

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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## Diary

SCPSW New Year Party  
24<sup>th</sup> January 2009

## 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.**

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# THE SCPSW AUTHOR

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## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

May you all have a peaceful and happy Christmas and may the New Year bring you health, wealth and happiness. The wealth may come from your success in our competitions and thus be modest, but don't let that deter you. Whether or not you are arachnophobic, Robert the Bruce should be a lesson to us all – if at first you don't succeed and all that jazz. Look at some of your old work and see if you can improve it, if it is work that has failed to win previous competitions and you have the benefit of a critique, take it with a pinch of salt, but give the critic some credit and try again.

Regrettably we are at that time of year when once again we are asking you to raid the larder, biscuit tin, or wherever you keep your savings. It is renewal of membership time once more and I trust you will have found benefit in your membership of fellow scribblers, such that you will send Beryl your subscription for 2009, due on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009. With Beryl's help we have kept our financial head above water, but any additional offering from those who can spare it would be much appreciated.

Your committee is currently actively reviewing work that has been published in Author during the past 20 years. Although this will depend upon subjective judgement it is hoped that we will be able to select a representative sample of the best of our work over this period. This will be published as an Anthology, with the financial and practical support of the Civil Service Insurance Society. We hope to complete our selection by the end of the year, so I will report progress in the next issue of Author. It may even have something of mine in it, though I'm not holding my breath.

We always have an enjoyable time at our New Year Party, reciting our poems and stories and casting our votes for those we think best, hoping to win something nice in the raffle, eating and drinking the, albeit it modest, fare provided and enjoying the company of our peers. So I hope to see hundreds of you at this event in 2009.

Winner of the Gompers' Article Competition was Perry McDaid, from Derry in Northern Ireland, to whom we offer our congratulations.

## **Chairman's Chat**

Terry Rickson

A number of literary figures have been in the news recently. One of them, Andrew Motion, admitting to the dreaded condition known as 'writer's block.' "Tell me about it!" I can hear many of you saying, myself included. Our esteemed Poet Laureate warranted not only a mention in the press but in addition a slot on Radio 4, something to which few of us could even dream of aspiring! I met him once, exchanging a few pleasant words whilst he signed copies of my collections of his work.

Another writer in the news has been the American, Annie Proulx, author of several acclaimed novels, including 'The Shipping News' and collections of short stories set in Wyoming. One of the latter, 'Close Range,' contained the novella 'Brokeback Mountain,' made into a highly successful film in 2005 by the director, Ang Lee. The film earned certain opprobrium in some quarters, being dubbed 'a gay cowboy movie.' Ms. Proulx has said that since the film went on circulation, it had become a constant source of irritation in her private life and that she had been bombarded with "...ghastly manuscripts and pornish re-writes of the story. Fortunately, the experience has not prevented her from completing the third and final collection in the series, 'Fine Just the Way it is,' published in June of this year.

On a happier note, the young Indian writer, Aravind Adiga, has won the Man Booker with his first novel 'The White Tiger,' a tale encompassing the vast and disregarded low caste in Indian society. I read with interest too that the Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk, once regarded as an enemy of the state under Article 301 of Turkey's penal code, won the Nobel Prize for literature. His 'crime', so called, had been to speak out about the Armenian massacres carried out during the First World War, a very touchy subject in Turkey. Pamuk has since led the Turkish delegation to the 2008 Frankfurt Book Fair.

The run up to Christmas is a grand time for books, both for adults and children - I always look forward to the prospect of being in receipt of one or two Book Tokens which I can use on a book of choice any time during the following year. So, a happy Christmas and good wishes for the New Year and trust you may enjoy a 'good read' as well as some pleasant hours writing.

## Letters

I believe the most enjoyable letters are those that involve controversy and invite contrary opinion. It is not therefore in the expectation of agreement that I offer the following comment, but rather to stir a few comments from others. On the other hand, it may merely confirm that I have entered my second childhood and my subsequent comment is irrelevant.

Knowing what children of certain age groups read is something that is easily established by those who teach children of specific ages, librarians and those who have children/grandchildren of that age, but for the rest of us it requires research, probably from the same people.

In my view it is better if creative writers were invited to write stories for young people and to let those who are expert in such matters decide the age group for which such stories would be suitable. If this is so, I suggest that future Froud Memorial Children's Story Competitions do not specify the age for which such stories are intended. This would, in my opinion, both increase the number of our members who would enter the competition and the number of non-members, i.e. potential new member entrants.

My apologies to Betty Griffin for taking so long to type her handwritten article. In this article on Gordon Gompers, Betty reminds us that he did not like our change of title, so perhaps it is time to resurrect the issue. The reason cited for the change was that the word Author in our title may deter new members from joining, but we lack evidence one way or the other. To those members who have joined us since we changed to our current title, I invite their comment as to whether or not they would have been put off if we had been still called the Society of Civil Service Authors. (Pop it in with your membership renewal if you wish and Beryl will pass it to me.)

Adrian Danson

## **SCPSW Annual Luncheon 2008**

We were fortunate to have author Jean Bowden, who writes under the nom-de-plume of Tessa Barclay, as our guest speaker at our annual luncheon. This was held in the Civil Service Club London, on 18th October. We were treated to a feast of crime writing. Her theme was 'The Charm of the Detective Novel'. Jean covered an impressive range of crime writing and, as a crime writer herself, spoke with authority. Her newly published book "To Die For" is a crime novel and is the latest in a list of over 100 novels that she has had published to date

Her expert talk appealed to readers and writers and the recommended reading that Jean inspired us with hopefully will spur us on to try our hand at crime writing.

Members attended from all over the UK, from Norfolk, Suffolk, Durham, Lancashire, Dorset, Kent, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Devon, Hampshire, Lincolnshire and London.

Ethel Corduff

## **Writer of the Year 2008**

John Bird from Solihull has been named Writer of the Year for 2008. The award is in recognition of John's overall literary output, an impressive body of work. Particularly for his novel, 'Alby and Me' and for his published poetry collection 'Life Lines'. 'Alby and Me' was long listed for the Waverton Good Read Award for the best debut novel of 2007-8, which had excellent reviews. His poem 'Stephen Hawking FRS' won first prize in the Writers Forum Poetry Competition.

John has published and broadcast poetry, plays, television comedy material, short stories, travel articles and non fiction books. Non fiction books include 'A new career after forty'. His academic study 'Control of enemy alien civilians in Great Britain 1914-1918' has been acclaimed as the most thorough and scholarly account and used as a prime source of reference on the subject.

John has worked in journalism, public relations and education, overseas as well as the United Kingdom. He has worked for the Government Information Service, a major research organisation and a British university. He has a Ph D in History from London University.

