

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
Sir George Rostrevor  
Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967-68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
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## Diary

### AGM

31<sup>st</sup> May 2008

### Poetry Workshop Weekend

18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008

### Annual Luncheon

18<sup>th</sup> October 2008

### DATA PROTECTION ACT

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

### DISCLAIMER

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

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# THE SCPSW AUTHOR

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## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

Having held our New Year Party with our treasurer in attendance I know we will survive for another year and I hope you will all enjoy the benefit that membership provides, not least of which is finding your work printed in Author – at least for the fortunate competition winners and this who have contributed their work.

I continue to welcome any contributions and if you have a computer with email facilities I would be grateful for such work to be sent to me as an email attachment. This avoids the time consuming effort of correcting errors that my scanner introduces. The latest problem has been its tendency to translate the name Sean into the word scan – such conceit by a machine is hard to bear and it simply ignores my angry comments. This should not deter those who have resisted the computer revolution and still use pen and ink or a typewriter, as all contributions are welcome.

Having enjoyed the company of one of our Vice Presidents, Iain McIntyre during the earlier years of my membership and the quality of his editorship over a decade, prior to his heart attack, I and those in attendance at the New Year Party were saddened to hear that he had died last November. He will be missed by those who knew him and will always retain a special place in our memories.

You will notice that we have introduced a new competition for writers of articles in memory of Gordon Gompers. How successful this will be depends upon your participation, so all members are invited to have a go, even if this is not your usual genre, perhaps the demands of a new style is just the stimulus you need to create the Booker Mann prize winner. You'll never know until you try.

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## **Chairman's Chat**

Terry Rickson

The official opening of the new St. Pancras International Station in London and seeing a photograph of the statue of Sir John Betjeman, served to remind me how much railways and railway travel have engaged writers and artists for nearly two centuries. The number of

books, films, plays, poems, songs, paintings and photographs featuring railed transport, is legion.

One of Betjeman's passions, as we know, was the railway. In the poem 'Essex,' for example, he paints a pleasing picture of the county in Edwardian times and one of its stanzas describes the idyllic country branch line, 'The old Great Eastern winding slow,' through a quiet rural landscape, 'To some forgotten country town.'

Betjeman is in august company. Auden captured the rhythm and beat of the moving train in his verse commentary, 'Night Mail,' reading it to accompany the film of that name. Sassoon, writing late into the night, pauses on hearing a local train pass along the Valley, its habitual travelling caused him to reflect, 'There's peacetime in that train.' It inspired him to write, 'A Local Train of Thought.' In contrast, Wilfred Owen, with powerful restraint, observed in his poem 'The Send Off,' that only a mere handful of those en-training for the Front, would ever return home, Railways held a fascination for Thomas Hardy and they feature in his writing. In his poem, 'At the Railway Station, Upwey,' he paints a delightful picture of a small boy with his violin, playing for a prisoner under escort, whilst waiting for the train to arrive. Hardy, that master of irony, contrasts the freedom of the boy to the constraint upon the prisoner.

All this seems to highlight the vast possibilities of using the subject of 'railways' in our writing. I dare say many of you have done so already. Perhaps amongst our members is someone who 'knows' they could re-write the script for 'Brief Encounter,' devise an even more murderous plot than that committed on the Orient Express or, coming up to date, a 'Western' that would rival 'The 3.10 to Yuma.'

So, 'Right Away!' and at the same time, 'Mind the gap,' for pit-fails.

A Happy New Year and may we all enjoy our writing.

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### **Iain McIntyre**

When I joined the Society in 1982, Iain was Publicity Officer. In that role, and later as Editor of the 'Author' and then as a Vice President, Iain always had the interests of the Society very much at heart.

He gave generously of time and money to keep up membership levels. It's almost unbelievable now that in the seventies we had between 350

and 400 members, but of course that was before the Civil Service was reduced and scattered.

Iain had many writing successes, including being a winner in a large Open Short Story competition run by the Society many years ago. For many years he masterminded excellent Annual Luncheons at the Club. He was a fine bagpipe-player, being in demand for weddings and Burns Nights.

I missed him sorely when he retired from active participation in the Society, after heart and cancer problems. He could always be relied upon to produce solutions to the Society's problems in a changing world.

My condolences to his family.

Joan Lewis

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## **Market Information**

Ethel Corduff

Based upon contributions by the late Gordon Gompers.

### **Photography**

As many of you will recall Gordon Gompers always promoted photographs to accompany articles, particularly travel articles. Photographs improve your chance of acceptance. Having a good camera is not enough, one needs to know how to use it to best advantage. The camera Gordon recommended was an SLR camera, though expensive, also one does not need to remember to remove the lens cap. (SLR is now available in digital form and continues to be the best option. Ed) If you are interested in nature photography good zoom lenses are essential to get close to timid subjects. A good animal picture livens up a travel article. If you feel your pictures are inadequate and you find some suitable ones by a professional photographer, you can look up the photographer in Yellow Pages and ask their permission to mention them on your article fact sheet as a source of additional pictures. Gordon often wrote his travel articles in collaboration with a separate photographer sometimes obtaining their name from the local guide book. If you are not technically minded the camera should be free of confusing gadgets.

Bill Doyle, a Dubliner who has published several books of photographs and also won the Daily Telegraph Magazine Photographer of the Year Award competition, works mostly in black and white. Throughout his career he's mostly used a Leica which is the street photographers favourite. He prefers a camera to be discreet and does not favour hardware or a noisy motor drive. He has used a Rolliflex for larger format negatives. He usually takes one shot by being in the right place at the right time with fast reflexes. When sending photographs to any magazine they should be glossy and packed in a cardboard stiffened envelope.

Gordon suggests that as one masters camera techniques, it is a good subject to write about it - there are several photography magazines. But first of all it is probably best to start with other magazines that showcase good photographs such as -This England P.O Box 52 Gloucestershire GL50 1YQ Editor@thisengland.co.uk the current issue has photographs of London Lights, Aspects of England and Towns - Cheltenham. Photographs should be mainly out of doors and include some form of life preferably human.

County magazines such as Surrey Life, Holmesdale House, 46 Croydon Road, Reigate, Surrey RN 2NH01737 27188 Editor Caroline Harrap editor@surreylife.co.uk KP Magazine for dogs- shows dog images. A free sample magazine and free dog newsletter available from K9 Magazine, 21 High St, Warsop, Notts NG OAA -Managing Editor Sean O'Meara scan@k9magazine.com

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## **Winners W.F and F. G Froud Memorial Competition 2007**

### **Children's Short Story Winners**

First Prize - "Timothy's Amazing Timepiece" by A Beckett, Nailsea, Somerset

Second Prize - Long John Silver's Magical Bicycle Bell by Thomas Stone, Braminster, Dorset

Third Prize - Jake and his Teddy by Anthony Murray, Crawley, West Sussex

## **Judge's Report**

What a privilege it has been to judge this competition! The standard of the majority of the forty-seven entries was very high. I feel that if the standard of the first chapter can be sustained throughout the novel, many of these submissions ought to be published as they would find a sizeable readership.

In order to determine the winner, I read each entry once and awarded marks out of ten. Those entries scoring eight or more constituted my first "shortlist". I read these twenty-six, placing each chapter on a ladder. My final short-list was made up of the entries on the top nine rungs of this ladder. I then re-read and re-assessed these nine entries, awarding separate marks for "idea", "quality of writing", "vocabulary", "ease of comprehension" and "un-put-down-ability". But even before I added up the marks to give each entry a total score, the winner became evident: Timothy's Amazing Timepiece. This piece of writing struck me as having an interesting, original idea which was expertly developed in the first chapter. I hope this standard is maintained throughout the book and, if so, it should soon find a publisher.

