

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Chairman:

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Vice Chairman:

Vacant

Membership Secretary:

Joan M Lewis
17 The Green
Corby Glen
GRANTHAM
NG33 4NP
membership@scpsw.co.uk

Meetings Secretary:

Ethel Corduff
10 Malcolm Road
Woodside
South Norwood
LONDON
SE25 5HG
meetings@scpsw.co.uk

Treasurer:

Beryl Jones
37 Lingham Lane
Moreton
WIRRAL
CH46 7SA

Competition Secretary:

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

Publicity Officer:

Jenny Chamier-Grove
jchamiergrove@hotmail.com

Diary

Poetry Workshop Weekend
27th -29th July 2007

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

Poetry Editor:

**Terry James
1 Thornleigh Park
Bangor
County Down
BT20 4NN**

Editor:

**Adrian Danson
78 Palace View
Bromley
Kent
BR1 3EL
adriand@onetel.com**

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

Some members probably skip the editorial. After all who wants to read about Danson's dilemmas? I say this because I have received so few of your interesting experiences, yet I am sure you have had some and I am equally sure that they would be of interest to other members. Take the comedian's line, "A funny thing happened to me on my way to the theatre tonight. No one believed them of course; assumed that they probably made it up, or were relating someone else's experience as their own, so try that then.

Many years ago I read in an article, (Probably in The New Scientist) that our memory is like a sponge, absorbing everything that our senses detect; everything we feel, see, hear, or smell. Why did we suddenly remember Great Aunt Lucy who died over twenty years ago? Could it be the odour of roses, or lavender, as we passed a garden a few yards back? Probably, according to this article. So what distant memory have your senses triggered in recent weeks? The sound of a farmer's gun, rain on the window pane, cold wind on the back of your neck, aircraft condensation trails in the sky: Perhaps it was something significant to you at the time; perhaps not, but something you would be prepared to share with us now.

To date I have received but two responses to my invitation to offer such, both relating to childhood. My wording must have been misleading, as I was inviting all memories, not just childhood and the two that I offered were clearly adult memories. I hope others are winging there way to me, even as I write. Such memories can relate to any period of your life, even the day that you were on your way to our Society dinner, but, having been abducted by aliens, didn't make it.....

I should have mentioned in the last issue that our financial position has obliged us to reduce the prize money for this year's competitions. It is hoped that this will be a temporary expedient and that it will not cause members to not enter. It should be said that a contributory factor is the reduced numbers who have entered competitions in recent years, i.e. support your competitions by entering more often and prize money will consequently increase.

If any retired members still have contact with their working ex-colleagues, ask them for information on how to publicise our activities amongst working members. Jenny is doing her best with publicity, but it is poorly rewarded and would undoubtedly be helped by personal contact. Members who are still working can obviously be even more effective, so everyone please do what you can to promote our Society.

Chairman's Chat

I have been reading a selection of fifty of Chekov's comic short stories. Chekov is not a name that immediately springs to mind as a 'comic' writer, more, a tortured Russian soul. He was not of that disposition at all, apparently, preferring the company of happy cheerful people, as opposed to those of a mournful or morbid nature.

The stories in the collection cover a range of Chekov's comic genius including, simple mistakes, mock romances, pretensions, the absurd, parodies and mistaken identities. The reader is often presented with tales that have the most unexpected endings or twists in their telling. The language can surprise with their 'modernity,' which is not entirely due to the skill and ability of the translator.

One story that amused me was 'The Complaints Book.' The book in question was retained at a railway station, supposedly in a desk under lock and key, which it wasn't, of course, and in which travellers scribbled their comments, complaints, etc. One read, 'I know not who it was that writ, but him that reads it is a twit.' Another makes some sly innuendo about the wife of the station policeman. One scribbler signs himself, 'Paragonsky.' One of the other tales is entitled, 'The Civil Service Exam,' - Russian style of course!

Perhaps you do 'have to get on Chekov's wavelength,' but bearing in mind these pieces were written well over one hundred years ago, they make a good read.

The collection was chosen and translated by Harvey Pitcher and published in a paperback edition in 2004 by Andre Deutsch. ISBN 0 - 233 - 00038 - 0.

Moving on, I do hope members have been supporting the Society's competitions; don't forget, the 'Froud Comp.' will come up later in the year. Now, all you budding and established poets, SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL POETRY PAGES EDITOR, Terry James, whose address can be found in the front of this magazine.

Enjoy your writing.

Terry Rickson

Letters

Members who do not receive email will not be aware that Roger De Boeur, a long standing member from Birmingham, has been very ill. He developed vascular problems and had a stroke, also developing diabetes and having to have a leg amputated.

He is now making progress and has replied to many members cards and letters. He is grateful for their concern.

We wish him well as he completes his rehabilitation.

Ethel Corduff

A Report on the New Year Party 2007

Ethel Corduff

The New Year party was held at St. Vincent's Centre on 27th January. Eighteen members and guests attended. Apologies were received from Vivian Edwards and Betty Griffin. New member Tom Bryson from Kenton, Harrow was welcomed. Terry Austin was announced as a new committee member by the chairman Terry Rickson. After a buffet lunch in the wood panelled room, the winners of the W. F. and F. G. Froud Memorial Children's Competition were announced. The first prize winner, member Lesley Wilkie of Drifffield, East Yorkshire and third prize-winner non member Diana Shaw of Weaverham, Cheshire, were unable to attend .

2nd prize winner Joan Lewis and new member Tom Bryson who was highly commended were present and prizes were awarded by prize sponsor Roy Froud. Roy announced that he would like to continue with the children's competition, perhaps for a different age group, as there was such a good response. The theme of the competition for the party was 'Promises'. Prize winners were Joanne Crawford , Adrian Danson and Beryl Jones. Clara Scott and Kathleen Stratton Collins helped to sort out the winning votes. Favourite poems were read, followed by a raffle Then it was time for tea - before members departed. Many had come long distances such as Roger De Boeur from Birmingham, Roy Froud from Bournemouth, Joan Lewis from Grantham, Joanne Crawford from Rutland, Beryl Jones from Wirral, Terry Austin from Milton Keynes.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

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

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

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

PW Weekend 2007

This is the last call for members interested in attending the annual Poetry Workshop Weekend. As previously announced, this will take place over the weekend of 27th -29th July 2007 at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Selly Oak, Birmingham.

The Timetable has now been finalised and, along with regular features such as the workshop session and Quiz, will feature three talks, a creative writing session and a poetry slam. The cost per person is £170. This includes all meals, en-suite accommodation and meeting room. A Booking Form was enclosed with the winter issue of *wavelengths*. If you have lost your Booking Form, are a new member interested in joining us, or have any queries about any aspect of the Weekend, please contact me, Mike Boland, at the address given above.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop will be held during the Birmingham Weekend. If any member has any points to raise or motions they would like to submit for discussion, please send them to me by 1 July 2007.

Open Day Event

On 12 May, the Poetry Workshop held a members' Open Day at the Canal Museum in London. The summer issue of *wavelengths* (published this month) will include a report on the day's activities.

Bill Barnes Competition 2007

Details of this year's Bill Barnes Poetry Competition will be given in the summer issue of *wavelengths*. Closing date is 30 September.

Subscriptions 2007

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2007. Existing members should have received a subscription form with the winter issue of *wavelengths*. Any member who has not yet renewed

will not receive any further issues of the magazine, if you haven't already renewed your subscription for 2007 do so now.

Please complete and send your form together with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above.

The cost of membership is £3 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

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

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

Poetry Workshop Web-site

The Poetry Workshop now has its own website.

Visit us on: <http://poetryworkshop.mysite.orange.co.uk>

Dates to Remember

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 27 - 29 July 2007 | Poetry Workshop Weekend |
| 1 July 2007 | deadline for motions for the AGM |
| 1 August 2007 | deadline for wavelengths # 12 (autumn issue) |
| September 2007 | publication of wavelengths # 12 |
| 30 September 2007 | closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition 2007 |
| 1 November 2007 | deadline for wavelengths # 13 |
| December 2007 | publication of wavelengths # 13 |

Continuing the History of our Society

Beryl Jones

SCPSW: Writer of the Year

The Matthew Finch trophy was originally donated to the Merseyside Civil Service Writers' Club by the late Merton Finch (who under the pen-name Matthew Finch was the author of 'Hang Your Hat On A Pension' and 'Dentist In The Chair') and awarded annually to their Writer of the Year. When the Merseyside Club was wound up the trophy was donated to the Society who have presented it annually since 1974. Some of the early winners of the cup are as follows:-

The very first winner of the silver goblet was Mrs Hilda Hickman a former editor of the Author from February 1978 until the middle of 1980. Prior to joining the Civil Service (Foreign Office - China Desk), Mrs Hickman was a missionary with the China Inland Mission in Szechwan Province, not far from the Tibetan border. During this time (1932-1946) she was not only a missionary and teacher but was also highly thought of as a nurse and healer. She also had vivid recollections of Gladys Aylward, whose exploits were made well known to the world in the film 'The Inn of the Sixth Happiness.'