John was unable to attend the Annual Literary lunch to receive his award, as he is recovering from an operation. We wish him a speedy recovery. More information on John's publications can be seen on his website [www.johncbird.co.uk](http://www.johncbird.co.uk)

Ethel Corduff

## **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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### **Review of the Year**

The year draws to a close with the Poetry Workshop in a healthy and vibrant condition. Membership numbers have increased to 86, and all our activities have proved well supported and popular. A report on the PW's main activities follows:

#### **PW Weekend**

The annual Poetry Workshop Weekend took place in July at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in the suburbs of Birmingham. Fifteen members attended to enjoy a varied programme of poetry-based activities. Several unfortunate incidents made the venue less welcoming than the previous year, so it was decided to look for accommodation elsewhere. Consequently, we are booked into the Hillscourt Conference Centre at Rednal, Birmingham for 2009. Hopefully this will prove to be a more congenial and permanent location for the Poetry Workshop. The date of next year's Weekend is 31 July-2 August 2009, and a Booking Form will be included in the winter issue of **wavelengths**.

#### **Waves 2008**

The annual showcase anthology of PW members' work goes from strength to strength. Liz Rowlands has been the editor of the anthology for the last five years, but at the 2008 AGM she announced her intention of standing down. The editor for 2009 will be Angus Livingstone. See the winter issue of **wavelengths** for details of how to submit work for consideration for the 2009 anthology.

#### **Bill Barnes Competition**

The competition, named in memory of the founder of the Poetry Workshop, attracted a total of 58 poems this year. At the time of sending this Poetry Page to Adrian the results weren't known, but the

winners will be announced in a future issue of **wavelengths** and of course in **The Author**.

### **Postal Folio**

There are four circulating postal folios in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. There are 24 members in the existing folios, but there is room for any member who would like to take part. Anyone interested should contact me, Mike Boland, at the address above or by e-mail to [pw@gothicgarden.freemove.co.uk](mailto:pw@gothicgarden.freemove.co.uk)

### **Wavelengths**

This is the quarterly magazine of the Poetry Workshop. Running to at least 20 pages each edition, it is issued free to all members of the Poetry Workshop. The winter issue contains the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham (by Nina Mattar on the Lebanese writer Kahil Gibran), poems by members, an article on Wilfred Owen by Terry Rickson and all the news of the Poetry Workshop's activities.

### **Subscriptions**

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop will fall due on 1 January. A renewal form will be enclosed with **wavelengths**. As decided at the AGM, the fee for 2009 has been increased to £5 for Society members.

### **Change in Officers**

As of this year's AGM, Liz Rowlands has resigned as Chairman of the Poetry Workshop after seven years in the role. During that time, the PW has gone from strength to strength, and is a far more vibrant organisation than before. She has been replaced by Barbara Stewart. In the autumn issue of **wavelengths** I announced my own intention to resign from the post of Events Co-ordinator at next year's AGM, although I will continue to edit **wavelengths** and pen this Poetry Workshop Page in **The Author**. I would like to wish the new Officers my good wishes for the future.

This is the start of a new era for the PW, with new people at the helm, and a new venue for the Weekend. I'm sure that this time next year I will be reporting on another successful year for the Poetry Workshop.



## **The Poetry Workshop**

If you are a member of the Society, have an interest in poetry but have not yet joined the Poetry Workshop - what are you waiting for!

The cost of membership is only £5, and for this small sum 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

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, Terry Rickson, at the address above. Cheques should be made out to: SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account.

### **Dates to Remember**

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>1 December 2008</b>      | <b>wavelengths # 17 publishing date</b> |
| <b>1 January 2009</b>       | <b>PW Subscriptions due</b>             |
| <b>1 February 2009</b>      | <b>deadline for wavelengths #18</b>     |
| <b>1 March 2009</b>         | <b>wavelengths # 18 published</b>       |
| <b>31 March 2009</b>        | <b>deadline for Waves 2009</b>          |
| <b>31 July - 2 Aug 2009</b> | <b>PW Weekend</b>                       |

I'd like to wish all members of the Society a very Happy Christmas and a successful New Year.

## **Poetry Pages**

Edited by Terry James

### **Heron**

Norman Bissett

Camouflaged by reeds  
and almost invisible,  
with its wedge-shaped head  
sunk on its shoulders,  
waiting for tiddlers and trout  
in the shallow loch,  
it stands immobile  
as an undertaker's mute,  
rooted to the spot.

A glance betrays it,  
the very slightest movement  
of its snake-like neck

and immediately  
its position is revealed,  
its cover broken.

Slowly, languidly  
flapping great grey dark-tipped wings,  
it takes to the air

and lumbers away  
heading over the water  
like a refugee.

### **Rush Hour**

Steve Glason

Clapham Junction - interchange  
People find it very strange  
Not stopping - Motspur/Worcester Park Information - in the dark.

Departure screens so anxious - scanned  
Cancelled trains - not fully manned  
Shepperton and Kingston sought  
Back to houses mortgaged bought.

Rumour has it - word of mouth  
Broken rail at Chessington South  
News is greeted with surprise  
Delays are mounting - tempers rise.

Rush Hour patterns ebb and flow  
(Journey - lengthy - rather slow)  
I pen these thoughts just waiting on  
A service failed near Wimbledon.

## **Love Came**

Angus Livingstone

Love came like a mutual friend  
who joined our group one day –  
sat us together, made us laugh,  
hold hands then teased us away,  
and stopped the tick of time.

Then this master of magic and love  
reduced the world to two –  
the oneness of you and I, complete,  
and the rest that wasn't you,  
and time did not hold sway.

I knew our friend was there for us  
each giddy day and night –  
for never was a love so sure  
or lives so truly right  
while time became the now.

But one night under a cruel moon  
while he looked elsewhere,  
you sneaked away without adieu  
to find a new affair  
three long years ago.

But today in town. I saw her. I saw her.  
She smiled. How could she smile?  
I'd no idea what my face revealed,  
as we agreed it had been a while  
since we were, you know...

But she had measured it in years,  
while I in days and tears.

## **Pick-Me-Ups**

Norman Bissett

A sonnet  
a day  
keeps depression  
away  
and the doldrums  
at bay.

A haiku  
at night  
gives the Black Dog  
a fright  
and keeps everything  
bright.

## **The Folk Singer**

Phil Ireland

Petal plays her song for you  
On her old Spanish guitar or battered tambourine,  
She will woo you with her words –  
Laced in Belgian cotton.  
At first she'll tell you of  
A love she finds hid in summer's dawn  
And then about the war she's waged  
In search of true world peace.  
Some songs she'll sing about her many lovers,  
The ones who died in Vietnam,  
The ones who broke her heart,  
The one who took her parts  
And made her whole again.

Soon you'll find her music lingers on,  
In time, until it finds its place  
In the embroidery she has sewn into space.

Petal sings her songs for you  
And even when she's down  
She'll thrill you and surprise you

And bless your mind with happiness  
As each new trick she tries –  
Until she brings us round  
To the point where emotion only is left  
As its own inhibition.

She'll whisper on the air between  
Filled with the heady perfume of her poetry.  
The words, the music and the dancers sing  
But still there's nothing left in you  
That Petal does not know  
Because she's brought emotion to a stand  
And holds you, gently in her hand.

**Uplift**  
Norman Bissett

Not Corcovado,  
Parthenon nor Iguazu  
boasts such a vista.

In an easy chair,  
minding the Christmas shopping,  
I scan Princes Street

like a peregrine  
perched in a leather wing chair—  
Tennyson's eagle,

surveying the crags  
and ancient crenellations.  
Silver filigree

festoons the branches  
of invisible elm trees,  
silhouetted trunks.