Even some of the entries which did not make my final shortlist of nine were beautifully written throughout. I felt that in these cases the novels should be completed and published; they would be enjoyed and valued but perhaps by a relatively small readership of our more intelligent children.

There were a few entries which had not been thoroughly checked, so words or phrases were omitted or repeated. In one case the pages were assembled in the wrong order.

But overall, the competitors are to be thanked for their hard work and congratulated on the quality of their writing

### **First Prize - Timothy's Amazing Timepiece by Roy James**

This story is based on an ingenious idea involving the manipulation of time. The main character is developed well in the first chapter so that the reader is on his side. A good picture of Timothy is conjured up just by reading the first page.

Descriptions are simple but engaging and there is humour throughout. The vocabulary used is interesting but modern and not difficult for most 9 - 12 year olds to understand (e.g. “nestling in his hand”, “mechanical craftsmanship”, ‘lurched forward, “passionately wished”). Dialogue is used to good effect to illustrate character and to carry the story forward. Of course, the chapter ends on a cliff-hanger which definitely left me wanting to read more.

### **Second Prize** - Long John Silver’s Magical Bicycle Bell by Tomas Stone

Another ingenious idea: the story of Aladdin’s magic lamp transported to modern England. Descriptions are interesting throughout; vivid pictures are projected into the reader’s mind by the use of interesting nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and their associated phrases (e.g. “a thin line of vaporous blue smoke”, “smiled wearily”, “the colossus towering above him”).

The story of a genie able to grant its owner’s wishes has been a favourite with children for hundreds of years and this old idea in a modern setting is sure to appeal to many youngsters in the 9 - 12 age group.

The transportation of the lamp from the Middle East of long ago to the England of today is cleverly done. The author assumes the reader is familiar with the concept of land-mines and with the literary figure Long John Silver and it is good that the reader is credited with coming to the story with background knowledge of this kind. Again, the chapter ends with a cliff-hanger that would have the reader turning immediately to the second chapter.

### **Third Prize** - *Jake* and His Teddy by Anthony Murray

This well-written story encompasses several familiar themes (e.g. a monster invading the household, the child being able to see the monster while the adults cannot) and adds its own original ideas of the monster transforming itself into members of the family and the monster being able to feed ideas into the adults’ minds.



It also features subjects likely to appeal to young children - the relationship between a child and his teddy, monsters, favourite foods, television.

If the whole book is as good as the first chapter, it would make a very good reading together book for 7 - 8 year olds and older children who have difficulty in reading by themselves. Most children aged 9 - 10 who enjoy a scary story would be able to read this by themselves.

The author's careful choice of words makes the story interesting, easy to read, and - for a youngster - scary and intriguing.

## **Timothy's Amazing Timepiece**

Roy James

(Froud Memorial winning entry)

### Chapter 1

**I**n the greyness of that November morning Timothy Tottle ran his finger along the edge of his pocket watch. Its white face and burnished brass finish glinted warmly, lifting his spirits.

Tim was a slightly built lad, with gingery hair and brown eyes. Although not actually scruffy, his general appearance did not endear him to those who were enthusiastic about dress codes. He wore a blue school jacket, grey trousers, a white shirt with the mandatory portion hanging out signifying coolness, and a tie which spent most of its time in his top pocket; thus completing his masterpiece of dishevelment. Having just turned eleven, Timothy was at that age when those odd creatures, girls, were becoming disturbingly engaging together with his obsession with facial spots.

He was also at that age when he was often late due to his reluctance to get up early.

This morning he had missed the bus and had to wait fifteen minutes for the next. Now he was stuck in traffic. Once again he was not going to make it for nine o'clock. This was not good. It would mean an audience with the head, and that was bad.

The bus moved forward and then shuddered to a stop again. The traffic stretched all the way up the High Street and showed little sign of going elsewhere.

Tim peered down at the clock in Eric's chip-shop. It was a quarter to nine. He glanced back at the watch nestling in his hand. It was much larger than most pocket watches; nearly eight centimetres in diameter. Although it looked the business, sadly it did not work. Tim had known this when his Grandfather had given it to him on his birthday. He did not mind it being odd looking: it was bound to impress his friends.

However, he now wished that it worked because an idea had occurred to him that might have got him off the hook. If he had put it back half an hour he could have claimed that his reliable old watch was running slow. It was well known that the head, Mr Bell, was keen on mechanical craftsmanship and might have been distracted enough to let him off. It was a long shot but it may have worked. The bus lurched forward again, covering a few more metres and then stopped at a red light.

Tim's Grandfather had found the timepiece in a bombed out watchmaker's shop when he was doing his bit to liberate Europe. Although it did not have any obvious damage, he never did get it to work; finally consigning it to a shoe-box under his bed.

Tim passionately wished that he could get it going again. He had turned the winder hundreds of times. Pushed and pulled at it but could not start it ticking. In the vain hope that it would miraculously work he pulled out the adjuster again and idly turned the hands back and forth, finally stopping at half past eight. He slipped the watch back into his pocket and stored out of the window.

After an eternity the bus rounded the corner and raced like a thing possessed to the school bus stop. Pushing down the stairs Tim looked through the back window towards the school playground. His heart sank. It was deserted. That meant only one thing, lessons had started, and he was a goner.

With his bag bouncing and jacket flapping wildly about him Tim ran towards the school. Suddenly, his courage deserting him, he flattened himself against the outside wall wondering what to do next. Undecided, he became aware of the watch. He took it out of his pocket. The back was open.

Amazed he looked inside noticing a large circular button engraved with the word 'REGRESSUS' staring up at him. He gingerly pushed at it. There was a faint 'ting' and then the watch started ticking.

Overjoyed he snapped the back shut and walked briskly across the playground to the main building. Gradually he became aware of some kids still hanging about outside. Strange, he thought to himself. They had not been there a moment ago. Don't they know the bell's gone?

Slipping quietly into the building he crept along the deserted corridor towards his classroom. The door was still open. Tim peered in expecting to see form 6B with Mrs Luggett presiding over the register. To his astonishment, only the Duffton twins and 'Brains' Beckton; were present. Very strange.

Tim was about to enter when a shadow filled the doorway and loomed over him. "Tottle! This is an unexpected honour" hissed a red faced Mr Bell. The head teacher outstretched his arm and then slowly bent it back pointing at his own watch with his other hand. "Quarter to nine lad?"

"Is it?" squeaked Tim, meekly.

"Yes Tottle" he replied. "Haven't we got something wrong here?"

"I can explain," replied Tim, confused.

"Rather than usually arriving after the bell, you appear, somewhat miraculously to be fifteen minutes before it." For a moment Mr Bell's eyes bore into him, making Tim squirm. Then, without warning his face exploded into a big smile. "Well done boy. Keep up the good work."

The morning dragged by without much happening. Lunch hour come and went. Tim had showed his new watch to his friends but they were not particularly interested. Then, much to everyone's mortification, the first session after lunch was Maths and Mr Grimton announced that he would be giving the class a mock exam at two o'clock. Tim had completely forgotten and had done no revision at all. For Tim, Maths had never been a priority, this being seriously un-cool.

"Right" bellowed Grimton, his eyes flickering insanely as he handed out the papers. "You so lucky people, your test starts in exactly one minute at two o'clock."

Tim struggled through the exam convinced that he was going to have to become a poet, a window cleaner, anything that only requires knowledge of maths at 'F' level. Whilst he waited for the results and the inevitable lecture from Grimton, he fiddled with his watch. He was

casually twiddling its hands back and forth when the back sprung open again. The watch was now set at one-fifty-seven. Tim had to look up, Grimton was saying something. It appeared that Becton had come top and Tim, second from bottom. Not good, Tim thought to himself. Big trouble at home.