When World War Two broke out Hilda was home on leave and getting back to China involved taking a series of ships to Calcutta via the Cape, and then flying over the Himalayas. The last leg of her flight was apparently from Kunming to Chungking and at Kunming, instead of going with the other passengers to a hotel in the city, decided to spend the night on the plane as it lay on the airfield. Recounting this later to her superiors, she was puzzled by their amazement; they then told her that for months the Japanese had bombed that airfield every moonlit night. On the night in question the moon had been full.

On her retirement from the Foreign Office, Hilda went to live in Deal, and began to write seriously with considerable success with short stories and articles in many newspapers and magazines.

The 1975 winner was Sylvia Daniels from Cleethorpes (M.O.S.) who is reported to have given an overlong speech at the Annual Luncheon when the guests of honour that year were Anna Neagle and her husband Herbert Wilcox.

In 1976 it was won by I.O.Evans (Idrisyn Oliver Evans) a founder member of the Society who, though born in South Africa, was a Welshman through and through. An irrepressible writer, no market was too big or too small. He wrote books on great men and women, geology, flags, science fiction, travel, editions of Jules Verne and Jack London, and was also an accomplished poet. Employed in the old Office of Works, I.O.Evans was also a proficient lecturer who never had the need of notes. Taking over from Admiral Gordon Campbell the task of writing a book on flags he visited the Admiralty for the latest information and was handed his own book on the subject - written some years earlier.

Andrew Jaroskiewicz was the 1977 winner which was the year he joined the Society. He cites his earliest claim to fame as winning, aged ten, a competition set by Cadbury's, the prize being a large hamper of chocolate bars. From 1971 to 1975 he taught physics and chemistry, spending two of those years in South Africa and material gathered there enabled him to win the Brennan Travel competition and the Victoria Neilson Gattey prize. Andrew joined the Civil Service in 1975 and began writing again after a lapse of some ten years.

Victor Negus Moore the 1978 winner was a former feature writer and subeditor who worked on a number of newspapers and magazines including the News Chronicle, the London Star and the Truth. He was editor/manager of a trade and technical group before going into advertising and marketing where he helped found the Council for Communications, Advertising and Marketing and lectured in this field for many years. Victor was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts for his services to specialised publishing and probably had the unique experience of having people who once worked for him or attended his lectures, senior to him in the Civil Service (which he joined rather late in life.) An accomplished poet, he wrote light verse using classical themes and was also an admirer of the 'Three Aitches' i.e. Heine, Hardy and Houseman.

In 1979 the trophy was won by R.Lewis Wright and in 1980 by Iain McIntyre (who also won it in 1997). Iain, a former Editor and Publicity Officer of the Society, got the award for coming second in the C.P.Snow Novel Competition, which was open to all Civil Servants irrespective of whether they were members of the Society.

Unfortunately the winner was not a member so the trophy was awarded to Iain for his novel entitled ‘The Eagle and the Wolf.’

All the Writer of the Year certificates for the above were produced by Iain, even his own.

This trophy is still presented annually, the winner for 2006 being Margaret Pelling.

I am grateful for the following two responses to my request for personal memorable events. Both were very interesting, but the second acted as a catalyst for my own memories of being a Dorset cub and scout. Memories came flooding back and gave me a few ideas for some new stories. That was one objective behind my invitation and I thank Margaret and Roy for their contributions.

Childhood Memories

Margaret Gregory

The first five years of my childhood were spent in America; the part I remember was being in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I have only snatches of memory from this time, like the Christmas tree that had to have its top lopped off to get it into our apartment, the unexpected discovery of Valentine cards and candy hearts hanging from our front door knob on February 14th and the marshmallow dessert that mother made for my fifth birthday. Our apartment block stood on Oklahoma Avenue overlooking Humboldt Park. A small friend and I, clad in a teddy bear coat and lace up boots, used to push, in my case, a green wicker dolls’ buggy up and down near the apartments.

One particular occasion lingers in my memory when I got lost in a large department store. I went up by mistake in an elevator to the storage floor and was finally claimed by my mother, who was afraid I might have fallen into the nearby river. But external events did sometimes intrude into this generally comfortable child’s world. I remember seeing the word, ‘KIDNAPPED,’ in huge newspaper headlines and my mother telling me about the Lindbergh baby kidnapping ordeal. I was afraid of being kidnapped myself, despite being reassured that I was an unlikely candidate. I ignored the ransom factor and used to lie in bed figuring out how the kidnapers would manage to get through the bedroom window.

I also could not understand why my mother started giving away some of my best toys and possessions. I specially resented the loss of my rocking chair. But this was just one consequence of the drastic changes that were

taking place in my parents' pleasant lifestyle. Like thousands of others they had lost money in the Wall Street crash and the depression that followed affected my father's job security. My father remained confident that he would be able to get on his feet again and decided to remain in the States while mother and I would stay with my grandparents in England.

I have no recollection of the anguish my parents must have gone through with the break up of our home and family life together. Mother and I boarded the liner, "The Majestic," for the Atlantic crossing with mother being seasick and very unhappy in the early days. The voyage was memorable for me as one of mother's friends had given me a small round case with a picture of Red Riding Hood on the front, containing, I think, five or seven small gifts, one to be opened on each day of the crossing.

I used to look out of the cabin porthole at the night blackness before going to bed, but was very surprised one evening to see lights everywhere - the lights of Southampton harbour. The next day mother and I were in a crowded lounge of families welcoming the passengers. It was there that I glimpsed my grandparents and a new English life had now begun.

A Scouting Interlude

Roy D Stevens

I was born and raised in a South Dorset village. As a thirteen year old in 1947 I belonged to a gang of about, six boys. We regarded other boys in the village who were scouts as 'cissies'. The local Scoutmaster was a 'Captain' Woodard. We all assumed he was a retired serviceman - in those days armed service officers tended to carry their rank into retirement.

It wasn't until years later that I discovered that 'Captain' was in fact a nickname given to him as a result of his having appeared at some time as 'Captain Corcoran' in a production of 'H.M.S. Pinafore'.

One autumn evening, just before Bonfire Night, our gang decided *it* would be good fun to bombard the scout hut (which was fairly isolated) with 'bangers'.

Soon after the 'attack' started 'Cappy' Woodard emerged. To our amazement, instead of remonstrating with us, he suggested that we should come along to the next meeting and see what scouting was all about. We were so taken, aback by this 'softly-softly' approach that some of us (myself included) decided we would go along. As a result, several of us decided to give it a go and I became a member of 'Squirrel patrol (six

boys). Each patrol was headed by a 'sixer'. I have vague memories of doing things with knots.

On some evenings we would go into the adjoining large field for Field Craft. That was good fun.

We stayed the course for about three months, but not long enough for our parents to have to buy uniforms. We left with a new found respect for 'Cappy' and the scouts, and our days of laying siege to the scout hut were long gone.

9 Days to Heaven

Reviewed by Ethel Corduff

I was asked to review the paperback book 9 days to Heaven by our member Teresa O'Driscoll. Theresa is a journalist, writer and self development facilitator who divides her time between Greece and Wales. I must say I approached the book with trepidation as the title seemed an impossible target. The book though basically Christian could be read by anybody, especially those who are seeking something, they have not yet found. Anybody with a personal problem could find this book useful. At the time of reading it I had a personal problem I could not resolve. Because of this I decided to get the most out of the book. I felt to do this I needed to read a chapter daily as suggested.