A bust of Gladstone  
occupies the mantelpiece,  
surrounded by books

on theology  
in the old Liberal Club—  
philosophical

tomes aimed at uplift.  
It's now part of Debenham's.  
Climb to the first floor.

Wend your way eastwards,  
past the vast picture window  
brimming with Castle.

It's on the same floor  
as foundation garments, bras  
offering uplift.

## **Woe**

Steve Glason

Summer Season - its the norm  
For Southwest Trains to be on form  
Cancellations - "Missing Guard"  
Hits the public very hard.

Standing thus quite lost - forlorn  
Commuter - Malden Manor born  
Stiffly bites his upper lip  
And to his bosom - laptop grip.

Journey short can be so long  
When everything at once goes wrong  
"Driver sick" - "There is no crew,"  
Chaos reigns at Waterloo.

Platforms crowded - not a sound  
It always happens homeward bound  
Making people very late  
Tolworth reached at ten to eight.

Misery! - a travelling mess  
On top of office daily stress  
From this suburban Surrey Core  
Rising chorus - "Please no more!"

## **Jailbirds**

Angus Livingstone

Was it random fate or a turn I'd had  
that's left me sharing this prison cell? Oh no,  
I rather think it was blind love gone bad.

I devour books and books - I want to know –  
while he stands and stares up at the sky:  
stands and stares because our time is slow.

He swears and says “If only Ah could fly  
like these bastard birds - it isnae fair.”

I wanted, but lacked the courage, to reply:

I too admire these masters of the air,  
but don't repeat the common view to me,  
that birds are free, and fly without a care.

Only a wild bird, caged and then set free  
can know something of freedom when first it spreads  
its wings. But then no bird could ever be

privy to the prison we build within our heads,  
confining us by fears - a frightening place –  
or know the helpless feeling 'm our beds,

trapped in the arms of passion's sweet embrace.

Both these plights leave us incarcerated.

And unless we fully know the opposite case

- the yin of the yang; the mortal with the uncreated –  
our partial knowledge will mislead and mystify  
like rising smoke that's swirled and dissipated

in the cold high winds where eagles fly.

I can do nought for now but read and wait  
within my prison cell and ponder why

human love supports this paradox of fate –  
spurned lovers all know how to hate.

(Terry asked me to mention the Kent & Surrey Poetry Soc open poetry comp., with prizes of £1350 - £4 per poem closing date 31/12/09. See [www.kentandsussexpoetrysociety.org](http://www.kentandsussexpoetrysociety.org) or write to Organiser at 26 Courtlands, Teston, Maidstone, Kent ME18 5AS. Ed)

## **The Risks of Being an Editor**

Jenny Chamier Grove

Whenever I catch myself about to write the word “sit” I feel a pang of anxiety. This is not because of some deep-buried childhood experience but because of instructions I received while working in a large government department.

I don't think I'd be in breach of the Official Secrets Act if I admitted that, at the time, I was the Assistant Editor of the staff newspaper of the Department of Trade & Industry, working for an Editor - I'll call him Geoff - whose background included the R.A.F. and provincial newspapers. It was the early 1980s. Norman Tebbit was about to become our Secretary of State. The office contained no computers. Stories were sent to the printers to be set up in type and I soon learnt that Geoff harboured certain suspicions against the printers - namely, that they were out to get him.

‘Don't use the word “sit,” Chick!’ Geoff would say with asperity, drawing a red line through the offending word.

Eventually he explained this cryptic prohibition. Geoff was convinced that, faced with the word “sit,” the typesetters would inevitably insert an “h” into it.

I was soon to learn that his misgivings were not unfounded. Each month before publication we would scrutinize the printers' page proofs only to find that the same misspellings occurred - “Her Majesty's *Stationary* Office” was a favourite.

Even so, I was sometimes perplexed by Geoff's superstitions. My convent school education meant I was not well versed in the vernacular. Words which seemed innocuous to me were sometimes banned by editorial decree, such as any reference to “bangs.”

However, while Margaret Thatcher's government got to grips with the Falklands war, the miners' strike, oil spills, and pay disputes and there were those in the lesser labyrinths of power who, like me, were wrestling with words. A campaign to replace bureaucratic circumlocutions with plain English was set up. A minister, Kenneth Baker, edited a book of poems. Meanwhile I kept a sharp eye on the page proofs to ensure that Permanent Secretary Sir Leo P. had not been described as “Surly old P.”

But when I eventually became editor, challenges came from an entirely different direction.

The first inkling of trouble to come occurred while I was at the printers, checking the Wanted and For Sale columns. I was searching for misspellings when the Head Printer, a heavily-built lugubrious man, hesitated behind my shoulder.

‘Are you sure this one's O.K.?’ he demanded, his stubby finger prodding the Wanted column.



‘Fourth member wanted for Pop Group,’ I read out. ‘I don’t see anything wrong with that. DTI is a big department. There are loads of clerical assistants who want to start their own bands.’

‘And what’s the band called now?’ he persisted.

‘The Three Skins,’ I read from the hand-written form.

‘So what will it be called when they get a fourth member?’

‘Oh.’

After that I always took the Head Printer’s advice, but, as I was soon to find out, not even he was infallible.

A few months later I received a classified advertisement which read: For Sale, Second-hand electric organ, very little used, £250 o.n.o., quoting an internal telephone number. Musical instruments featured regularly in the For Sale column so I let it through.

But scarcely had the newspaper been distributed throughout the department before my telephone rang and a shrill woman’s voice launched into a virulent tirade.

‘This is Mr X’s P.A.’

Mr X was a particularly testy Under Secretary.

‘Thanks to you we’ve wasted our entire morning. Mr X is going to make a serious complaint about you and your staff,’ she went on vehemently.

Actually I didn’t have any staff, apart from Rita Shah, my highly efficient clerical assistant. Margaret Thatcher had called for cuts and when I’d been promoted to Editor, my post of Assistant Editor had been abolished, as part of the process of “natural wastage.”

‘Don’t you check your classified advertisements?’ the strident tones continued.

I soon learnt that Mr X, the Under Secretary whose telephone number had been quoted in the For Sale column, did not own an electric organ, for sale or otherwise.

‘You must have known that £250 is a ludicrously low price?’ the dressing down continued.

I hadn’t.

But others had, it seemed.

Apparently the electric organ had attracted an unprecedented response. Most callers, on learning the true state of affairs, had masked their disappointment very well, it seems, some so well that they had even lapsed into laughter, which was more than could be said for the Under Secretary.

The experience left me with a profound impression of the power of words but also with the fear that I might be about to learn more about the meaning of the phrase “natural wastage.”

## **SCPSW ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2009**

### **Lewis Wright Short Story Competition**

Maximum length 3,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £4.00 per story. Prizes as follows: 1st: £50.00; 2nd £30.00.

### **Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition**

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the George Farley Prize). Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.00 for first and £1.50 for each subsequent poem. Prizes: 1st: £30.00; 2nd: £20.00.

### **Vincent Brennan Travel Article**

Maximum length 2,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.50 per entry.