“Here are your papers,” declared Grimton, shaking his head. “I want you to mark the correct answers in when I read them out. I also want Hennings and Tottle to study these answers and revise....revise. We’ll have another test next week.”

After Tim had written in the correct answers he returned his attention to the watch. Noticing that the back was still open he pushed the button, closed it and put the watch into his pocket. There was a faint ‘ting’ as it started ticking.

Remembering what Grimton had just said to him he returned to his marked up paper, but it was gone.

“Right” bellowed Grimton, his eyes flickering insanely., “You so lucky people, your test starts in exactly one minute at two o’clock.” He marched up and down the aisles handing out papers.

“Not another one?” Tim moaned out aloud. Alice Hall, sitting adjacent, gave Tim a quizzical smile.

“Do you have a problem, Tottle?” said Grimton, handing him his paper.

Tim looked at the questions and scratched his head. “Excuse me, Sir. I think you’ve made a mistake?”

“A mistake”, repeated Grimton, his eyelids winking furiously. “I don’t make mistakes. It’s you Tottle, failing to comprehend the obvious.”

“The questions look the same Sir.” Tim’s voice trailed off. Realising that his

“Tottle! What’s your problem?”

“Nothing, Sir. I’m just having a bad day.” Alice Hall giggled.

“Right. When you feel that you are ready, please let me know.”

“Yes Sir”. Tim was not just having a bad day, he was having a very strange day. He just wished he could fathom out why.

Although he had to sit through the test again it went really well since he was able to recall most of the answers from the first time round. Fancy giving me the same paper twice, he mused. Maybe it's a new teaching technique?

After the test, Grimton quickly scanned the results. Well done Beckton, Jones, and amazingly, you Tottle. You seem to have most of them correct. Incredible."

Assuming it to be nearly four, Tim started collecting his books together when Grimton sidled up to him.

"Tottle, I will be wishing to see you after school in Mr Bell's office, if you please." His eyes betrayed a hint of menace.

"What? Now, Sir?"

"No lad. After school at four o'clock. Can't you tell the time?"

Tim twisted around and looked at the clock on the wall. It was only ten past three. Looking furtively around he realised that nobody was attempting to pack up. He slid his bog back to the floor again. "What's going on?" he whispered to himself.

"Now you so lucky people, we move onto a new subject area this afternoon called trigonometry," Grimton announced with unfettered glee. There was a low collective groan and everyone reached for their textbooks. Tim was totally bewildered.

On the way home he reflected on the day's curious events. When he had gone to Ding-Dong's office after school, for from a pat on the back for exemplary effort he had received a roasting. He and Grimton were both convinced that Tim had somehow sneaked into the teacher's common room early that morning and copied down the answers to the mock exam. Try as he may he could not convince them that he had actually been given the same paper twice. A letter was to be sent to Tim's parents. That was definitely not good.

As a distraction from the uncomfortable thoughts swimming around in his head Tim fished out his watch. Once more it had stopped. After turning the hands forward and then back five minutes it sprung open revealing the button again. It seemed that by simply moving the hands in this fashion released the back. A bit odd, but at least Tim could start it whenever he wanted. If only it would keep going.

When the bus arrived at the High Street something was going on. Tim quickly pocketed the watch. In the evening darkness he could see flashing blue lights up ahead. The bus halted and a policeman spoke to the driver. A moment later everyone was asked to get off the bus due to some danger ahead.

Crowds were beginning to gather as Tim ran towards the flashing lights. As he drew nearer he could see flames and smoke pouring out of Eric's chip shop. He stood across the street with the other onlookers.

A police sergeant shouted across to a constable who was keeping the road clear. "Anyone in there?"

"Owner and two customers Sir."

"Can't we get them out?"

"No way! The fryers alight. They're all trapped in the back. Gas cylinders. Likely to blow any second Sir. It happened so fast."

"Where's the Brigade?"

"They'll be with us in two minutes."

Tim reached for his watch to check if they would be that quick. Pulling it out of his pocket he noticed he had forgotten to press the button. Upon activating it there was a soft 'ting' and it immediately started ticking.

What happened next thoroughly shook Tim.

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### **Gordon Gompers' Article Competition**

Topic - 'Markets'

Max 2,000 words

Prize £50

Closing date 31st July 2008

£3 entry

Double spaced with word count

Entrants should use nom de plume and provide their name and address on a separate sheet to:

Competition Secretary Ron Jeffreys

186 Lewis Flats,

Lisgar Terrace,

London W14 8SQ

(Entries will only be returned if accompanied by s.a.e.)

## **Poetry Pages**

Poetry Editor Terry James

### **The CMB**

Angus Livingstone

(cosmic microwave background)

The background hiss of three degrees,  
- the big bang, now barely a sneeze –  
was discovered serendipitously  
by two researchers trying to see  
if they could find intelligence  
from an extra-terrestrial kind of mensch.  
The receiver in their experiment  
was twisted, warped and strangely bent –  
a giant ear-trumpet to hear the trace  
of manufactured sound from space.  
It's the best evidence I have seen  
our Creator's got the joker gene  
that such a device quite so naff  
was first to hear his fading laugh.

### **Lifeboat!**

Fred Jeffery

Cross the roads and rubble down to slipway three,  
"There's a yacht in trouble with a crew of three."  
"Mick, get the cox'n aboard."  
"Quick, have the lifeboat unmoored."  
Throttle at the double, we head out to sea.

Feel the water splashing in the lifeboat's well;  
On the bow, waves crashing; there's a rising swell.  
Rush through the storm gale force five,  
Must get those folk back alive!  
Through the breakers smashing, as we go like hell.

It has been a long ride when the craft we see;  
But we're on the wrong side, they must have our lee.  
"Blast! Little time we have got.  
Fast, turn to circle the spot."  
Now once we're alongside, we retrieve all three.

Still the waves come roaring, and our vessel rolls.  
How the seas come pouring. "Jack, avoid those shoals!"  
"See, the yacht sinks out of sight."  
We pass the old harbour light.  
Soon the crew are mooring - and we've saved all souls.

In some shady cavern free from stress and strife,  
Or in harbour tavern were the jokes are rife.  
We take storms and the slack;  
One day we may not come back -  
Sailing into Heaven, for the sea's our life.

### **Disbeleaf**

Steve Glason

On the platform people frown  
Autumn leaves are turning  
Russet hues of golden brown  
Clogging wheels a-churning.

Excuses - thick and fast they fall  
"Bonfire smoke at Woking"  
Southwest Trains not playing ball  
Commuter near to choking.

To Waterloo - a sluggish start  
Reduced electric power  
Quick instead by horse and cart  
For the office tower.

### **Grey Matter**

Ethel Corduff

Grey is precious,  
considered dull by youngsters,  
there's clouds, hair, clay, rabbits,  
shades of grey, grey area.

A grey day, garden rocks,  
worn pavements, grey with effort,  
stone fireplaces, grey with illness.

Grey is low key, grey is great,  
grey is power and knowledge  
that youth has not yet achieved.



## Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

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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

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### Bill Barnes Competition 2007

The results of the 2006 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition are:

1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Alison Michell

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Sonia Royal

3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Sylvia Neumann

In addition, and in no particular order, the judge, Adrian Green, considered poems by

Ivy Hudson, Norman Bissett, Eleanor Broaders, Sylvia Neumann and Alison Michell as being worthy of Commendation.