I collected the nine mind focusing items, one for each chapter. They included a potted plant, a stone, a few dried or fresh herb leaves, a candle, etc. I felt a bit silly with the item beside me for the appropriate chapter, but it enhanced my understanding of the theme of the chapter. In fact I thought it was a clever idea. I found myself looking forward to each chapter. The illustrations by Toni Ndikanwu are clever and profuse and add more meaning to each section.

Spirituality and exploring it are the main themes of the book. It helps if you have a faith but non believers aware of an emptiness in their lives would find the book fulfilling. There is also a companion CD track available. For more information Teresa has a website www.teresaodriscoll.co.uk. The book is well written and costs £9.99 from O books, an imprint from John Hunt Publishing. I intend to keep it by for future contemplation perhaps heaven will eventually be in sight.

Animal Fortune

Tom Bryson

(Highly commended by W. F. & F.G.Froud Competition judge)

Tim and his twin sister, Francesca, were not too pleased. Their morning at the donkey sanctuary had been cut short when Dad had arrived in an old, borrowed van. They were to help him move a mattress into the flat just bought by their uncle Jack.

It was high summer in the pretty little southern Spanish port of San Andres, where their grandparents now lived. The twins were there all summer holiday, though their parents could only manage a fortnight. Most mornings they spent in a rundown cluster of buildings where an old Welsh couple tried their best to look after abandoned donkeys and mules, a dozen or so cats and dogs, and a young goat.

Tim and Francesca fed the animals. They also loved to walk the dogs along the shore behind the field. Sometimes it felt that the bigger dogs took them for a walk. Francesca's favourite job was taking the little goat, Rambo, round the bushes near the beach where it scoffed all the blackberry shoots and fruits. She had renamed it Brambo and it rewarded her with a playful butt or two.

Tim had heard that morning that the sanctuary might have to close at the end of the summer. The land on which it stood was tip for sale. The old couple and their supporters were finding it very difficult to raise the amount of money needed to buy it. There seemed to be nowhere else they could afford that would be suitable for the needs of the animals.

Now, however, the twins had other things on their minds. The mattress would not fit the lift in the block of flats. So, with Dad and Uncle Jack, they were sweating, puffing and panting as they pushed it step by step up four floors to the flat. It was hot and stuffy and, by the time they reached the door of the flat, everyone was quite exhausted. It had seemed like hours on the stairs though it was really only around twenty minutes. Time passes slowly when you are not enjoying yourselves.

Then Uncle Jack produced some nice cold cans of lemonade. The four of them sat on the balcony under a large umbrella looking across the sea to the hazy mountains along the coast. Tim told the others the news about the sanctuary and wondered if they had any ideas for raising money. Uncle Jack said he would try his mates at the golf club. Dad said that Gran and Grandad might be able to do something at their bridge club. The twins brightened up. The animals might yet be saved.

The flat had been empty for a long time. The elderly French lady had died suddenly and no one had been able to find any trace of heirs despite adverts in the newspapers. The flat and most of its furniture had gone up for auction. Uncle Jack had bought it very cheaply.

The twins were intrigued to find at the bedside a photo of a small dog with reddish fur. The name, Roux, was on the back of the frame. Uncle Jack had been told that the old lady and her dog had been inseparably for years. Apparently Roux had died only a couple of weeks before its mistress.

They now had the problem of getting rid of the dirty, lumpy, old mattress.

“I can’t face these stairs and corners again,” moaned Dad. Uncle Jack nodded and sighed. There was along silence. Tim peered over the balcony.

“It could go over the side,” he said finally. “Wicked! That’s what they would do in films.”

“Too dangerous. And yet

” Uncle Jack realised the car park below was deserted. It was usually full to overflow but that morning some workmen had been installing a new barrier. The car park had been cleared and the workmen had gone, leaving the barrier down.

Dad shrugged his shoulders. Fran giggled. Tim’s eyes shone as he looked down. A minute later the old mattress, swaying in the seas breeze, was perched on the railings of the balcony. A final glance down. “Still all clear. Away it goes.” The mattress toppled over the side.

Instead of the expected thud and a cloud of dust, there was a loud ripping sound, then silence. Horrified, the four on the balcony stared down at the mattress now rocking on two steel hooks, once used for securing a washing line, at the side of a second floor balcony. They all rushed downstairs and out the front door.

Already a crowd of neighbours and peoples heading home for lunch was gathering. Ladders appeared. Lengths of copper piping arrived from the plumbers opposite. Among the spectators the noise level rose. A great babble of Spanish erupted.

The mattress resisted all efforts to move it off the hooks. The hot wind started blowing strongly. The mattress seemed to come alive as it fought off the poles, brushes., pipes and ropes launched against it.. Shouts of encouragement and derision filled the air.

The mattress at last surrendered. One side split open noisily. It dangled for a moment on one hook. The crowd below scattered. Then out of the open end floated small lumps of wool and tens, hundreds of pieces of green paper.

It took several seconds before the crowd realised they were being showered with money, old 1000 peseta notes, long replaced with euro notes. Then the rest of the mattress collapsed on top of them. What a hullabaloo! It could be heard all over town.

The notes were flying tip and down the street and into the gardens. Everyone was chasing them and, to the surprise of Dad and Uncle Jack, the notes were being placed in a box that had appeared beside the twins. The adults had often been told how honest and helpful the Spanish people were. Now they knew it was true.

Gran and Grandad had arrived to see the new flat. They had heard the commotion but were astonished to find the cause. The cash was now being counted and was found to be just one 1000 peseta note short of two hundred and fifty thousand, worth roughly 1500 euros, or over £1000.

Uncle Jack knew the cash legally belonged to him, but immediately announced that he would give it all to the donkey sanctuary fund as a tribute to Roux the little dog so many of the local people remembered with affection. When Grandad, who spoke some Spanish, told the crowd of Jack's decision a great cheer rang out.

Before the banks had closed that day, the pesetas had been turned into euros. The following morning the children presented the windfall to the old Welsh couple. There were tears and smiles all round, even the animals seemed to be in a particularly good humour that day.

The publicity given to the mattress affair had a marvellous effect on the appeal for the sanctuary. Money poured in from other events. Many of the local restaurants started to set aside their surplus bread, fruit and vegetables to ensure a steady supply of food for the animals. Within a year not only had the purchase of the field been completed but new sheds and kennels were built. The number of animals rescued had doubled. Tim and Francesca had so much to tell their friends and schoolmates back in Britain. Everyone wanted to join them in San Andres the following summer.

And after a few days the other 1000 peseta note turned up high in a plane tree.

It is unfortunate that not everyone can be a winner, but there is always next, as I keep reminding myself. The following was one of those that did not win the President's Competition. (Ed)

Myself When Young

Ruth Sear

Myself when young, rarely did frequent My Grandparents' house. Where there was always an argument!

“Where's your tea cosy, Gran?”

The teapot's familiar knitted cover was missing.

“I'm wearing it in bed these winter nights, Sally.”

Grandad gave a shout of laughter. “That was my idea! She complained that her poll was cold in bed, and the circulation to her brain had stopped. I suggested she wear the tea cosy, the two holes each side would do for her ears to stick through!”

“You need to have your ears uncovered at night. In case some man breaks in, and tries to pillage, rape or violate,” snapped Gran.

“He'd have to be desperate to go near you,” said Grandad. If it ever happened, I'd feel sorry for him”

The usual acrimony between my grandparents. When I was a child in the 1950's, they lived two streets away, and I reluctantly sometimes went to see them.

They married in 1904; and argued about everything. Grandad was tall and strong in those days, an ostler at the local colliery. He was very religious, and every Sunday morning and evening he attended the local chapel. He had a powerful baritone voice, and sometimes played the organ. During the week he worked hard, and was reliable, honest and conscientious.

But on Friday nights he changed. He arrived home from work, and handed over most of his pay to Gran. He kept a little aside: “For a drop of something, a man deserves a pint after a hard week.” She trembled, for she knew what would happen. Her pious, upright, sober, God fearing husband went out for his drop, and arrived home very late,

very drunk, bad tempered, violent and swearing profusely. Sometimes he was carried home by his fellow drinkers. Sometimes he slept in the potting shed outside, or in the nearby fields or hedgerows.

Gran spent Saturdays cleaning the debris from the night before, including the vomit. The frightened children would creep around the rooms as quietly as they could, and later that morning their father appeared, in time to attend the local football match. He had no memory of the night before. On return home in the early evening he would abstain from alcohol, and spend his evening playing with the children, or reading. Not reading to the children, or reading the Bible - that was reserved for Sundays - but reading the racing paper. After all, he had a professional interest in horses.

