that was different,” he blustered, “at least the Brits are our allies.”

“Wasn’t she a married woman too?” the lieutenant asked.

Joe looked uncomfortable.

“I guess she was,” he admitted.

“So where is her husband?”

“He’s in Burma.”

“Fighting the Nips?”

“I guess. He’s been away a long time.”

“If he finds out that you were screwing his wife, do you suppose he’ll think it’s O.K. because she was consorting with an ally?”

“I reckon not.”

“And what about your wife, Joe? Are you going to tell her about it?”

Joe avoided his gaze and did not answer.

“This is a lousy war, Joe, though I don’t suppose there’s any other kind, and we all want to survive and get back to our normal lives, if there is such a thing. If we can snatch a little loving to lighten the journey on the way then bully for us. Isn’t that the way it is, sergeant?”

“I know you’re right, Sir,” Joe agreed grudgingly. “But I still don’t think she should get away with it.”

“Look at the picture again, man,” said the lieutenant. “See how happy they were together. We have just killed her lover; don’t you think that’s punishment enough?”

Slowly, reluctantly, Joe nodded his head.

“So, I’ll ask you one more time, soldier; what shall we do with these papers?”

The sergeant took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and passed it across the desk to the lieutenant.

“Burn them,” he said.

Briefcase Encounter

Brian Scott

Robert was looking through the window when the tube train plunged underground and the bright, cold spring sunshine abruptly disappeared. It was Monday morning. The novelty of his new job in the City had already worn off and to make matters worse he had overslept and had not had time to buy himself a newspaper or magazine to read on the train.

He brightened up when a young woman forced her way past the immobile passengers in order to reach the corner seat opposite him. She gave him an apologetic smile as he moved his feet to make room for her briefcase on the floor underneath the window, but thereafter avoided his gaze. She was wearing a smart suit with a short skirt, and kept her nicely-rounded knees demurely pressed together. Not for the first time, Robert reflected on women's indifference to the weather when choosing their clothes. Certainly, looking at girls in mini-skirts kept Robert warm on a cold day, but they surely did not do the same for their wearers!

He looked at the woman surreptitiously. She was pretty, but seemed very nervous and edgy, looking anxiously around one moment, then staring out of the window at the blank walls as though to shut out the world. Robert wondered if she were starting a new job; he remembered his own anxiety under similar circumstances a few weeks ago.

He felt a mad impulse to break the sanctity of the London Underground by speaking to her. Maybe a friendly word from a stranger would make all the difference to her worries, whatever they might be. No doubt the other passengers, if they noticed at all, would be shocked or amused, but so what? More important, what would the girl's reaction be? Probably an icy reply meaning "Mind your own business." Worst of all, she might ignore him totally, which would put him firmly and humiliatingly in his place.

Nevertheless, deciding he had nothing to lose except his self-esteem Robert spent the next few minutes trying both to screw up enough courage to speak to her and to think of an opening remark which would convey his concern but conceal his desire.

His hopes were dashed abruptly when, two stations before his own, she got up to leave the train. She fought her way through the standing passengers, and Robert agonised over getting off as well. He had some wild plan of following her to see where she worked so he could pass there at lunchtime or after his day's work on the chance of meeting her and chatting her up, although that would be even more blatant than making an approach on the train. Besides, there was his job to think about.

Ready to abandon his fantasy, Robert saw with a shock that the briefcase was still at his feet. She had forgotten it!

His spirits soaring, Robert snatched up the case and pushed everyone ruthlessly out of his way as he struggled through to the still-open door and stepped onto the platform. He rushed past startled travellers and with a sigh of relief saw the girl as she made her way to the foot of the escalator. Catching her arm, he said triumphantly, "Look, you forgot your case."

He was astonished by the look of terror on her face. Surely she could not suppose that even the most desperate mugger or rapist would assault his victim here? Then with a feeling of sick horror he realised that her look of fear was directed not at him but at the briefcase. It was no accident that she had left it behind.

They stared at each other for a moment of paralysed eternity.

He should have hated her. She was prepared to kill him and dozens of other passengers for her "cause", whatever that might be. He wondered what evil could so corrupt such youth and beauty and seeming innocence.

Even as he lowered the case carefully and caught hold of her startled hand to make a run for their lives he knew that it was too late. Still it was not vengeance or even fear that he felt. The thought which he took to oblivion was "What a waste!"