The spring issue of **wavelengths** will contain the judge's report, the three winning poems, plus those receiving Commendation.

Details of the 2008 Bill Barnes Competition will appear in the summer edition of **wavelengths**.

### PW Weekend 2008

The annual Poetry Workshop Weekend will take place on **18-20 July 2008**. The venue this year is the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham. The cost of the Weekend is £196 per person, which includes all meals, en-suite accommodation and meeting room. As usual, we ask for a deposit of £30, with the balance payable in May. Alternatively, you may pay by instalments, by arrangement with our Treasurer, **Terry Rickson**. A Booking Form was enclosed with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. This should be returned with your deposit to me, **Mike Boland**, at the address given above.

### Waves 2008

Contributions for **Waves 2008**, the annual collection of PW members' work, should be sent to **Liz Rowlands**, (address at page heading) by **31 March 2008**. Poems may be rhymed or unrhymed. There are no

restrictions on form, but entries should be no more than **34** lines, including stanza breaks, and should not have been published previously. To assist with marketing costs, contributors of published poems will be asked to purchase 6 copies @ £15.

### **Subscriptions 2008**

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2008. The cost of membership remains unchanged for yet another year, being £3 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. A Renewal Form was enclosed with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. Please complete and send it with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**. Prospective new members should contact Terry Rickson at the address given above.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year
- 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

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

### **Dates to Remember**

1 January 2008	Poetry Workshop subscriptions due
1 March 2008	<b>wavelengths</b> Spring issue (Bill Barnes Special)
31 March 2008	Closing Date for Submissions to <b>Waves</b>
1 June 2008	<b>wavelengths</b> Summer Issue
18 - 20 July 2008	Poetry Workshop Weekend

## **Publisher's Guidelines**

Joan Lewis

I take it all back. One may cull guidelines for a magazine from various sources but there is nothing – but nothing – one can do if a new Editor takes over and changes all the Rules!

Writers' News readers will have seen in the March issue just out that Diane Kenwood has taken over Woman's Weekly and has plans 'to make it more contemporary and relevant to today's over-fifty women's readers'. Nothing is now out of bounds – so you can try domestic violence, cosmetic surgery etc. and also 'first class contemporary fiction'. Ideas by email to [sue\\_pilkington@ipcmedia.com](mailto:sue_pilkington@ipcmedia.com), with a list of previous published articles/stories..

Last issue I said I'd look at openings for writing on gardening. I'm very wary, not least that I don't quote too much without permission – isn't Life fraught! Neil Fletcher's excellent article is in Freelance Market News for October 2007. I don't wish to be sued so will just quote two websites:

[www.gardenwriters.co.uk](http://www.gardenwriters.co.uk); [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

Sorry to have become such a wimp.

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## **History of the Civil and Public Service Writers (continued)**

Beryl Jones

Officers of the Society - Presidents:

James Laver 1968 - 1975 CBE, FRSA, FRSL.

The fifth President of the Society, James Laver, the son of a stationer, was born in Liverpool on the 14th March 1899. At the age of 12 he won a scholarship to the Liverpool Institute where, according to an article in The Mersey Packet of May 1961 entitled 'Packet Personalities', he 'spent the hours his fellows gave to sport at the Museum, Art Gallery and Library in William Brown Street.'

Given £1,000 by one of the great Liverpool ship owning families to further his education, Laver was accepted by New College, Oxford and matriculated in 1917. Gazetted to the Kings's Own (Royal Lancaster) Regiment he arrived in France just two days before the Armistice. He

later wrote 'I am probably the only soldier in the First World War to have received a medal for every day of active service.' On returning to Oxford he won the Newdigate prize in 1921 for a poem on Cervantes a feat which he said horrified his more hearty rowing friends.

In 1922 he was appointed an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Engraving, Illustration and Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he was to remain for 37 years, becoming Keeper in 1938. One of his more interesting assignments was organising an exhibition of Samuel Palmer's works which was owned by his irascible son A. H. Palmer.

Writing in the evenings his prolific literary output included studies of living artists, 'Portraits in Oil and Vinegar' (1925) beginning with a spurious Sainte-Beuve eipigraph mischievously invented by Laver himself; which was generally well received, although slated by Clive Bell in *The Athenaeum*. His real prominence came in 1927 with the publication of his poem 'A Stitch in Time' a pastiche of 'The Rape of the Lock' brought up to date. Highly praised by the critics it rose in price in two weeks from 3s/9d to £1/15s. The poem, saucy, satirical and slightly scandalous made Laver's name and gave him entree into the popular press. A sequel entitled 'Love's Progress' followed in 1929 and in 1933 the two were published together as 'Ladies' Mistakes.' All these pieces eventually became collectors' items.

When the International Theatre Exhibition, containing works by all the leading Continental and English designers, was transferred to the V & A from Amsterdam, the Museum bought a large number of designs and models including work by Edward Gordon Craig and it was decided to make these the nucleus of a collection of the Art of the Theatre. Laver was put in charge and stage design became one of his special interests. He also did some amateur productions and translated several plays from the French and German. A play for children, 'The House that Went to Sea' was produced at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1936 but Laver's biggest stage success was the dramatisation of his novel 'Nymph Errant' which ran during the 1933-1934 season. Sir Charles Cochran turned it into a musical with lyrics by Cole Porter and Gertrude Lawrence played the leading lady.

Laver felt he was leading a double life. 'To my colleagues at South Kensington I had become a cigar-smoking, Savoy-sipping, enviable but slightly disreputable character, hobnobbing with chorus girls and hanging round stage doors. To Gertrude Lawrence and her friends I was something "in a museum" engaged in mysterious and apparently useless activities quite outside their comprehension; a character out of *The Old Curiosity Shop* hardly fit to be let out alone.'

But Laver seemed to manage two lives very well. There was nothing amateurish in his contributions to art history. 'French Painting and the 19c' (1937) was a judicial assessment with a new psychological approach whilst 'Adventures in Monochrome' (1941) surveyed the popular graphic arts. Two works of 1930 'A complete Catalogue of the Etchings and Drypoints of Arthur Briscoe' and 'A History of British and American Etching' and his pioneer book on the French painter James Tissot published in 1936, all demonstrated how seriously he took the subjects on which his career was based.

Laver's interest in the history and psychology of costume began through his wanting to date paintings by the costumes. It was now that he began to develop the theories for which he will be best remembered; the so-called 'cycle' of fashion, the relationship between dress design and the other applied arts, and the economic and social factors controlling the evolution of taste. He published several important books on these topics.

Just before the 2nd World War Laver was involved with the removal and packing away of the V & A's treasures, which included part of a wall having to be pulled down to get out the Raphael Cartoons. Three days after the outbreak of war he was installed in the Treasury where his reputation was that of an unorthodox official. He was invited to become a national lecturer on the National Savings Committee and found himself talking to Irish labourers on muddy airfields, miners at the pithead baths, men puddling steel and girls filling detonators. In the course of this work he became slightly alarmed at the power he was experiencing as a demagogue. He wrote. 'The trouble with all public speaking is that one begins to evoke emotions one no longer feels -and that might almost be the definition of a prostitute.' It was also apparently typical of him that on his long train journeys up and down the country he would 'read all the books in the London Library under

Occultism', the culmination of which resulted in a book on the 16c prophet Nostradamus.

In his 1963 autobiography 'Museum Piece' (of which the Times Literary Supplement unkindly remarked that it reminded one of the man who came to tea and stayed for a month), Laver interrupted his cosy recollections to wonder whether with all his varied achievements, he was not after all a failure.