One Friday night he arrived home early from the pub, very drunk as usual. He ordered the children to bed, and my Dad answered: "Shan't it's too early." With a terrifying roar Grandad lurched toward the truculent boy, who promptly ran out of the house. Down to the river ran the pursued and the pursuer. Dad was caught, and thrown into the cold water. Unfortunately he couldn't swim, but luckily was rescued by a passer by. The following day, Grandad said to him "Hello what did you get up to last night? I saw your wet clothes drying this morning. Fell in the river, did you?" He had no recollection of the previous night!

Another Friday, he made a detour on his way home. In a field near the town a circus had arrived; it was late and all the circus folk were in bed. Except the snake charmer, a dusky gentleman from India, whom Grandad had met in the pub. The two men walked unsteadily towards the caravans.

I want your snake, and I'm going to take him home. My kids want a pet, and I'm going to give them one. "Thus spoke the generous father. Then another idea penetrated his befuddled brain.

"I'm getting cold, standing here. Give me that turbine you're wearing. It's on your head," he said, helpfully. "I'll give you two pennies for it," he added in a condescending manner.

The reptile's owner knew better than to argue with his intoxicated companion. So Grandad took the new pet home in its basket, and

deposited in the warm kitchen overnight. He went outside to relieve himself, and promptly fell into the onion patch, where he remained until the next day. What became of the 'turbine' was never disclosed.

Early the next morning, Gran went downstairs to make the kitchen fire. She saw a large basket in a corner, and heard a rustle inside. With quaking heart she gingerly took the lid off, and imagine her shock and horror when she saw the contents! She dropped the lid and screamed. The snake also received a surprise, and reared its head out of the basket. A thought quickly flashed through Gran's mind: perhaps this was the kind of snake that didn't poison its victims, but killed them in a different way - by crushing them She didn't know what type of snake it was, only that it was big.

The creature slid out the basket and crept along the kitchen floor, tongue flickering, investigating its new surroundings. It had never been in a kitchen before, and hissed at Gran who was nearly fainting. Then she heard her children's voices from upstairs, and her maternal instincts drove away her fear. With a quick prayer she snatched a broom, and opened the back door.

She wasn't sure how it happened, but somehow the creature was swept out of the kitchen, and into the coal house. Brave Gran. The sleeping husband was found among the onions, and on waking he declared with genuine astonishment that he knew nothing about the acquisition of the snake. He was amazed to find the reptile, asleep and covered with coal dust. He thanked his wife for not sweeping it into the onions. Gran guessed it had come from the circus; the snake charmer was summoned, and the snake safely returned to the circus, where it was subjected to a wash, and a breakfast of something unmentionable.

Now I know why, when Grandad called Gran a 'stupid twerp', she called him a 'stupid *snake*'.

The Children's Ward

Ruth Sear

When I was young, in 1951, I went into hospital, for an operation!

I wrote the silly, childish ditty during an arithmetic lesson at school, and the teacher rewarded me with one hundred lines.

In 1951 we lived in Manchester; Mum, Dad, and myself. A week or two after my seventh birthday Mum packed a small suitcase, and took me on a bus to an enormous hospital where I was to have a small operation. I wanted to take Dad's birthday present with me but Mum insisted I leave it at home. I had wanted a Swiss army knife, with lots of intriguing blades, a corkscrew, and a device for taking stones from horse's hooves. But Dad said I was too clumsy to use the knives, too young to use the corkscrew, and too scared of horses to even think about going near a hoof! So he gave me instead a beautiful miniature sewing box equipped with needles, cotton, a thimble and a pair of scissors.

The operation was to be the next day, and I was to go home on the day following.

We took the lift to the children's ward on the third floor, and met a nurse coming towards us. She had blue eyes, and on top of her golden hair wore a white cap, like a crown.

The nurse hardly glanced at me. "Hello," she said to Mum, "I'm Nurse Strange."

'Hello.' I replied, shyly. 'I've brought my favourite teddy bear, he's coming with me when I have my operation.'

'No he isn't.'

I stared at the nurse.

'Can't I keep my teddy bear with me?'

'No.'

Mum said: 'Why not?'

'Germs. And they don't do surgery on animals here, only on people.' Nurse Strange gave a hollow laugh. "You're the nose op, aren't you? I'll take you to your bed." I was now trying to fight back tears.

'Never mind,' Mum whispered. "It's only for two days." We followed the nurse as she walked briskly down the middle of a very large ward. The white walls were decorated with religious pictures, in black frames. I

liked one entitled 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' standing amongst beautiful flowers, blessing the children and animals.

At the end of the ward was a large chimney breast, with a real fire, warm and bright, surrounded by a fireguard.

The ward contained about thirty small beds, arranged in two rows, facing each other. Most of them were already occupied by children. The remainder were rapidly becoming occupied as the admissions arrived, all accompanied by their mothers.

Nurse Strange marched me to an empty bed. It was very neat and clean. Mum unpacked the suitcase, and put my belongings in a nearby locker. She gave me a large cellophane packet, containing wine gums, which were my favourite sweets. There was a picture of Mickey Mouse on the top of the packet. I began to feel more cheerful.

Mum said: 'I'll be here the day after tomorrow, to take you home. They don't allow visitors on operation day. Don't worry...' She was interrupted by the sound of a large bell ringing. I was frightened. Was there a fire? No, it was the signal for the visitors to leave.

I sat on the little bed and watched as Mum walked towards the exit. There were tears in her eyes.

Feeling sad, and with tears in my eyes, I looked around the ward. A boy, of about my age, was sitting in his bed, reading. He glanced at me, and said huskily: 'I'm Tom.'

'I'm Elizabeth. Have you had your operation?'

'Yes. Are you going to have yours tomorrow?'

'Yes, in the morning. I'm going to have a small operation on my nose.'

'Don't be silly. You're going to have your tonsils out.'

I felt alarmed. 'No, I'm not. I'm here for an operation on my nose.'

The boy laughed. 'Look around you. All those kids who came in today, including you, are going to have their tonsils out tomorrow.'

I looked at the other children on the ward. I suddenly felt very scared.

'This is an E.N.T. ward,' said Tom.

'What's that?'

Nurse Strange walked by, at that moment. She said: 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes. I mean no. What are all these children in here for?'

‘All those admissions are going to have their tonsils out. The operation is called a tonsillectomy. Now, is that a packet of sweets on your bed?’

‘Yes. My Mum bought them for me.’ But I could scarcely answer. I was horrified. I thought I was in the hospital for a nose operation, and they were going to take out my tonsils! Nurse Strange picked the sweets from the bed.

‘I’ll take these. All sweets are put in a big tin and mixed together. Then each child is allowed one sweet from the tin after lunch, and one sweet after supper. That is a fair system.’

The tears were now coursing down my cheeks. I wanted to run out of the ward, and go home. I didn’t know the way, but I could ask someone in the street. I looked out of the window, and saw the sky becoming darker, as night closed in. At home, Mum would be in our kitchen, preparing supper for Dad. In the evening, settled on a chair with her knitting, she would listen to the wireless. I desperately wanted to return where it was safe and familiar.

I heard Nurse Strange speaking to another nurse.

‘Look out for the new little girl, she’s an only child, and she’s spoilt. She’s not used to sharing. She’s making a fuss about some sweets that her Mother brought in.’ Then she spoke to me.

‘Get changed into your pyjamas, then come to the table for your supper.’

‘I’m not ill. I don’t put my pyjamas on at home until it’s bedtime.’

‘You’re not at home now. All the children in this ward wear their night-clothes during the day, until they go home.’

I wiped the tears from my face, took a deep breath, and tried to stop crying. Feeling miserable, I put on my pyjamas, and Nurse Strange picked up my clothes.

‘I’ll lock these in a cupboard, just in case you decide to run away,’ she said with a sinister laugh. ‘Now after supper I suggest you sit in bed and read a book. Like a good girl.’

But I couldn’t eat any supper. I was too unhappy, and wasn’t used to eating so early in the evening. I climbed into bed, feeling bewildered and confused, and stared at the counterpane. It was neatly tucked into the sides of the bed. It was blue, decorated with designs of nursery rhymes, which were in white. Underneath each illustration was a rhyme. But the

pictures and writing were upside down, and could only be read by standing at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly I had an idea. I climbed out of bed, pulled off the counterpane, and turned it so that I could see the pictures and read the writing. At that moment, a voice spoke.