Prize: one only £30.00

### **George Farley Prize**

For light humorous verse only. Judges and sponsors, Pamela Farley, Aline Shee and Jean Squires (daughters of George Farley). Judges look for the qualities their father valued in humorous verse – “wit, clever construction and interesting language”. Entries returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Prize £25.

### **Notes for Entrants to all Competitions**

- 1 Unless entrants state on entering competitions that they do not wish their entry to be published, all winning entries will be published in Author if space permits. The entrants name will also be quoted, unless entrants advise on entry that they prefer to use a pen name.
- 2 Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of the submission. Entries exceeding specified number of lines or words will be disqualified.
- 3 All entries should bear only the pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting: pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. (Optional for serving members, Department and staff association for potential publicity use.)
- 4 All entries should be sent to Competition Secretary, Ron Jeffreys, 186 Lewis Flats, Lisgar Terrace, London W14 8SQ not later than 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007.

R C Jeffreys  
Competition Secretary

## Portugal Dreaming

Sheridan Brenchley

(Winning entry of the Vincent Brennan Travel Competition – 2008)

“I’m glad you made it,” said Doug, hugging me as we left Porto airport on our way to our hotel. Twenty-four hours earlier I’d been in the middle of a mysterious bout of sickness and wondered whether I would make it to the airport.

Fortunately it had passed and although I felt weak we had made it to Portugal. We hailed a taxi outside the airport and half an hour later we were at the Hotel de Paris, a wonderful old building that proclaimed it had been a hotel since 1883. Some of the previous guests seem to have left a few souvenirs behind. On our floor there was an antique sideboard, a wind up HMV gramophone complete with record, a pre electric Singer sewing machine and a huge water jug and stand, so necessary before the age of mass plumbing. The breakfast room was a strange mix of old and new. The windows were modern and double glazed, but the ceiling was wooden and elaborately decorated. Two huge old walnut dressers faced each other as guests slipped quietly in and out of the room.

Porto, Portugal’s second city, lies on the northern bank of the river Douro. It has no famous historical sights, but the old quarter has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is slowly being restored to something of its former glory. The metro is currently being extended to try to combat rising traffic queues and the central area is pretty much a building site. We did the usual touristy things like looking at the Cathedral and climbing the Clerical Tower to enjoy wonderful views over the city to the Douro.

“Are you up to visiting one of the Port houses?” asked Doug on the second day.

“Of course,” I replied, even though my appetite had not yet returned to normal levels. The weather was warm and sunny and we walked down to the river and crossed the much photographed

Pont Dom Luis I, a two tired iron bridge that carries cars and pedestrians to the suburb of Vila Nova de Gaia. More than 60 port lodges are housed here, their huge neon signs proclaiming their

identity. Taylors, Dows, Sandeman, Cockburns I knew, but Calem, Ferreira, Barros?

“Some of them aren’t open at the weekend, but Graham’s is,” said Doug. Fine by me, except that Graham’s was at the top of the hill.

“The view will be worth it,” said Doug soothingly. We eventually reached the large, elegant building and went into the cool and vast interior. I hadn’t drunk port for years and really knew nothing about it, except the time-honoured image of crusty old men enjoying port and cigars after a sumptuous dinner in some country house.

We were treated to a brief introduction to the highly complex world of port wine making. The Douro Valley has the oldest demarcated wine region in the world and as the rock is mainly of slate it holds the warmth from the sun to slowly release it at night. Temperatures in the summer can touch 116F, but equally in the winter can go to –20F. Only a small portion of the grapes grown in the Douro are turned into port. The grapes are picked, by hand, between mid-September and mid-October but barely a few days after fermentation has begun the “must” is run off into vats and Douro grape brandy added. The grape sugars, which have formed are left intact within the wine and this gives port its distinctive taste. The resultant brew is stored in lodges dotted around the Douro Valley. The region’s cold winters help to clear the wine, removing some cloudiness, which accompanies fermentation. The following March the wine is shipped to the lodges in Porto and we were standing in front of some of the huge casks in the Graham Lodge. Ready for a taster? We certainly were and I now knew that young port is red and as it ages it becomes ruby, then it lightens to the colour of deep amber and finally spun gold, or tawny as it is known in the trade.

We tried white port, usually served chilled in Portugal as an aperitif, then a ruby port and finally a tawny, ten year old port. The latter was as smooth as silk as it slipped down my throat and I said with a deep sigh. “That’s for me I’m going to buy two bottles.” A few minutes later we were walking down the hill. The view of the old quarter of Porto was attractive in the golden glow of late afternoon and my stomach felt back to normal. I was feeling quite content, then suddenly and inexplicably the ground came up and hit me. My chin and knee took the brunt and I tore a strip off the skin of my little finger. I let out

a yell and Doug turned to see me sprawling in the road. He looked horrified and helped me slowly to my feet.

“What happened?” I mumbled mystified.

“There was a small, raised ring in the road, I thought you’d seen it.”

“I hadn’t,” I muttered darkly, thinking that Porto was becoming a dangerous obstacle course.

Thank goodness you had the bottles of port.” I limped over to a café and cleaned myself and my wounds as best I could. My knee was sore the following day, but we resumed our sightseeing and took a tram ride to the mouth of the Douro where we sat in a beachside café and watched the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash against the rocks.

After two days in Porto we picked up a hire car and headed north to the Peneda-Geres National Park. Never heard of it? Neither had I until I bought a guidebook on Portugal and saw some photographs of a beautiful landscape called the Minho. On the way we stopped at the famous church of Bom Jesus just outside Braga. It was built in the eighteenth century, but is probably most famous for its stunning and elaborate baroque staircase which can be climbed on either side of grey granite and white washed surrounds, which act as a backdrop to fountains at each level. There are over three hundred steps and I managed them even with my gammy leg.

For the next couple of hours we drove along near deserted roads until we reached our hotel, called a Pousada. Until recently these were small, government run hotels, either former historic buildings or in this case more modern, but set in areas of great beauty or charm. The Pousada in the hamlet of Canicada was built in the style of a mountain lodge and was wonderfully peaceful. For me the view from the balcony was magical. Before us lay the Caldas Valley, created by damming the River Caldas and creating a lovely lake surrounded by steep wooded slopes. The weather was hot and sunny and we spent a couple of days walking in the southern part of the park. We visited the spa town of Geres, which was having a spring festival and witnessed an odd spectacle of two bulls brought together in the hope they would fight each other. Although quite fearsome looking with long horns the cattle had been domesticated for so long it had obviously bred much of the aggression out of them and they managed only a couple of half-

hearted lunges at each other. This was not the last we would see of these rather engaging creatures.

Our next destination was another Pousada, this time in the northeast town of Braganca. The roads we travelled on were almost deserted and even though Portugal has enjoyed twenty years of European Union membership and all the economic benefits this brings, Northern Portugal, particularly the area known as the Tras-O-Montes, has known great hardship and as a result huge waves of emigration to the Americas and South Africa. We had no particular plans for our time in Braganca, other than to explore the town and find out about the nearby Montesinho Natural Park, where we planned to do a little walking. On the first night instead of eating in the Pousada, (our room had stunning views of the castle and almond groves beyond it) we decided to go into town and find a restaurant.