'Instead of proceeding in however pedestrian a fashion, along the highways of literature, I had been diverted into the bypaths of expertise.' Described as a natural dilettante, but no fribble, his works on fashion will stand as minor classics. He must also be credited with the valuable service of crosspollination between subjects which is the dilettante's special office and virtue. Packet Personalities argues that Laver was 'no mere chronicler of vagaries of fashion, he has evolved a philosophy of the subject. For him the hemline was a seismograph in which he saw the rise and waning of civilisations. He read omens in overcoats, portents in petticoats, sermons in stoles. He delimited erogenous zones with the ruthless nicety of a Versailles diplomatist.' His thesis was that fashion is never arbitrary. It has its roots in the unconscious, the Collective Unconscious if you will, and the hopes and fears of a whole society are reflected in the cut of a dress." (Times Obituary)

James Laver was a brilliant speaker and on the many occasions when he addressed the members of the Society there was always a large and appreciative audience. In 1928 he married the actress Veronica Turleigh, a welcome guest at many of the Society's dinners and when she died in 1971 it was felt by the many friends who knew them that James never really got over her loss. He died in 1975 as a result of a fire in his flat thought to have been caused by a cigarette.

If one considers his prolific output across many genres, starting in the Liverpool Post in 1919, the Times Obituary is perhaps apt when it describes James Laver as a 'polymath of formidable virtuosity.'

Sources: Times Obituary June/Evening Standard - 1975. The Mersey Packet- May 1961.

## **Members' Successes**

Novel Award Listing For Solihull Writer  
(Quoted from Birmingham and Solihull newspapers)

Solihull author John C Bird's novel, *Alby And Me*, about growing up in Birmingham in the 1940s, has been long-listed for the prestigious Waverton Good Read Award.

The award, for the best British debut novel of 2007-08, is chosen by the residents of Waverton, a village near Chester with a population of about 2,000. A team of up to 80 readers plus a small group in Styal Women's prison read and allocate scores to each nominated book. The long list of 20 books was selected from a total of nearly 60 nominations. A short list of five books will be agreed in April and the winner announced in July. The award will be presented at a dinner in October as part of Chester's Literary Festival.

The Waverton Award was inaugurated in 2003 to replicate Le Prix De La Cadere, a prize awarded annually for the French debut novel of the year by villagers of La Cadere D'Azur, a Provencal village with a population of about 4,000.

Previous winners of the Waverton Award include Mark Haddon for *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-time*, which won the 2003 Whitbread Book of the Year award, and Marina Lewycka for *A Short History Of Tractors In Ukrainian*, which won the Bollinger Everyman Woodhouse Prize for comic writing.

Bird, whose previously published and broadcast work includes plays, poetry, television comedy material and non-fiction books, said, 'Given the many fine books that were nominated for the award, it is particularly pleasing to have my first novel given this recognition.'

*Alby And Me*, which has received enthusiastic reviews, is a powerful and poignant evocation of the friendship of two unusual boys growing up on a Birmingham housing estate in the late 1940s. Set against a background of family strife, it is a gritty, compelling, often humorous account of a critical period in the boys' lives as they encounter bullies, sexually savvy girls, a suicide, some vintage working class characters, and God. It is story touched with both joy and sadness, and has an ending many may find hard to forget.

An excerpt from the novel can be read on the author's website: [www.johncbird.co.uk](http://www.johncbird.co.uk). The book is published by Exposure Press, price £6.99.

(I'm sure you will join me in wishing John good luck at the next stage of the Waverton Award – Ed)

Another of our members, Peter Lancaster Walker, having retired and previously having written plays, decided to try his hand at writing children's books. His first book has now been published in USA, another has been accepted by a UK publisher and more are awaiting acceptance. Watch out J. K. Rowling.

The following was the US press release: (In the USA they spell travellers with only one l)

Bouncing Ball Books is pleased to present *Space Travelers Land At Buckingham Palace* by Peter Lancaster Walker.

Have you ever wondered if some of the people who roam the Earth are not at all human beings? *Space Travelers Land At Buckingham Palace* confirms our belief that not everyone we know is born from the same planet.

It all begins when celestial beings from the planet Valpon voyage across the universe to land their spacecraft in the garden of Buckingham Palace. This adventurous group of alien adults blends in perfectly with Earthlings because they look exactly like Earth children. From a chance spot in the Oxford-Cambridge boat race to attending the Epsom Derby, the Valponians hit London running and London will never be the same!

Get ready to laugh out load as the Space Travelers get caught in a time warp, accidentally return to Valpon with one of the Queen's Corgis, and compete in a hilarious version of the Valponian (Olympic) Games where dodging bullets is a regular competition.

So whether or not you have been to Buckingham Palace in London, England, Walker will make you second-guess taking a stroll among the Palace's gardens. You'll never know if you are walking among your friends and family or aliens that simply look like them!

*Space Travelers Land At Buckingham Palace* can be found in bookstores everywhere. To read more about Peter Lancaster Walker and learn about his upcoming author's events, please visit [www.bouncingballbooks.com](http://www.bouncingballbooks.com). Books can be bought via Amazon, at bookshops, or by contacting Peter on 0116 2334467 (email [peter.walker9043@ntlworld.com](mailto:peter.walker9043@ntlworld.com))



## **Mrs Dunmore's Decision**

Paul Williams

(Short Story First prize at New Year Party 2008)

**M**rs Dunmore was last seen talking to a young man at Waterloo Station before taking the 16.20 train to Exeter. At least, the young man thought he was talking to Mrs Joy Dunmore. In fact he was talking to the newly married Mrs Martin.

Not long after the train departed Joy made her way to the toilet with her bag. There she took off her rather cheap clothes and put on the dress and jacket Tony had bought her in Selfridges a few days before. She also applied a tasteful quantity of makeup, not much, but more than Mrs Dunmore had worn for several years, apart from the previous day in the Registry Office from which she had emerged as Mrs Martin. As she was leaving the cubicle she suddenly remembered to put on her wedding ring. She had not worn a ring of any kind for some time.

She returned to her seat and watched thoughtfully as bushes and telegraph poles flashed by. 'Oh Simon,' she said silently, 'can you forgive me? You do understand why I have to do it, don't you? Perhaps one day even Gary will understand.' She regretted not having a magazine to read but was not too bothered. It would have been a nuisance if she really was going to Exeter to see her supposedly sick sister as Gary thought, but she was only going as far as Basingstoke. She felt a moment of panic when she arrived and saw that Tony was not on the platform but then she saw him coming through the gate, a broad smile of pleasure and apology on his face.

'Sorry,' he said after kissing her, 'had trouble parking the car. You look absolutely lovely.'

The drive to Warwick, or rather to the village just outside it, took nearly two hours. She had not been in such a luxurious car for a long time. The last occasion had probably been her first husband's funeral ten years before. She recalled sitting in the back of the Daimler holding Gary in her arms, holding that beautiful head as he promised her, with utter sincerity, that he would look after her now. The memory induced the threat of a tear which she suppressed. Tony had endured

enough sadness of his own without her going all emotional on him. She did not resent him mourning his first wife with such intensity, she understood his feelings entirely. She would have had mixed feelings about marrying less than two years after Simon's death.

When she saw Tony's house, or rather *their* house as she must now get used to saying, she was taken aback. She had expected it to be smart but not quite as grand as this. After they had had some tea he showed her around and she felt a little overwhelmed.

'You'll get used to it,' Tony assured her.

'But all the cleaning it must take, and the garden! I'm amazed you keep it all so well.'

She realised what a silly thing it was to say even before he laughed. Of course, she recalled, Mrs Meek came in four times a week, and Mr Meek did the garden. Yet much as she knew she would come to love the house, she was rather relieved when he suggested that they go to the village pub for dinner. She still felt a little disoriented and the company of strangers would be welcome, at least for that evening.