‘I’m sorry, that’s not allowed. All counterpanes have to face the same way on this ward. You don’t want to upset anyone, do you?’ It was Nurse Strange.

I crept out of bed and replaced the counterpane to its original position. I pretended to read a book, but was trying to plan my escape. But how could I find my clothes that had been taken away? I began to read, and gradually began to feel sleepy.

After a while, I got out of bed to use the toilet. But no one had told me where it was. I walked to the fireplace and stared at it through the fire guard. The flickering flames and the sparks shooting up the chimney reminded me of the fire at home, and I thought about Mum and Dad again. Were they missing me?

Suddenly, a shower of sparks shot through a small gap between the guard and the fireplace. I felt a hot burning sensation on my arm, and smelt my pyjamas burning. I was terrified. A voice shouted: ‘Keep away from the fire!’ Another nurse appeared. ‘Are you all right?’

I burst into tears. What a hostile, unfamiliar, and horrible world hospital was.

Eventually I was tucked firmly in bed, then a large tin of sweets appeared. Feeling hungry, I took one. It was liquorice. I hated liquorice.

I hid the sweet under my pillow. I gave up all hope of running away that night. The remaining visitors departed after the bell sounded, and some of the children cried for ages, afterwards. The nurses changed shifts, and the lights dimmed on the ward.

I slept very little during the long, boring, and hungry night. And I was worried that my tonsils, wherever they were, would be taken away.

The next morning I was told there would be no breakfast. Shortly afterwards I was given an injection, which hurt. I saw Tom, enjoying a large bowl of cornflakes, on a tray in his bed. He grinned at me.

‘Your throat will feel awful when you wake up after your operation,’ he said. ‘But it passes away soon enough.’ I couldn’t answer because I was now feeling very sleepy. Goodness knows what happened to my

teddy bear, for I never saw him again. I was taken on a trolley to the operating theatre, on the same floor as the ward. I heard a voice telling me to count to ten backwards, and saw a rubber mask descending over my face. I screamed and struggled, my final thought was, as I succumbed to the anaesthetic, that I was going to have the wrong operation.

When I woke I was on the ward and Nurse Strange was standing by the bed.

‘Did I have my tonsils out?’ I was surprised to hear how normal my voice sounded.

‘No, of course not. There’s nothing wrong with your tonsils. You only came in here to have a small operation on your nose. You’re going home tomorrow.’

I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. So I hadn’t had the wrong operation, after all.

The remainder of the day passed in a haze. I saw children going to the operating theatre, all riding on one trolley, about six at a time. The porter and nurse were encouraging them to all sing together.

‘Come on you lot! Louder, sing louder! Let’s have ‘Pack up your troubles.’ All together now!’

The following day, after a good nights sleep, I went home. It was a relief to leave the ward. Mum got a taxi to take us home.

I ran into the house feeling happy and relieved that my ordeal was over. There was Dad.

‘Hello love,’ he said. ‘It’s been quiet without you.’

‘Here’s a present for you,’ said Mum, handing a brown paper parcel to me.

I unwrapped it with eager hands.

I withdrew a doll; a very pretty doll, with yellow hair and blue eyes, dressed in a nurse’s uniform.

When I was young I loved to receive a new doll.

But I knew what I would do with this one. I wasn’t given a Swiss army knife for my birthday, but I could use those bright gleaming scissors that reposed in my new sewing box.

Cannes, Glamorous Resort of the Stars

Brian Jones

‘The world famous resort of Cannes has everything’: the sea and sun, but also islands, flowers, luxury hotels, festivals. It is the city of stars and the star of celebrations.’

So reads the description in a current travel brochure. In the case of this celebrated resort it happens to be true. Cannes is noted for being the haunt of painters, attracted by its fabulous light, but more than any where else in Southern France, it has received visits from the greatest names in literature, many of whom chose to settle. Authors include Prosper Merimee, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Colette, H.G..Wells, Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene.

Perhaps the most tragic was the painter and diarist Marie Baslikirtseff,, who died at the age of 24 in 1884. Russian born Marie, born of very wealthy parents, was the original self-centred, vain, spoilt brat, but she was a very dedicated student of art and music and left behind a monumental diary, which has still not been fully translated in its original form.

The French Riviera has everything for the visitors, rich or poor. It’s radiant light, it’s constant sunshine, and especially it’s glamorous resorts, which make the Cote d’azur the most gorgeous coastline in Europe.

Of course, there is a downside, even for the Riviera - hotels and restaurants can be expensive, especially in the high season; summertime traffic can be murderous along the coastal roads; souvenirs can be as garish as those from Brighton; some of the beaches are hard shingles rather than sand. Also one’s scrutiny of the topless, nut-brown maidens can be obscured by the sagging flesh of the shameless matrons.

Of its famous resorts - Monaco, Nice, Antibes, St Raphael, St Tropez, Cannes,, perhaps Cannes is the best known.

For the visitor coming on the five hour journey from damp and dark Paris, On a high speed TGV train, Cannes and its sister resorts of the Cote d’ Azure can hit your eyes and ears like a glorious , wide-screen

Technicolor travelogue in Dobby stereo. (That should be Dolby – Ed) The sea and sky are intensely blue, the palm trees undulate in the balmy breeze; palatial creamy - white villas and casinos gleam and dazzle; and the multitudes of universally topless sun soaked girls ravish the eyes and inflame the senses. The aromas of Paris - petrol fumes and old drains are more commonly replaced by pine and eucalyptus.

Cannes's elegant promenade is bordered by palm trees and gardens and over looks a fine sandy beach. There is a long parade of luxury hotels along the front and the side streets. Between the new conference centre and the lush gardens Allee des Stars, an avenue of 200 tiles where the hand prints of the great movie stars who attended the film festival have been set in the concrete. Apart from the celebrities who have attended the world famous film festival visitors to Cannes, for long and short stays, include everyone from the Beck's to Madonna. Cannes's popularity with the ostentatious rich can be seen in such sumptuous hotels as the Majestic, the Noga - Hilton and the Carlton.

Near to the old town and the harbour, crowded with rows of fishing boats and the luxury yachts are an extravagant examples of wild Victorian architecture hidden behind lush foliage, villas with minarets and turrets that seem to be straight out of the Arabian Nights

Also near to the harbour is an old square known as the Liberte. Shaded by plain trees and surveyed by a statue of Lord Brougham, the founder of Cannes, this is the location of a very colourful flower market. In the nearby side streets one can buy delicious fish, pasta bread and cheese. The fruit and the vegetables of the market brim over with Mediterranean warmth and aromas.

The statue in the Liberte commemorates Lord Brougham, who was largely responsible for the development Cannes as a famous resort. Cannes was just small fishing village before the ex -politician, Lord Henry of Brougham, arrived from England on a six-horse carriage with his sickly daughter, Eleanor. He was hoping that the pleasant climate of Nice would help his daughter's recovery. They never reached Nice because of a cholera epidemic. Instead, a vacation in Antibes, and then Cannes. Lord Brougham was so impressed by the surrounding of Cannes that he ordered a luxury villa. Other wealthy and notable

British visitors soon followed and Cannes began to rapidly expand. Famous visitors included Queen Victoria, and her son Edward. Lord Brougham invested one million francs for a new harbour so passenger boats could dock. He died in 1868, two years before the coming of the railway.

From Monet and Matisse, some of the world's most famous painters have tried to immortalise the strong light and varied hues of the Riviera. The best known in the region were Picasso, Monet, Bonnard, and Matisse. A selection of their paintings can be seen in the public galleries in the nearby picturesque town of Antibes and Cagnes-Sur-Mer.

For the tourists disinterested in art Cannes can offer golf, sailing, windsurfing, tennis, parasailing and of course swimming in un-polluted waters.

Apart from Antibes and Cagnes-Sur-Mer another popular excursion for visitors are the islands of the Lérins with their beautiful pine and eucalyptus woods. On the largest island, St' Marguerite, is a massive fortress which is associated with the very mysterious 'Man in the iron Mask' One of the many theories about his identity is that he was the illegitimate brother of king Louis XIV.