“Where is everyone?” I asked as we walked along near deserted streets. “Probably watching the football.”

“What football?”

“Arsenal against Barcelona.”

“I think they just don’t eat out very often.”

There were few restaurants we fancied going in, then I suddenly saw a sign above a row of shops in the main square. The menu looked interesting, so we went up a flight of stone stairs which were flanked by blue and white tiles.

We stepped into another world. A world of chandeliers, wooden embossed ceilings and creaky floorboards. The owner greeted us warmly and showed us to the non-smoking section of the restaurant. We were surprised by the lack of diners, as apart from a couple nearing the end of their meal, there were only three other people in the spacious dining room. However the strains of Mozart drifting across the room and the huge old wooden Portuguese dressers convinced us that this was going to be a good evening. I chose wild rabbit and Doug had wild boar, but before we got to that we were served garlic bread. We had noticed that the Portuguese get the palate warmed up by serving delicious but filling hors d’oeuvre. Still it would have been churlish not to eat them so we were half full when our main course arrived. Both our dishes were huge and very tasty, although the

Portuguese habit of sprinkling salt crystals over the vegetables before serving the meal would have had health officials back home in a frenzy of agitation. We were too full for a dessert and were surprised when the owner, in a gesture of apology that Barcelona had beaten Arsenal in the last moments of the game, brought out a bottle of port and proceeded to offer us two free glasses of the ruby nectar! We had already consumed a fair amount of wine so we were very mellow as we walked uphill back to the Pousada.

We returned to the restaurant following night for another excellent meal and this time we managed a dessert each. It was going to be a struggle to leave Braganca. After visiting the well-preserved castle and learning that Portuguese troops had fought alongside the French in the carnage of Verdun in the First World War, we moved north into the Montesinho Natural Park. We managed to find a room in a new Residencial (small hotel) in the town of Vinhais and spent a couple of days walking in the Park. The villages are still largely based on smallholdings, but with the arrival of tractors twenty years ago and an improved road network life is now much better than before. People cultivate vines and fruit trees, particularly cherries and almonds. The pace of life still seems remarkably unhurried and we saw elderly women dressed in the traditional black costume and headscarf of the region. The mountains are less dramatic than the Peneda-Geres National Park, but the wood-swathed valleys and gorse-covered moorland have a quiet charm that is timeless. In the villages many of the lovely old houses are being restored, possibly by locals returning from working abroad.

The last part of our holiday was a few days in the Douro Valley. En route we stopped in the town of Lamego known for its 12<sup>th</sup> century castle and its baroque church modelled on the lines of the church at Braga. The castle was closed but the church was open.

“Another three hundred steps to climb?” asked Doug when we stood at the bottom of the staircase. “We could get to the church in the car.”

“That’s cheating, think how good we’ll feel at the top.” Doug was not wholly convinced and could be forgiven for thinking the whole thing was an action replay of Braga. Same fountains, same blue and white tiles, even the church looked remarkably similar. The difference was that the view from the top was much more pleasing and our

reward was sitting in the courtyard of a nearby hotel, of all things drinking Lipton's Iced Tea!

Our last Pousada was in the town of Alijo. There is a poignant statue in the middle of the town of a grape picker, his huge basket almost as big as he is. This is serious grape country and most of the steep terraced slopes of the Upper Douro Valley are covered in neat rows of vines. It is still a labour intensive industry as we found out when we visited the Fonseca vineyard, which produce all their best wines from grapes grown on their estates. We wandered through the vineyard and later sampled their late bottle vintage and their equally famous reserve blend, Bin 27. We bought more bottles to take home and the following day made our acquaintance with possibly the prettiest railway station in Europe, if not the world.

The town of Pinhao is on the River Douro and a popular embarkation point for river cruises. The small immaculate station is covered with beautiful blue and white tiles giving a pictorial history of the area. We decided to take a train more for the fun of the ride along the Douro than to get anywhere in particular. While we were waiting we enjoyed the loveliness of the river and the steep slopes covered with vines, a huge name in black letters proclaiming these to be Calem vines.

"I don't mind if the train doesn't come," said Doug, enjoying the sunshine and the tranquil scene. The train did of course come and we had a splendid ride along the river, got off, had a coffee and pastry at the tiny village of Pocinho and enjoyed the experience all over again on the way back. The following day we hired a small wooden boat for a couple of hours. It was similar to the vessels that last century brought the port wine by river from the vineyard to the port houses in Porto. Then it took eight days, now it takes only a few hours by road or rail.

That night we enjoyed our last meal in Portugal and for dessert I had a local speciality of apples poached in honey and port. Delicious. It was a great way to end a lovely holiday, due as much to the courtesy and friendliness of the Portuguese people as their superb country.



## The Red Mackintosh

Michael Smith

‘Excuse me, is this seat free?’ asked Dan.

‘Yes.’ The young woman looked up briefly, and then returned to her crossword. Her short auburn hair, sharp features and tawny eyes gave her a vulpine look.

Dan was about to place his pint of Guinness on the table when his foot slipped on something, causing him to lurch forward.

‘Oh no! My clothes are ruined!’ The woman leapt to her feet, knocking her chair over.

Dan looked in horror at her blouse and emerald green suit, then at his nearly empty beer glass. ‘I’m dreadfully sorry. I’ll pay for the cleaning, of course.’

‘You’re damned right you will, you idiot. But that’s the least of my worries. I’ll never get the job now.’ The woman was almost in tears. ‘And it’s your fault, you clumsy fool.’

‘Now look here, I’m not clumsy and I’m certainly not a fool. I slipped on something. Perhaps you dropped some food on the floor.’ He had noticed an empty plate on the table.

‘The woman’s eyes widened. ‘How dare you try to blame me.’

Dan knew he had to defuse the situation, and quickly. ‘Look, I’ll pay for the hire of another outfit for your interview.’

‘That won’t help. The interview’s in half an hour’s time. I’ve already had to change the appointment once; I can’t do it again. I’m not the only applicant, you know.’

‘Hold on a minute. I may have the solution.’ Dan shouldered his way to the bar and spoke to the barmaid.

‘Carol, do you think Brenda might have a suit the young lady could borrow for her job interview?’

The barmaid laughed. ‘You must be kidding, Dan. That girl’s half Brenda’s size. I might be able to help, though.’ She left the bar for a few moments and returned with a bright red shiny plastic mackintosh.

‘You must be mad! I’m not wearing that!’ The woman looked aghast.

Dan thrust the garment at her. 'Don't argue, you're wasting time. Just put it on. I'll go to the interview with you and explain what happened. In the circumstances, I'm sure they'll give you another slot.'

'I've got to get out of these sopping clothes first. Where's the toilet?'

'You can use the staff loo,' said Carol.

A few minutes later, the woman returned, to a chorus of wolf whistles and ribald comments. Ignoring these, she looked straight at Dan. 'Don't say a word, not one word.'

The building where she had to attend her interview was only a quarter of a mile from the pub and they arrived with five minutes to spare.