They said little over dinner but the silences were by no means awkward. The smiles they instinctively gave each other were enough. When they had finished they took their remaining wine into the public bar and watched happily as local youths played darts. Nice boys, she thought tenderly as she watched them, a little rough but nice. From their conversation she deduced that they all worked locally. They worked. Joy approved of that.

'How was he when you left him?' Tony asked at last. She had been expecting the question.

'He followed me to Waterloo,' she said. 'By the way, the rent's paid up to the end of the month. After that he's on his own.'

Tony looked worried.

'I only hope you won't resent me for the advice I gave you.'

'I won't do that,' she assured him. 'It was good advice. It's what I've been telling myself for the last five years.'

‘Look,’ he said, after thinking for a while, ‘perhaps it’s still possible to do something. I’ll pay for any clinic or rehab centre you want to look for.’

‘He’s already been to several and much good they did him,’ Joy pointed out. ‘I could afford them the first time, and the second. I even managed a third time after I’d remortgaged the house. When that had been taken from us and we had to go to a council flat still he wanted more, thieving, lying. He even took my wedding ring, Simon’s ring I mean.’

‘There might still be hope,’ Tony persisted. ‘I’ve seen those photos of him, the ones taken up until about five years ago, and those old videos. Such a charming boy! And you and Simon looked so proud of him as you had every right to be. Sophie and I couldn’t have children you see. I can’t tell you how sad that made us. I would be proud to call Gary my son one day. I really do mean that.’

‘Yes, I know you do. Maybe one day that will happen if he doesn’t die first, but there won’t be any change as long as he thinks I’m there. You’re right though, he was charming.’ She allowed herself a moment of fondness but then her face hardened, ‘until it started, until he had his first fix, as they call it. I could live with him taking everything, in fact as I let him take more and more I sometimes still felt a thrill that he needed me so much. It was the moral blackmail that I couldn’t cope with, though at first I almost believed it. I had made him what he was, apparently. I had driven his father into an early grave and I was doing the same to him. I was a mean bitch, a slag. At other times there was the whining, the pleading. And it would always be just another hundred quid that he wanted, just enough to get himself sorted. He had to be content with forty today. It was the last paper money I had.’

‘You mean you gave him money even today?’ Tony asked, unable to suppress a slight smile.

‘I can understand why you’re amused,’ she laughed. ‘But you see, it wasn’t Mrs Martin who gave him the money, it was that silly Mrs Dunmore. And Mrs Dunmore was last seen talking to a young man at Waterloo Station before taking the 16.20 train to Exeter. Let’s have another drink, Tony. It’s time the two of us started living again!’

## **A Bit of a Card**

Adrian Danson

(Winner of poetry prize at New Year Party 2008)

16.20, the shop would soon shut  
Not enough time to if, or to but  
Yet he looked long and hard  
At the price of the card

Though he knew that to woo  
The young widow from Crew  
A scrooge he must never be  
Generosity is all she must see.

Will you marry me? He wrote to his love  
On the card with a golden star above  
Silver angels, animals, wise men three  
And child in a crib, all for 49p.

He dropped it into her letter box  
Then home again to darn his socks  
And dream of life with the lady next door  
That exclusive and wealthy Mrs Dunmore

## **Annual Luncheon 2007**

Report by Ethel Corduff

Dr. Ruth Webb biographer of Virginia Woolfe and Jean Rhys was Guest Speaker at the Society Annual Lunch on 20th October at the Civil Service Club. Her dedicated research was described vividly in an extremely entertaining talk. Dr Webb's expertise and dedication to compiling biographies was admired by all present. Fleur Hogarth, President Alan Watt's daughter was also present. It was nice to see Chris Adye back again accompanied by his brother Michael. He and his Mum had been regular attendees at the lunch, sadly she recently passed away. She will be missed. New members present were Nina Matter from Sutton and Frances Mc Mahon from Old Harlow. Members came from Grantham, Middlesex, Durham, Kent, Bournemouth, Ipswich, Hampshire, Surrey, Hertfordshire, Essex and London.

## Old Annie and Her Last Chicken

Oliver Eade

Old Annie's yard was silent. The silence was eerie and it unnerved Sean. He halted half-way up the path. Without the usual comforting clucking of Old Annie's hens in the yard his courage began to waver. It wasn't that he was *scared* of Old Annie. No one could ever be scared of the old woman, dotty though she seemed to be at times. It was *age* that frightened him, and stripped of the soothing sound of Old Annie's 'chicken' as she called her faithful scrawny old egg layers (she never said 'chickens'), the yard itself now seemed worn-out and ancient. Not only was age scary, it seemed so pointless to young Sean – the whole thing about *growing* old, the change from smooth and soft to hard and wrinkled, the greying of things, the sadness, the stooping...and the *sticks*. The tap-tap-tap of Old Annie's two sticks on the pitted wooden floor of the dilapidated cottage *did* scare Sean. It reminded him of bones, and bones meant death. Like the silence of the yard just then.

Clutching the cloth-covered tray of buns and other goodies his mum had asked him to take to Old Annie in exchange for a dozen eggs (the old woman always refused money), Sean walked slowly and cautiously through that silence to the back door. The cottage was dark, but that wasn't unusual. Old Annie never had any lights on.

"Seen it all before, I 'ave," she'd once said when he told her how dark it was in there. "No need for no lights!"

Now, in the creepy silence, it was like the cottage itself had given up on life, its carcass soon to be overrun by the rampant shrubs enshrouding it, its door threatened by the tangle of a rose bush that had long-since forgotten how to make roses. And there was the wheel-less wheel barrow and the broken garden fork – all these things, so familiar to Sean, now seemed full of menace. Before knocking on the door he turned. His frightened gaze searched the still yard. Not a 'chicken' in sight!

"Well now, young Sean. What a pleasure it be to see you round 'ere!"

Sean fair jumped out of his skin

“I sees you comin’ up yon path an’ I say to myself ‘ ‘e be bringin’ they buns an’ all they goodies an I ain’t got no eggs for ‘im this time!”

Sean stared at Old Annie and forced his lips into a weak smile.

“But I’ll ‘ave ‘em anyways, they buns, I says to misself, ‘cause young Sean here, ‘e won’t want to be a-tellin’ ‘is mum the sad story of it all. ‘E be a good lad, be young Sean, an’ not the type to go upsettin’ ‘is mum like that. So I says to misself, lets jus’ see what Virginia can do – an’ all by ‘erself’.”

Old Annie winked at Sean, but he had no idea what she on about. He only knew that Virginia was the woman’s favourite hen.

“Oh, there’s me yakkin’ on and you won’t be knowin’ what the old bird’s talkin’ about!”

Old Annie chuckled.

“Be a darlin’ an’ put they buns in the kitchen, then I’ll tell you why there b’ain’t be no a-cluckin’ an’ a-scratchin’ in the yard no more.”

Sean, gripping the tray tightly for fear that some invisible ghost would reach out from the dark wall and grab it, followed the tap-tap-tapping figure into that musty, grey room at the back of the cottage...the one she called her ‘kitchen’ and that always smelt of old cabbages. He put the tray carefully down on the top of the sloping wooden table.

“Mum says there’s no hurry about the tray,” Sean said, re-discovering his courage. “Any time will do, she says.”

“Arrh, she be a right angel, that mum of yours.”

Sean smiled. He agreed with Old Annie.

“Now you sit yourself down there, my lad, an’ I’ll tell you a story that’ll fair chill your young bones!”