Cannes should be avoided during August when it can be unpleasantly over crowded and prices go up. Also avoid the film festival in May when the movie industry takes over for 12 days of parties, screenings, deals and prizes. It is very difficult to get a hotel booking and you will find that the starlets on the beaches, wearing little more than a smile and beach sandals, are no more seductive than ordinary tourists. Later the pace of life slows down to its customary laid back mode and the locals are friendly and inviting again.

Cannes no longer caters exclusively for the wealthy. Hotels can be no more expensive than London, campsites abound along the coastline and cheap flights are now common place from Dublin and London.

(I found Cannes pleasant enough, but Paris was anything but "damp and dark" – aux contraire Ed)

The Obliging Ghost

Alan S Watts

There were so many people at the party that it was quite impossible for all of them to find pegs for their coats. So the large tables at the end of the room had to serve as coat stands, and became so covered with coats, hats, scarves, and handbags that no-one would have guessed there were tables beneath. On the top of this pile was a hat, a man's hat, a trilby hat, a blue trilby hat, yet not the sort of blue trilby hat one could find in an ordinary High Street outfitter's. It was an artistic hat – at least, it seemed meant for an artistic man. Merely looking at it, gave one the impression of being in contact with an unusual person.

But the party was so crowded, and the chatter so deafening, and the food so delicious, and the wine so intoxicating that anyone who might have noticed the unusual hat quickly forgot it. Besides, there was a musical entertainment once the waiters had satisfied the majority of appetites, and the chairman had climbed onto the platform and made his customary speech of welcome and so on. He then announced that two ladies had kindly volunteered to perform a piano duet, and he led the applause as they took their seats at the piano.

The piece was a well-known interlude by Bach. The audience, despite having glasses re-charged and hot crepe-suzettes handed around, were reasonably attentive, especially those not too far from the piano. So all went well. The pianists were intent upon their task, but evidently enjoying it. Then came the time when it was necessary to turn the page of the music. A lady's delicate hand reached forward, took hold of a corner of the sheet and lifted it ready to turn. But somehow, at the critical moment, it slipped from her fingers, and, caught in the draught raised by a corpulent body trying to get out of the way (the chairman's, as it happened) glided to the floor.

Everyone near to the piano saw it happen and had not the slightest doubt about it. Even the chairman saw it, because he realised he had caused it, and glanced over his shoulder as he came to a sudden stop at the side of the room. But no-one realised immediately that something very odd had happened. The pianists might indeed have continued playing for a moment or two without their music of sheet, had they known the piece by heart. But it was clear to everyone paying the least attention, that they had stopped playing, and the lady who had been playing the low notes had her hands nowhere near the keys when she

leaned over to receive the sheet from the young man who had rescued it. Yet while she was doing so, and her companion was not too sure what to do except keep her hands poised ready to resume and smile at the audience, the music continued. Bach's interlude went on without a pause. It is true that those at the other end of the room, and not able to see the piano had no idea that anything strange had occurred. Later, when their fellow guests assured them they had been within a few yards of something quite inexplicable, they were very hard to convince.

So the party gradually dispersed. The waiters collected up the glasses. People shook hands, made dates to see one another again, yet when they went to retrieve their coats from the piled-up tables few of them – probably none – noticed that the unusual trilby hat was no longer there.

But I had noticed it, because I had noticed its earlier presence. And thus, a week or two later, when I came into my office I was very intrigued to see it again. There it was, resting upon a shabby briefcase left on the seat of one of the chairs in the waiting room. I was about to question my receptionist about it, when Polly Jones (she is my receptionist, cum typist, cum fax operator, etc. etc.) straightened up from behind her desk, and looked at me with a pink and worried face.

“Whatever's the matter?” I asked.

“The contract – the Bilson contract,” she stammered. “I must have left it at home. I could have sworn I'd brought it. But it's not in my handbag.”

“The Bilson contract!” I could hardly believe my ears. I had worked so hard to land this contract, and it would mean so much to the firm. Without it, job losses would be inevitable. So I stood and stared at her. “But you knew he was coming this morning.”

I couldn't help being irritable. This was no light matter. The contract would be worth upwards of two hundred thousand pounds to the firm, and with such a bad-tempered man as Bilson it had not been easy to bring off. Time and again he had threatened to break off negotiations and go to our competitors. What is more, he was quite prepared to do so. Thus it had not been until late that previous evening, after hours of exhausting bargaining, that we had reached agreement. The other directors joined me in shaking hands with Mr Bilson, and it was then a matter of making a fair copy of the agreed draft, which had been the result of so many amendments and re-amendments of the original. I was deputed to sign it on behalf of the firm at 10 am the following morning,

and because it was so late, Polly had taken the papers home with her, promising to bring the typed draft with her the next morning.

“Left it at home!” I repeated, hardly able to contain myself.

The poor girl burst into tears.

“Yes. I know what I did. I placed it by the telephone, and I thought ...”

“It doesn’t matter what you did,” I declared angrily. “It’s what you didn’t!”

“Oh, I am sorry. It’s all my fault,” sobbed Polly. “Perhaps if I were to take a taxi.”

“Taxi!” I pointed to the clock. “You’d never get home and back in half an hour. And Bilson should be here in five minutes.”

We stood staring at each other.

“Well,” I said, sorry to see her so upset, and wanting something to say which might console her. “Maybe he’ll be late. I’d better get ready to see our other caller. Though I wasn’t expecting anyone this morning.”

“Other caller?” Polly was still snivelling.

“The man with the funny hat,” I told her.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Then you’d better do so now and ask him what he wants.”

She trudged dejectedly out of my room and with a sigh of resignation I sat down at my desk. I wondered how I could explain things to the directors, for I hadn’t the slightest doubt that our chance of bringing off this contract was now gone for ever. I just waited for the outburst from Bilson when he learned there was no contract to sign. I could already hear his scathing remarks. “What sort of a firm are you?” “Who ever heard of a junior member of staff being sent home to type out an important document?” “I agree it was late, but surely the girl could have stayed an extra half hour? Is she a one-finger typist or something?” Somehow I was more concerned about what Bilson would say than what the directors would.

One or two envelopes had been placed in my IN tray, and I turned them over with very little interest, until, incredibly, underneath them I saw the cleanly-typed draft of the Bilson contract. I snatched it up and

dashed out, waving it like a man demented, to show it to the red-eyed Polly.

“But how did it get there?” she wanted to know.

It was more than I could explain.

Then I glanced at the chair where the artistic hat had been, and saw it was no longer there.

At that moment Mr Bilson arrived.

From then on, I began to have strong suspicions about the owner of the artistic hat. I use the word ‘suspicions’ because I had no direct evidence that he was responsible for either of the two supernatural happenings which I had witnessed. That there was a supernatural agent, I had no doubt. Music doesn’t play itself and documents don’t fly through the air, even in these days of fax machines, and the Internet. But that the agent should be a man wearing an unusual hat was far from being obvious, except that the hat (but not its wearer) had been observed on each of the two occasions.

And I was destined to see the hat again, but not for several months, and in very prosaic circumstances. On a London bus, in fact.

Being a rate-payer of a London borough, and just past the critical age of 60, I enjoy the privilege of possessing a bus pass which enables me to travel without payment on the London Underground and on London buses, the only stipulation being that I present my pass on request.

On this particular morning, I knew I had left my pass at home and would have to pay, so while I was waiting for the bus to arrive, I selected the necessary coins from my pocket and held them ready. When the bus came, the conductor was collecting fares on the upper deck, and only clattered down for a moment to call out the name of the stop and the warning:

“Hold tight!”

Then he rang the bell and we drew away from the kerb again.

It was then I noticed the unusual blue trilby hat on the man in front of me. I was sure it was *the* hat, although I suppose it is remotely possible that there is such another one somewhere in London. But I never gave that possibility any real consideration. As soon as I saw that hat, my

mind was made up. I slipped the coins I had ready back into my pocket, and waited.

The odd thing was, everything was so normal. The man beneath the blue trilby (and I could only see that his hair was unkempt) opened his newspaper and began to read it. The conductor, coming downstairs again and squeezing himself into the space beneath the stairs in order to allow half the passengers to alight at Piccadilly Circus and almost as many to get on, gave directions on where to find Regent Street to a man carrying a huge parcel, before he was satisfied that everyone was safely aboard and could ring the bell.