'My name is Morag McInnes,' the woman said to the girl at the reception desk. 'I have an appointment at two-thirty with Jane Ford.'

The receptionist's eyes lingered only momentarily on the mackintosh. 'Third Floor, Room 308, North Wing. If you'll sign in, I'll ring to let her know you're here.' She looked at Dan questioningly.

'I'm Dan Fraser. We're together.'

'Not any longer,' said Morag. 'I'm going up alone.'

'But...'

'But nothing. I'm going to sort this out myself.'

The receptionist looked at Dan again. 'Don't ask,' he said, and sat down in the reception area.

'Five...ten...fifteen minutes elapsed. Must be a good sign, Dan thought. Or else she's crying her eyes out in the loo. No, she's too gutsy for that.'

Morag emerged from the lift after twenty-five minutes.

'Well?' said Dan.

'An interesting encounter,' said Morag.

'I'm sure, but did you get the job? Or don't you know yet?'

'Jane said I was just the person she was looking for.'

'That's great. But what about the lurid garb?'

‘Oh that, I said there was a perfectly reasonable explanation which I would be happy to relate when appropriate and if required, but I’d rather have the interview first.’

Dan wagged his head. ‘You’re incredible. I can just see you carrying it off.’

‘It’s all about being positive. I went in determined to show her there was more to me than a cheap and flashy mackintosh. Not that I wasn’t grateful for the mac. I think I’d have been hard put to convince Jane that I was the person for the job if I’d walked in wearing just my knickers and bra.’

Dan laughed. ‘Come on, you’ve worn that mac long enough. Let’s go shopping for something more suitable.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I don’t want any more drinks thrown over me,’ said Morag as she and Dan walked into “The Feathers”, almost empty now that the lunchtime patrons had left.

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ replied Dan.

Morag was now wearing a smart royal blue suit and white blouse. She handed a plastic bag containing the red mackintosh to Carol, the barmaid. ‘Thanks for the loan.’

‘It’s not mine, I wouldn’t be seen dead in it. Someone left it on a chair a couple of weeks ago and hasn’t come back for it. How did you get on?’

Morag gave her a brief account of the afternoon’s events, and then bought drinks for the three of them.

Dan and Morag sat at the fateful table. Dan raised his glass. ‘Here’s to you, Morag. Congratulations on your success and all the best in your new job.’

‘Thank you, Dan. And I have a couple of toasts of my own. First to a very nice man to whom I apologize for what I said in anger last time we were in this hostelry. Then to a shiny red mackintosh which saved the day.’

## **The Envelope**

Angus Livingstone

(Highly commended George Farley Prize 2008)

Oh what a miserable life I lead,  
a slave to mankind's strangest need.  
I lie in a drawer in perpetual night  
until one day I see the light.  
Not a moment of heavenly glory –  
no, its the start of an end that's gory.

First I'm stuffed until I'm bloated,  
then licked by a tongue that's often coated.  
My mouth is glued, I'm slapped on my back  
before being scored by a pen that's black.  
Then thumped with a stamp like a lazy ass –  
oh the shame if it's only second class.

Then I'm taken for the walk we dread,  
to the pillar-box monster coloured red,  
fed to the mouth attached to its jaw  
my carrier calls it his mother-in-law.  
To the Royal Mail I've been tossed  
the quickest way of getting lost.

In its stomach I lie in fright,  
now hot, now cold, in dismal light.  
Two ways out of a stomach, my brother,  
and one way is just as bad as the other.  
So there I'll lie flat on my back  
till the postman stuffs me into his sack.

That's when I'm thrust from pillar to post,  
dumped at an office where they all boast  
of the sorting machine's white paper ride,  
to end in a sack, squashed tight inside.  
Finally delivered through the recipient's door  
lying bruised and battered on the floor.

Then I'm split apart to get at my letter,  
or steamed open - that's not any better.  
Some letters are kissed and then caressed  
but I'm just crumpled up with the rest.  
We envelopes are finally completely humped –

## Miriam

Oliver Eade

Miriam was different. How and why was of little importance. She was different, and that was enough for her peers to use the girl as target practice for their jibes and their cat-spit cruelty. Not a day went by when Miriam wasn't surrounded by that circle of hormone-laden adolescent girls hell-bent on making her existence at school a total nightmare. It was all verbal, of course. Not once did anyone actually lay a finger on Miriam, but those girls' words were razor sharp. They had no need for physical violence. Strange how girls unable to string together two coherently-written sentences in their mother tongue in class knew how to use words to cut a fellow pupil to the quick in the school playground...particularly in the proximity of boys.

Yes, Miriam was different. For a start she was pretty, yet she never flaunted her looks. When the testosterone-driven hulks of the school found themselves cold-shouldered by the girl they labelled her a frigid snob, moving off to find easier game whilst the female cat-pack closed in on her with its claws and canine teeth of gossip and innuendo. Miriam was also brilliant. She could hardly help that. Top in all subjects...winner of a junior national poetry contest – these things were bad enough, but what really did it for the pack was that Miriam was kind. She'd befriended a stammering, overweight girl called Mandy, and in doing so had dared to defy the pack's unwritten rules on how the class pariah should be treated. That was it! The two girls were labelled the M & M's and Miriam herself now bore the full brunt of the pack's attacks.

They knew nothing about Miriam, those girls. There was only their own hateful jealousy which had framed a distorted image of the girl their feline brains had created for themselves. Miriam's strength at shrugging off their attacks was only seen by them as an added annoyance – one that demanded an ever more determined onslaught the next time.

And the cat-pack had no idea what Miriam did after school. Every evening the girl took a detour via the derelict manor-house at the edge of town. Still owned by an old lady who had spent the greater part of

her life in a psychiatric hospital, some said it was haunted. Whatever, no one went there... no one apart from Miriam.

He was only seven when a five-year old Miriam first wandered into the ruined mansion to discover what lay beyond the dark entrance overhung by trailing brambles. Now he was eighteen.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” he said that evening, stepping aside for Miriam, and following her into the dimly lit hallway. It was as far as she ever got, that hallway, and from there she and Edgar, for that was the young man’s name, would peer in at his world as they sat on the floor and talked. She could see into the reception rooms where elegant women in wide crinoline dresses would small talk incessantly about nothing of any importance; she was able to pry into the oak-panelled dining-room where the large family would be seated downstream of Edgar’s walrus-moustached, patriarchal father with his side-burns and his long, dapper dinner jacket. She would smile at Edgar whenever the man roared out:

“Edgar! Where the devil are you, you intolerable youth?”

And Edgar would hide behind her when the family was sent to search for him, and they would giggle together. For this was their secret.

Miriam had always accepted that her friend was from a past era, but he was no ghost. They had both decided long before that this was just a time thing. A strange but natural phenomenon and something to do with that hallway in the now-ruined mansion. And it was mighty convenient for Edgar that hiding behind Miriam, unseen by his family, also rendered him invisible. He hated his authoritarian father, and more than ever that day, for he had something that he knew Miriam wouldn’t wish to hear.