Sean was certain his bones didn't *need* chilling any more as he sat politely on one of the chairs by the table and Old Annie sat on the other.

"You be comfortable, then?" she asked, and Sean nodded. He *did* like the idea of being in on the old woman's secret, even though it was sure to be scary.

"It were early this mornin', afore 'e sun comes up an' afore 'e postman comes a-pushin' all them love letters through Old Annie's door..."

The old woman winked again and chuckled.

"...an whilst Virginia, she still be a-dreamin' 'bout that chicken 'eaven up there..."

Sean gripped the edge of his seat, for he was *certain* the story had to involve a ghost.

"I 'eard this sound outside in the yard. Like some spirit was out there searchin' for a new soul to gather in. Brushin' they trees an' they bushes with its long, cold fingers. Feelin'...always feelin'..."

Sean felt himself go all shivery inside, but he hung on to his courage for he was determined to show no fear. He stared at Old Annie's moles and wrinkles, for they were familiar to him, and that familiarity helped to smother his fear.

"An' the sound of that spirit, it come closer, Sean. Arrh, it be so close Old Annie, she could feel the breath of it comin' through 'er window. An' still not a peep from my chicken out there. But I knows there's somethin' in that yard, an' I goes to the window, see, an' I looks out..."

Old Annie paused, and Sean's eyes widened, begging her to go on.

"Nothin'! I looks out an' sees nothin'!"

She smiled at Sean, and her smile told him there *had* been something out there, in that yard so alive with dead spirits and demons.

It was *that* sort of a smile. Go on, Old Annie, *please* go on, his eyes urged.... cautiously.

“But I knows better, din I!”

She tapped the floor with one of her sticks and Sean shuddered ever so slightly.

“An’ I be right all along!”

Old Annie nodded, and Sean nodded too, not taking his eyes off the old woman.

“See, I went back to bed, but these old ears, they stays awake. B’ain’t be nothin’ that can fool an old set of ears like mine!”

Sean slowly shook his head.

“No sooner did my old ears ‘it that pillow than it started up again. All that brushin’ an’ scrapin’...an’ they lost souls a-stirrin’...”

Sean began to count the moles on Old Annie’s chin. It helped to take his mind off the fear.

“Then...”

“Six! Six moles. No, seven. That’s one *too*...I think.’

“...see... afore it ‘appens it grows quiet. Quieter than death itself, it be.”

‘Or *is* it? Perhaps it’s *not* a real mole, that one. Different colour. But what else could it be?’

Sean fixed his gaze on that thing on the old woman’s chin, his hands sore from gripping the chair. ‘A stain...a *stain*? Could it just be a stain there?’

**BANG!**

Old Annie struck her stick at the floor, shaking the dust and sending a shock-wave down Sean’s spine.



“Six...no...no...seven!” he gasped. “I’m not sure!”

The old woman smiled.

“Oh, the noise of it! The screechin’ and the hollerin’ an’ the panic. Yes, Sean, it were the sound of panic comin’ from hell, I can tell you!”

“Yes!”

Sean was rigid. His fingers ached.

“Killed the lot but for my Virginia. Know why?”

Old Annie laughed.

“We be friends, me an’ Virginia, that’s why!”

Sean just stared at the old woman. Perhaps she was even *more* dotty than he’d thought.

“An’ you knows what we does with friends in our Annie’s house, aye?”

Sean shook his head.

“Like my young friend, Sean, ‘ere?”

Sean shook his head with vigour, and made a mental note of the distance between his chair and the door.

“We lets ‘em in, see. Virginia, she always sleeps in my bedroom. Can’t ‘ave a friend sleepin’ out there, can I?”

Sean froze. He had no idea where this was leading to. But Old Annie, she just looked sadly at the tray with the buns and the goodies.

“So we can’t go upsettin’ your mum by a-tellin’ ‘er that sly old fox went an’ killed all Old Annie’s chicken, can we? All except Virginia, that is!”

Sean grinned with relief. A fox! That’s all it was – a stupid old fox!

“So we’ll just ‘ave to ask poor old Virginia to make up for the loss, aye? Think she can

lay ten times as many eggs, Sean?”

Still grinning, Sean shook his head.

“Well, if I ask ‘er very nicely...like she’d be doin’ my friend Sean ‘ere a real big favour...then maybe she’ll ‘ave you ‘alf a dozen of ‘er eggs for your mum by next week! ‘Ow’s that, Sean? You just say to your mum, Old Annie’ll ask ‘er chicken to do ‘er best. ‘Er *last* chicken, Sean. ‘Er *very* last, ‘cause Old Annie, she b’ain’t be wantin’ to feed that old devil fox no more chicken, an’ there b’ain’t be room in my little ‘ouse for more than Virginia an’ me!”

The old woman struggled back on to her feet. Sean, too, stood up.

“Now you be sure you thanks that dear mum of yours for they buns, uh? An’ come back next week for my last chicken’s eggs. *Extra* special eggs, they’ll be. Virginia’ll see to that!”

Sean listened to the tap-tap-tap of Old Annie’s stick on the ground as she followed him to the door. *Now* he found the sound comforting...but he felt sad that it would have to replace the sound of the clucking of hens in the yard as a source of comfort.

Exactly one week later Sean returned to the cottage. The quiet front yard harboured no fear for him this time. There were no ghosts or ghouls lurking behind the untidy bushes and trees. He walked boldly round to the back door and knocked loudly. Whilst waiting for the old woman to appear he tried to imagine the size of Virginia’s eggs. They were sure to be simply *huge* to make up for the loss of her dead fowl friends.

No sound! Nothing at all. He knocked and knocked. Nothing! He went round to the window in the front and peered into the darkness. He could just about make out the shape of the old woman’s armchair, but nothing stirred. There was no sign of Old Annie. He returned to the back of the cottage...to Old Annie’s bedroom window. The curtain was closed. Old Annie never slept during the day. *Never!* Sean tapped at the window, but the curtain remained drawn.

Sean didn't Old Annie again. When he came home without Virginia's eggs his mum immediately went round to the cottage. She was away for ages, and the noise of the ambulance sirens told Sean something was very wrong. When his mum *finally* returned he could feel the sadness in her.

"What's wrong, Mum?" he asked. "Is Old Annie okay?"

At first she said nothing.

"Is she okay?" the boy repeated. "And Virginia? Did she lay those extra special eggs for you? Like Old Annie said she would?"

"She's passed on," Sean's mum said at last. "Old Annie's passed on."

"You mean she's *dead*?" Sean questioned. He felt his eyes moisten. "Like her chickens after that fox came?"

"There'll be no more eggs now," Sean's mum said sadly.

"But Virginia? Old Annie's last chicken. Couldn't she stay with *us* now, Mum? Dad could make a run for her in the garden. One that'd keep her safe from that fox."

Sean's mum came over to the boy him and gently stroked his hair.

"She'll not be laying any more eggs, Sean. They found the old hen in Annie's bedroom. Maybe the old bird saw no point in carrying on with Old Annie lying there, dead in her bed. They found Virginia on the floor beside the bed."

Sean knew that in truth neither Old Annie nor her last chicken could have continued to live on in the cottage without the comfort of the clucking and scratching of the other 'chicken' in her yard. And now he was sure it hadn't *just* been a sly fox who had paid the old woman a visit that night. It had been the Devil himself, disguised as a fox...for only the Devil could have done such a thing to Old Annie and her 'chicken'.

## Shrinkage on Saturdays

Fred Jeffery

I don't know why, but Saturdays are definitely not good days for me. Things never go right midweek, which is why I should have stayed at home on the one day I have off from minding Sharon's kids.