The conductor then began to come along and collect fares, and I waited in tingling anticipation as he drew nearer and nearer to me. What was about to happen? I asked myself. Would I feel a ticket being placed in my palm? Or a coin? Or might my bus pass suddenly come into my pocket despite having been left fifteen miles away?

“Fares, please?”

He was a burly black man.

“Where do you wish to go, sir?”

I told him, and felt that everyone on the bus was anxiously awaiting the outcome. But the conductor seemed unaware of any tension.

“Fifty pence, please.”

“Fifty pence!”

He repeated the demand, and while waiting for me to find the money, went and checked a couple of passes lower down the aisle.

When I had received my ticket, the blue trilby hat turned around and a pair of brown eyes studied me from beneath ragged eyebrows.

“Certainly,” said the hat’s owner, “I am a most obliging ghost when occasion demands, for instance, when someone is about to be embarrassed through no fault of their own, or when someone is in danger of losing their job, and suchlike occasions. You have seen the sort of thing. But —” and the brown eyes looked at me severely “— but I do not oblige when I am put to the test by some selfish person. In such cases, I never oblige. *Never*. So I am afraid you will never see me again. You will look for this blue trilby hat. But never see it, ever.”

And indeed, I never have.

The Paradol Chamber, etc.

I see that in reporting ‘The Case of the Five Orange Pips’ I apologised for having to omit several others which had occupied my friend Sherlock Holmes in 1887. Amongst these were the adventure of the Paradol Chamber and the Amateur Mendicant Society. Actually the Paradol Chamber was the name of the room where the Mendicants held their club. I think I mentioned it was a luxurious place in the lower vault of a furniture warehouse, but I failed to give it its name.

I first became aware of the Mendicants one evening when I was in Oxford Street on my way to Baker Street. There I was approached by one of the shabbiest and most evil-looking beggars I have ever seen. He was insistent that I should purchase a packet of lucifers from him, and prevented me from getting past him on the pavement. I was so angry I would have called a constable if one had been near. Anyhow, I did eventually get free of him and continued on my way.

When I reached my destination I found Holmes lounging as usual in his chair.

“Hallo,” he greeted me. “Who was that lady you met in Piccadilly this afternoon?”

“Piccadilly? How do you know I met a lady in Piccadilly?”

“You wouldn’t have worn that suit, Watson, if you had gone out merely to meet someone like me.”

“That doesn’t mean I met a lady.”

“But there’s an aura of expensive perfume about you.”

“Nonsense,” I told him. “By this time, any aura would have worn off.”

“So you admit seeing a lady?”

“Well, yes. But how d’you know it was in Piccadilly?”

“My dear Watson. I should play fair with you. I didn’t deduct these things. My spies informed upon you.”

“Your spies?”

“Yes. My beggars. One is waiting in the dining-room to meet you.”

Imagine my surprise when I found that very beggar who had accosted me in Oxford Street sprawled on one of Mrs Hudson's best dining-room chairs.

"Holmes!" I protested. "We can't have this sort of fellow here."

"This sort of fellow," said Holmes, "is Lord Algernon Potter."

"Lord ..." I gasped.

"And in the next room," went on Holmes, opening the connecting door, "are Viscount Rogers, Sir Humphrey Paul, and to complete your surprise, the Bishop of Maida Vale."

I gazed dumbfounded at the raggedest collection of scarecrows I had ever seen. For a moment I thought Holmes must be deceiving me, but when I looked more closely at the people, I recognised not only the Bishop whom I meet on the Diocesan Synod, but one or two others.

"These gentlemen," Holmes explained. "Are my Amateur Mendicants. My spies, I should say. And now, Watson, I want you to call a cab and come with me down to their headquarters to meet others of their society. All devoting their leisure time to assisting me in fighting crime in this great metropolis.

The hansom took us down to Clerkenwell, a district I am not too familiar with. We stopped outside a warehouse, and Holmes conducted me down a couple of metal staircases until he reached a closed pair of doors. It was opened in response to his rhythmical knock and we entered.

"How d'you like this for a club-room?" he asked.

"I'm amazed."

I was doubly amazed. First I was amazed at the disreputable appearance of the club members, and secondly, I was amazed at the opulence of the furnishings. Then I was introduced to those club members present. It was strange to be invited to have a brandy by a dirty-faced, unshaven old-Harroviaan, while listening to Holmes outlining his next plan of campaign to an intensely interested audience including the young Duke of Bodmin, Colonel Sir Maxwell Ivanhoe, and the Hon. Theobald Jones. Apart from a fear that my companions, despite their titles and social connections, may need further de-infestation treatment, I enjoyed my visit.

On our way back to Baker Street, Holmes asked me whether I thought I could find my way back to the Paradol Chamber if I needed to. I told him I was certain I could. Then, ten days later, when he was absorbed with the Orange Pips affair, he asked me to return to the Paradol, and tell the keeper on the ground floor that the Club would be holding its AGM in the middle of the succeeding month.

“And just look in at the Paradol Chamber before you leave,” said Holmes.

I accordingly went back to the warehouse, met the warehouse keeper, a taciturn man wearing a green baize apron and calico sleeves, and gave him Holmes’s message. I then descended the metal stairs to the double doors, and prepared to give the rhythmical knock Holmes had instructed me in. But there was no need. The doors swung open. So I went inside. And what did I find? The place was entirely empty – not a chair, not a table, not a carpet, not a lamp, and certainly no amateur mendicants.

I went back to Baker Street. Holmes was not to be seen. But Mrs Hudson was – unlike on the last occasion when I had been to the Paradol Chamber. I heard her answering a ring on the doorbell. Then she hurried in to inform me:

“There’s a horrible man asking for you, Dr Watson. Oh, please be careful. He might mean you some harm.”

“He might indeed,” added a voice we both recognised.

We spun around, and there was Holmes in the foul garb of an Amateur Mendicant laughing at us.

“All the others are now on vacation,” he told me.

“And what about the Paradol Chamber?” I asked. “It was completely empty when I called.”

“So it should be. What’s the point of having our meetings in a furniture warehouse if the furnishings can’t be stored away, neatly and inconspicuously, when they aren’t required?”

The Dent Ego Trip

Terry Austin

Six of us were waiting in the gardens of Dent Youth Hostel as our guide for the day drew up in his battered Volvo Estate. We watched as the fifty - plus figure in a one - piece fleece lined suit stepped out, his face distinctly dropped momentarily as he saw us.

“My name is Jack,” he said, a smile gradually appearing, “I wasn’t expecting a group of your age, I usually take younger, fitter folk down with me. Have any of you been caving before?”

We all shook our heads. We were walkers and members of our local Youth Hostel Association group. The youngest of us, the only other male beside myself, was forty-five.

“Ah, well, I’ll go easy on you then and take you through some of the less complicated systems. A word of advice first. If we get separated, stay still, I can find you in twenty minutes from any part of the caves. You will be quite safe; it just takes a little getting used to, with no light apart from your helmet lamps. If you would like to follow me we have a fifteen minute drive to the entrances.”

We followed him in our own cars to Selside Farm and parked within reach of Alum Pot and the Ingleborough Caves. We were shown how to connect the leads from the lamp to the power pack secured on a webbing belt and tested each one for potential faults, each making sure our helmets were adjusted for a good fit before setting off.

Jack invited us to peek over the hole that is known as the Devil’s Kitchen by having an arm crooked round a stout tree and his other hand grasping the webbing of each of us as we took turns to lean over the edge to view the rock strewn bottom, eighty feet below. There was a rock bridge two thirds of the way down, reached by a single rope suspended from a beam at the surface, a few feet away from where we were standing.

“We won’t go that way today, we may have a chance of a closer look from below that bridge if conditions allow later.” We walked half a mile until we came to what we thought was a larger than average badger hole in the ground, a little over two feet in width.

That was our way in, a rubble strewn passage where the only way to move was to stoop low and inch our way forward. It had already been

decided that the men folk should be at the front, middle and tail of the party - I was at the tail, listening to the helmets bumping against the rock ceiling and watching the strange patterns that the light from the headlamps formed.

Later we came into a slightly raised area about head height: the only trouble was that there was a spine of rock running along the entire length and in the centre of the passage.