“Miriam, he’s sending me off to London to stay with my uncle to get started in the family business, and then... Oh God, Miriam, then he plans to marry me off to a girl who looks like the back end of a cart horse, but who can bring wealth into the company. I can’t bear it! I beg you Miriam, come across the threshold into *my* world and we’ll escape together. We’ll build a life here, you and me.”

Miriam squeezed Edgar’s hand, and held him close to her. For some while their relationship had changed. Whilst still friends, there was a

new awareness of each other. They were no longer children. Miriam knew it as love.

“I can’t,” she said, looking away. “You know I can’t. It’s my father. There’s only the two of us since my mum died, and he’d be devastated. If I became another of those missing people...”

Her eyes were moist, for she no more wanted to lose Edgar than he her.

“The other way around?” she suggested, glancing up at him.

For a few moments her large brown eyes held him motionless.

“Miriam, how is it possible anyone could be as lovely as you?”

“That’s not an answer,” she replied, gently slapping his hand.

“In your world I’d be a nothing, Miriam. It’s different for a man, you see.”

“Is it?” the girl queried. “Why?”

“Because I’d be laughed at. Called names. They’d say I’m stupid.”

Miriam was unimpressed.

“Those things you tell me about, Miriam. Machines that fly about in the sky with people in them. Horseless carriages that travel at amazing speeds. They’d all be foreign to me.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“And your poems, Miriam. You said you wrote them just by tapping at letters on black keys. How can this be? I’d be labelled an ignoramus for not knowing!”

“I don’t mind.”

Edgar took hold of Miriam. He saw she was on the brink of tears.

“Here I can look after you. I know this world. I’ll overcome that father of mine. I can be someone. And Miriam, I want to look after you. I’d be too ashamed in that strange world of yours to have to follow you everywhere. Explain it to your father...then come with me. People in the future sound so clever. Surely he’d understand. Perhaps he’ll know of some way you could come back and visit him.”

Miriam was crying now.

“They’re not so clever where I come from, Edgar. Nothing like you. And no, my dad wouldn’t understand. He’d only get hurt. I can’t leave him.”

“Miriam, it’s tomorrow I have to go to London. I’ve no idea when I’ll be back. I know it won’t be soon. My father’s only too pleased to see the back of me.”

Miriam held on to Edgar and sobbed. All that torment at school she’d been able to put up with because she always knew Edgar would be there, waiting for her. Being with Edgar was the real world and the rest was just a nightmare. Suddenly that real world seemed to be collapsing about her, leaving only the nightmare.

“Don’t go. Please don’t. Pretend you’re ill. Anything!” she pleaded.

“You don’t know my father. He’d pack me off to London in a coffin if he had to! Just speak with your father, Miriam. Beg him to let you go. I’ll be back here, waiting, later this evening. If necessary I’ll wait all night.”

They kissed.

“There’s another thing,” Miriam said, looking away from Edgar. “We don’t really know what would happen if one of us were to cross over. If I were to go back a hundred and fifty years would I no longer exist? And you...if you came across to me you might suddenly be a hundred and fifty. It’s got to be Good-Bye, Edgar. I’m so sorry!”

Miriam just turned and ran, still weeping.

She couldn’t imagine her life without Edgar. Although no one else knew about him, and although they only met for brief periods in that strange timeless hinterland of the hallway of the old ruined manor, Edgar had become Miriam’s life. She had no idea how she would cope with the pack at school the following day.

Miriam came very close to telling her father; she’d even packed a rucksack with the intention of returning to the old manor during the night. But when she opened her mouth to tell the man she couldn’t hurt him. She loved him too much.

“What is it, Miriam?” he asked as she stood in front of him, her mouth hanging open...wordless.

“Nothing, Dad. Nothing at all.”

And most of the night she wept in her bed, thinking only of Edgar waiting alone in that timeless hallway, his hope fading all the time.

The following day at school was the worst Miriam had ever experienced. She was teased mercilessly when the pack discovered her



trying to help poor Mandy with the other girl's homework. Even the boys joined in the taunting over lunch break:

“Hey, boys. The M & M's are looking particularly ugly today, don't you think? Which one would you go with, guys, if they were the last two girls left on earth?”

Mandy, who really was ugly, was pretty upset. Miriam put a comforting arm around her friend, and led her away from the pack. Mandy never could understand why all the others were so cruel to her; even less why Miriam should bother to stick up for her.

“Come round to my place this evening, Mandy. I'd like you to meet my father.”

Mandy was delighted. She couldn't stop smiling after that. And Miriam? Suddenly there was a huge gaping hole in her life. She had to do something to try to fill it.

The bell sounded. Miriam dreaded being seen going home with Mandy – the cutting remarks and jibes – but she'd survive. She always did. Just because she tried to be kind to Mandy the cat-pack accused her of having no interest in boys! She could imagine their taunts that evening:

“Oh look at those two love birds! Aren't they just cute? Hey, tweetie-pies, what do you get up to together, eh?”

If only they knew the truth.

“Wow, just look at him!”

Miriam turned, as she was packing her school bag, to see Vanessa, the ring-leader of the cat-pack staring out of the window. She must have seen someone at the school gate. Vanessa's side-kick peered over her shoulder.

“Funny clothes he's wearing,” the other girl said.

“Oh you know nothing about designer stuff! He's just gorgeous!”

It was like a light had suddenly been turned on inside Miriam. She grinned from ear to ear as she hurriedly stuffed the remaining books into her bag.

“Quick!” she said impatiently to the ponderously slow Mandy. She pulled the surprised girl by the arm out of the classroom.

“They're in a hurry!” exclaimed Vanessa. “Let's see what they get up to tonight, eh. Follow 'em for a laugh.”

She cackled like a witch. She is a witch, thought Miriam, but what do I care now? She was grinning like the whole world belonged to her, and Mandy, confused and frowning, struggled to keep up with her. In the playground Miriam let go of Mandy and ran to the gate. She leapt into his arms, allowing him to swing her round and round as he kissed her over and over again. Finally he lowered her gently to the ground.

“Do I look a hundred and fifty?”

Miriam laughed.

“One of the girls said ‘wow!’ when she saw you. That means you look great, Edgar.”

“I couldn’t leave without you. I spent all night in the hallway, just thinking. Knew you wouldn’t be able to leave your father. It was selfish of me even to suggest it. Forgive me?”

Miriam gave him a playful slap on the wrist.

“Of course! And I suppose I’m gonna have to explain you to Dad, now.”

Miriam turned to look for Mandy. The girl had held back, a frightened rabbit, and now stood all alone half-way across the playground, looking on in disbelief. Closer, a semi-circle of girls stared like inquisitive cows, their mouths open. A few pimply boys had grouped timidly behind the girls, as though suddenly emasculated by the manly presence of Edgar.

“Are they the ones who were bothering you, Miriam?” Edgar asked, glowering at Vanessa and her cat-pack.

“Oh, they don’t bother me, Edgar. Come. Meet my friend, Mandy.”

Miriam took Edgar’s hand and led him straight through the cat-pack, forcing her would-be tormentors to stand back and make way for them.

Edgar took Mandy’s hand and kissed it. The poor girl almost fainted.

“Delighted to meet you, Mandy. Miriam’s told me so much about you. From now on, count me as your friend, too.”