Full of foreboding, though tempted by the lights, I drifted down the mall. Then, as temptation overcame fear, I entered the prestigious store of Mills and Markham.

Nervous? Well I do know they're keen on prosecuting those they suspect of being shoplifters. Only last week they collared this bloke for pinching a pair of trousers. I don't blame him. He'd just been drenched when one of their vans passed him in the street and showered him with dirty water?

Imagine being accused of theft! Had it been me, I would never have dared enter a shop again. Mind you, most shoplifting, they say, goes unpunished. The firms simply write it off as shrinkage and add the cost to our bills. Of course, that doesn't stop them prosecuting on suspicion and the shame of being accused would be like a prison sentence, only longer.

To add to my worries was the rumour that young Gilbert Arnside had started work there - as a store detective, would you believe? Not only is he a giant of a man, but he is also known to be thick, touchy and forever jumping to conclusions. Besides which, his mum is now running our Mothers Union!

Warily, I drifted along the aisles, carefully avoiding touching anything. Everything was enchanting and full of colour. If only I had some money...

On I went, past the chinaware section, where they have the cutest little tea-pots. Only, I didn't handle them - just admired them from a distance.

It was then that I saw Valerie Smythe. Now Val and I have been friends for years and there isn't anything, but anything that either of us wouldn't do for the other. Or would have in the old days.

But just recently, it seems, she has been going through a bad patch. Her Wally lost his job at Sprotbrough Chemicals in that last lot of redundancies and their son left home to live with a traffic warden.

On top of that it seems Val went and left the police force. At the time it seemed suspicious: chiefly because I was not told why. And you don't like to ask, do you? Just in case...

I felt I must have a word with her and see how she was coping, so I hurried after her. Another reason for leaving the store pretty quickly was the sight of big Gilbert lumbering along behind the displays, obviously intent on detaining somebody and I did not want to be anywhere near when he pounced. Well, suppose it was somebody I knew...

As you will recall, the counter where they have the dress jewellery in Mills and Markhams is almost on your way out. Daft, but still...

Anyway, imagine my horror when I saw Val, apparently examining the display, suddenly slip a brooch in her pocket.

And almost under the nose of Gilbert, at that.

What was I to do? Obviously, she was under a tremendous strain - but being arrested and appearing in court, like a common criminal - well, she would never get another job - and her reputation... ! It didn't bear thinking about.

Actually, I didn't think. Quick as I could, I rushed up and flung my arms around her.

Gilbert closed in for the kill.

Val!' I exclaimed. 'It is so good to see you.'

She tried stepping back, but I held her tight.

'Give me a call tonight,' she blurted out - and all but crashed through the glass doors.

Gilbert strode through in pursuit and, anxious to see what would happen, I followed nervously behind.

'One moment, madam,' the man drawled officiously. 'I am a store detective for Mills and Markhams and I have reason to believe you have an item on your person for which you have not paid.'

Val shrugged and felt in her pocket for the brooch. Only it wasn't there.

Obvious, really. I had it.

'Not quite the right words, Gilbert,' she was saying. 'But I don't appear to have the brooch. Oh hell. I must have dropped it.'

Valerie!' I tried, but she was too flummoxed to talk to me. I wanted to tell them about the brooch, only nobody would listen. How I wanted to help!

And how they wanted to get rid of me.

'Gilbert,' she gabbled, 'this is an old friend, Dinah Hamilton. Dinah, this is Gilbert Arnside. I'm a security adviser now and we were just having a practice run. But there's something wrong, so we will have to go back into the store. You know my number. Give me a ring, eh? Sometime?'

And then they were gone.

Filled with emotion at what had happened, I just stood there, sniffing. I had pulled out my handkerchief when this young lady in purple tights and one of M and M's skinny-short uniforms came up to me. Judging by her age she had probably just been taken on for the Christmas rush.

All polite and proper, the interfering busy-body said, 'You appear to have dropped something, madam. Is this yours?'

I looked down at the brooch, still on its card.

Like a fool I answered, 'Er - yes. Why?'

'Because, madam,' she declared, 'I am an employee of Mills and Markham and the brooch was not in one of our standard bags. May I see your receipt?'

Naturally, I went as red as a London bus. Obviously, she thought Gilbert had arrested Val and that I was an accomplice.

As I gaped round at the gathering crowd, she added, 'Would you mind stepping this way? Thank you so much.'

What could I do? I just fainted.

## **Oh Mrs Dunmore**

Beryl Jones

(New Year Party 2008 runner-up)

‘Mrs Dunmore was last seen talking to a young man at Waterloo Station before boarding the 16.20 train to Exeter.’ These headlines, splashed across the Evening Standard, were accompanied by a rather grainy photograph of the lady in question and the following description. ‘Aged 49, 5’ 6” tall, round face, heavily built, short red curly hair and wearing a full length red coat, blue scarf and toting a large ‘Betty Boop’ shoulder bag.’

At around three in the afternoon, ten days prior to the above headlines Mrs Dunmore left the offices of Malcolm Moore Finance stating she was going to the bank, the hairdressers, then home. Malcolm, arriving back from his so called business trip to Las Vegas found that not only had Mrs Dunmore not been in the office all the previous week but no one, apart from trying her mobile a couple of times, appeared concerned about her absence.

Elaine Dunmore, a childless widow, had worked for Malcolm Moore Finance for 8 months before her disappearance and during that time had made herself indispensable. The ill wind that struck the previous incumbent, who sustained a compound fracture of the right leg after tripping over Elaine’s ‘Betty Boop’ bag in Starbucks, had blown Elaine into the temporary exalted position of Chief Finance Officer.

Now she was missing and the police were involved.

‘You say she lived alone and had no family’ said the policeman. ‘Have you been to her home, phoned the hospitals, contacted her friends?’

‘I went to her home this morning’ interrupted Malcolm ‘at least the address she’d given. D’you know what I found constable? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Some waste ground that’s all. And I’ve tried the hospitals. Again nothing.’ He cursed.

‘I can see you’re concerned about her safety.’

Malcolm put his head in his hands. 'It's my safe keys I'm worried about more than her bloody safety. I'm waiting for the locksmith now.'

So what did happen to Mrs Dunmore? She did speak to a young man at Waterloo station but only to return a glove he'd dropped, she did board the 16.20 to Exeter but she never alighted. Instead a very attractive smartly dressed slim brunette stepped down from the first class carriage carrying, not a large 'Betty Boop' bag but, a smart brown leather holdall. All that was recognisable of Mrs Dunmore, should anyone care to look closely, were her ice green eyes. To all intents and purposes she had vanished from the face of the earth.

Liz Jordan, aka Elaine Dunmore, had planned her revenge on Malcolm Moore with deliberation and forethought setting herself a target of 12months. That she achieved her goal in eight was an added bonus.

Apart from his small legitimate financial company Malcolm Moore was a loan shark of the very worst kind. His enforcers had beaten Liz's companion and friend so badly he was still in hospital after almost a year. It didn't matter that her friend was a con man and trickster he hadn't deserved that beating.

Liz's life for 8 months had been one big act. An accomplished actress and make-up expert Liz had used her expertise to great effect and had utilised her late aunt's name and National Insurance Number to further muddy the waters.

The night before her disappearance Liz worked late, transferring funds to various off-shore banks and sending Paid in Full statements to the majority of Malcolm's clients. She also cleared out the safe. As well as some cash Liz also took Malcolm's precious Black Book, a book the Inland Revenue never knew existed but were very pleased to receive a few days later. She also took the office lap-top.

In a rehabilitation hospital a few miles away a certain patient smiled as he read the headlines and then quietly got on with his basket weaving.