“This is where we sit down for a bit, this area leads to Double Shuffle Pool and to get there you do this.” Jack climbed onto the ridge and, using his hands to take the weight, edged sideways on his bottom along it. We all followed suit, suddenly realising that our weight was more than was desired for this sort of thing. We thankfully ended the hammering our buttocks were taking and came to the pool itself. Another shock to the system awaited us. The pool had steep sides and no visible way round it apart from two rocks jutting out from the side, barely a foot wide.

“Here is the other shuffle.” Jack laughed as we pressed our trunks against the rock, our legs dangling over the watery abyss and moving slowly sideways again. We each grasped his offered hand to get across the last gap and sat for a few minutes.

“How deep is that pool?” One of our ladies asked.

“Nobody has found out, yet.” We didn’t ask any more questions. “Now we are going to climb into another chamber and this time you will be getting a little wet.”

We climbed up through a waterfall and, once into the chamber were obliged to crawl on hands and knees along a part, which was all of three feet high, the same in width and with two inches of water running between us. It was surprisingly warm; we were told the whole cave network stayed at a steady temperature all year round.

Our next target was a place called The Slot, which, although having good headroom, had rock jutting out along its length at head height on one side and waist height on the other and made us walk sideways in a rough S shape. We were starting to get used to walking in awkward positions but the caves were not finished with us yet.

We steadily worked our way along a broad passage with large rocks interspersed along its length.

“We are coming along the Lower Long Churn Cave,” Jack called out, “if it starts raining above it will flood in minutes. We would then have to take a passage called Upper Long Churn which is always dry, if needs be we can sit out quite comfortably until the water drains into the sump at Alum Pot. Now I want you to see our showpiece.” We entered a large chamber. “Turn your lamps to full power and look upwards.”

We did as we were bid and were met with a wonderful sight. Where the water action from the moors above had swirled and gouged at the limestone for millions of years it had created a domed ceiling.

“Welcome to St.Paul’s,” Jack smiled, “we will have a few moments here, then I will take you to where the fun really starts. Turn your lamps down again to conserve the batteries.”

We were soon on the move again towards a place Jack called the Cheese Press.

“I think it’s time we had a coffee break, find yourselves a comfortable rock, there are plenty about.”

After we had our coffee Jack told us of some of his experiences as a cave warden and many anecdotes of his former charges. Then he pointed to a passage to one side of us when he saw we were all prepared to move again.

“That’s the way I want you to go next, but before you do, just turn your lamps off.” We were in complete darkness. “All of those films you see of explorers and smugglers walking through caves without light is bunkum, this is how they really are. Now switch on again.”

We blinked in the light again and looked round. Jack was nowhere to be seen. “Look over here.” His voice called. At ground level, in a gap no more than nine inches from floor to ceiling, was Jack’s head and shoulders.

“This is the Cheese Press, possibly the smallest passage in the caving world. Carry on along the passage I have shown you and I will catch up with you without using my light down this way. You have a choice of levels, I suggest you split up with one group taking the upper chamber, we should all meet at the same point.”

We did just that with three of us walking comfortably upright on the lower chamber, while my fellow male companion took the other two

ladies through the upper chamber, with appropriate remarks heard all the way above us, their lamps making small shafts of light stream through the holes where old water courses had worn the rock away. Quite an exhilarating feeling knowing that we were making our way through the caves alone for a while.

We found Jack in a large chamber ten minutes later, sitting on a rock and finishing his coffee with his lamp switched off.

“Now we will visit Dr. Bannister’s Hand basin. You may have noticed that we cavers are religious folk. Apart from St.Paul’s we also visit the Font and indulge in the Baptistry Crawl regularly, where I shall lead you shortly. If you didn’t get wet last time I can assure you that you will next.”

It was wet, very wet. We had to negotiate our way through another waterfall which led to two passages, the entrances of which were side by side at the edge of another pool with a permanent rope attached between them for us to swing out over the water, across the rock face and, with a bit of luck land in the desired hole.

After much gasping and utterances of relief each one of us made it without falling in, a thing I personally expected to happen, I never did have much sense of balance. Then we had the Baptistry Crawl to contend with, which I can only describe as very hard on the knees as eons of running water had scalloped out the cave floor in shell patterns, rough to the touch if felt against what used to be the flow of the current and smooth with.

All the way through the upper chamber system were holes where the water from the moor above had found a weak spot and worn through, we could see daylight peeking through in some, revealing the remains of sheep or other small animals that had fallen through and perished.

We reached our final water spectacular, Dr.Bannister’s Basin was gushing away at all sides and from where we were standing at the edge of the chamber we felt the water which was coming from behind us at thigh height getting stronger and threatening to carry us over.

“It must be raining above,” Jack looked at his watch, “ we had best go through Long Churn again, we can make our exit by the Borrins Moor Cave, we have one more water slide to go through, the wrong way of course.”

He turned and we retraced our steps, making slower progress through the increased flow and climbing the water slide was difficult but we reached dry ground soon after and found an exit even smaller than the entrance we had used, each of us wishing we were a little thinner.

It was teeming with rain when we reached the surface. All the while we were in the damp below, not one of us had felt the least bit cold, now that we were on the moor and walking across the Limestone Pavement towards the parked cars we were shivering and the wind was bitter.

“We have a saying here,” Jack said, trying to take our minds off our discomfort as we walked, “If you can see the top of Ingleborough Hill it is going to rain, if you can’t it is raining.”

We watched in awe as white water sluiced down into the caves we had just vacated, the limestone channelling it into wild torrents and funnelling it at ever greater speed down every conceivable fissure.

The next few moments were spent loading the equipment we had used into the back of Jack’s Volvo and checking each item. My oppo and I waited under the shelter of the tailgate door while the ladies used our two cars in which to change into some dry clothing. We decided to drive back to the hostel in our wet gear in order to avoid any further delay. We all said our goodbyes to Jack and thanked him for his company, time and expertise. Like most of his Cave Warden colleagues, he was an inspiration to us all and we thoroughly enjoyed our trip below, our stay was further enhanced by the typical friendliness and crack of North Yorkshire folk.

60 years ago I watched the owner in a Poole High Street grocery shop.....

After standing feet astride before his majestic marble counter, like an emperor surveying his terrain, he then turned the great wheel of his slicing machine to a speed that, had it been fastened to the wheel of a vehicle, would surely have approached a world record. The leg of ham moving, as if by magic, to this guillotine so sharp it would have given any beard as close a shave as the best Gillette might provide, was converted to slices precisely thin and exactly to the customer’s order.

The number of slices specified by the lady whom he served, were placed in a neat pile upon grease-proof paper, placed in turn upon pristine white wrapping paper that was adroitly rolled, folded and tucked into an envelope shape that held it securely. This was placed in the lady's basket and a pencilled note made of its value.

A massive well matured cheddar, resting on a platter of well scrubbed oak, was then attacked by a wire, held taught by his strong hand, drawn through the cheese with the same precision, placed upon more grease-proof paper and transferred to the pristine scales. The indicating needle swiftly moving to confirm that the weight was within the smallest fraction of that specified and, following a nod of approval from the lady, was again secured in an envelope of white paper.

Two large wooden spatulas were used to measure out a portion of butter, patted into a brick shape, weighed, wrapped, approved by the lady and added to the basket.

Next the sugar, poured by a shining metal scoop into a shallow bowl on the measuring scale, until the specified weight was in balance. With a practiced hand he rolled strong blue paper into the shape of a cone; a cone that had a pointed top, transferred the sugar from the bowl into the cone, tucked in the pointed top to secure it and added it to the ladies basket, whilst making his pencilled note with the other hand.

Rice, flour, dried beans, tinned beans, pees, corned beef, biscuits and other items were duly added and noted, until the lady's shopping list had been fulfilled and she stood with a raised eyebrow, scanning the shelves. To ensure the lady did not fail to add to her shopping any item available in his shop, he then began the recital, for which he was famed,

“Tea, coffee, cocoa, pepper, salt, mustard” were the first two lines. Sadly I no longer recall the remainder. If a customer selected an item, he would stop, satisfy the order and continue reciting with metronome precision, as if having lifted the needle on a gramophone record, he had then replaced it in exactly the same spot.

We live in a wonderful modern technological age and I doubt that the modern supermarket will be remembered 50 years from now. It was a different world, much has improved, yet that old world has left a warm residual memory of a simple life that provided for our basic needs; we had yet to learn how essential were the electronic devices that had yet to be invented.

Adrian Danson