Edgar put one arm around Miriam, the other around Mandy, and escorted the two girls from the school playground to a collective of stupefied stares, whilst Miriam chattered excitedly to him about nothing in particular.

## **A Portrait of Gordon**

Betty Griffin

**G**ordon Gompers lived in South London all his life – 82 years. His family were of Dutch, Irish and Jewish descent so Gordon was a bit of a mixture. His father kept a ladies dress shop in Tooting.

They moved to Woodfield Avenue, a pleasant side road off Streatham High Road.

After the death of his mother, his sister Joan kept house for him and it was a great shock to Gordon when she died in 1997. It took him a long time to get over it and to adjust to the everyday household tasks of shopping, meals, etc.

As he had no particular interest in the fashion trade, he took various jobs, one being in the engineering department of GKN. Eventually he joined the Civil Service in The Lord Chancellor's Department and worked for many years In South London Magistrates Courts.

He started writing in the 1950s and became a member of the Society of Civil Service Authors, at it was long known. He disliked the recent change of title. (So do I – Ed).

To the Society magazine 'Author' he subscribed many articles, letters, poetry and his regular contribution of "Market Information" until 2006.

The Society used to meet in different places; The Liberal Club in Whitehall Place was very elegant and quite a good few people attended. Gordon was often there, with some controversial remark.

After a time we met at the Civil Service Club in Great Scotland Yard. Quite a small place but as membership had dwindled it was suitable for the smaller numbers attending.

Gordon came in spite of difficulty in walking, as he was determined to keep going, regardless of age and fatigue. Another meeting was with Alan and Marjorie Watts at their home in Beckenham, which was called the 'Away Day', where we were very welcome. We were invited to bring a poem or piece of prose to read out. Gordon always managed to get there, in spite of it being quite a walk from Beckenham Station. It was a pleasant house with the living room on the first floor, from where one had a view of the field at the back of the houses. It was not large yet had a more spacious feel as the houses had only a small paved area at the back.

Another meeting place was St. Vincent's Centre in Carlisle Place, where Ethel arranged food, drink and literary contributions. Gordon once brought some cuttings of his published articles. He also brought an early copy of Beano; his ambition was to get something printed in it. He had quite a number from 'The Lady' and other magazines on photography, country houses etc. By studying the markets he began to get articles about hobbies accepted for publication. His own hobbies were photography, playing the recorder, writing poetry and stories, reading comics such as Beano. He compiled lists of publishers who were interested in these subjects and these were printed in Author under the title 'Market Information' in the hope that this may help members get their articles printed.

In his opinion, Dr Johnson was right in his comment, "Only a fool wrote for anything but money".

(Fortunately Gordon never sought payment for such advice – Ed). But added that one should remember the less successful. He thought it did not matter if one was not paid, or if the amounts were small, it was recognition that mattered and, even if nothing were paid for work, it could lead to other markets.

Some publishers paid well, others not so well. Several never paid at all, others closed down or went into liquidation.

Bill Barnes wrote a letter entitled, "Dosh-Bosh" in which he said that he wished dear Gordon would stop using the slang word "Dosh", which irritated him and reminded him of ill-gotten gains. In spite of this Gordon continued to use the word.

He kept writing short stories but could never seem to get them right, so he went to classes to improve his technique. The classes were held at Morley College, Westminster Bridge Road, not far from the bridge and Houses of Parliament. The tutor was a Mr Williams, who was a writer and teacher, and he used to set the class a subject to write about and bring for criticism by him and the rest of the class. The comments were most useful and revealed mistakes as well as good points.

Gordon wrote several short stories for practice and finally got published in women's magazines and he won a short story competition in SCSA. He wrote criticisms in the Morley magazine on musical events that were held there – orchestral concerts, ensembles, quartets, etc. Sometimes his observations were not agreed with, but were generally

pleasing. He also wrote the criticism for the Dolmetsch recorder programmes held at Haslemere in Surrey.

The news letter printed by the new history group, 'The Streatham Society' always included a criticism by Gordon in 'The Pump' on plays and music performed in various Streatham Churches and Halls. It appeared under 'Gordon's Corner' for many years.

One Society he used to report in 'The Pump' was the Streatham Camera Club, to which Gordon belonged. He was quite interested in all aspects of photography and became good at photographing many subjects. He did not like photographic backgrounds or different distances out of focus, preferring a sharp image. Several of his published articles were illustrated with pictures he had taken. He won several prizes in local photographic exhibitions.

Another subject he reported in 'Gordon's Corner' was entertainment on the stage. He very much liked the open-air theatre staged in the Rookery and Park Streatham. It was held on a sloping lawn leading to a backdrop of two large cedar trees, with flower beds, usually of petunias and geraniums, running parallel to the trees.

We sat on the grass or paid for a deck-chair. Gordon used to sit on an upright seat looking rather important and thoroughly enjoying the scene. Professional actors and actresses performed Shakespeare plays and opera companies sang light operas, arias and extracts from grand opera and musicians provided orchestral concerts.

He often remarked that he saw a cat wandering onto the stage, though he used the slang word 'moggy'. Personally I never remember seeing a cat, either at the concert or just having a walk round the park. The gardeners chased them off if they dared and no dogs were allowed near the flower garden either.

One of the members of the Streatham Society used to produce a concert evening once in a while, as she was rather good at writing small sketches interspersed with musical numbers. Gordon always wrote a criticism in 'The Pump'. These were often held at the Streatham Darby and Joan Club, a handsome Victorian house with large rooms and an ornate ceiling in Leigham Court Road.

On one occasion we had a series of sketches and songs and our producer wrote a small playlet about a rich Streatham family named Howland of the 1600's. Elizabeth, their only daughter aged thirteen years and heiress to a large fortune, was betrothed to Wriothesley Russell Duke

of Bedford aged fourteen. Writing in his 'Corner', Gordon praised Caroline, the thirteen year-old actress who played Elizabeth, in glowing terms, calling her performance charming.

That went down well, but a month or so later when the same Caroline was in the chorus of a concert given in the local church and sang a solo soprano number, Gordon, in his criticism wrote, "She was there more for her ornamental value than for vocal excellence".

Her mother was not pleased and told Gordon so. He quickly apologised the in the next 'Pump' news letter he apologised for his thoughtless comment and wrote, "As excellent as her vocal qualities were her ornamental qualities even exceeded that",

Gordon had on previous occasions got into trouble with some unguarded remark and this was a faux pas which was not easily forgotten, even if it was forgiven.

He used to give talks sometimes, though not on history. At one society, 'The Lambethans', he spoke about his favourite authors. He particularly liked Jane Austin, for her early 19<sup>th</sup> century portraits of the life of the times. And Trollope was another author he much admired. The Newfoundland writer L. M. Montgomery he found most fascinating and never tired of her stories about Green Gables.

He never travelled abroad, as far as I can remember, the only place he went for holidays year after year was The Channel Islands. He found a good place to stay in Sark and got to know the family who ran the hotel very well. He seemed to like the young woman who helped with the family and showed us a photograph of her. He loved the rugged scenery of the Islands and how these were divided into Bailiwicks dating back centuries, with some notices still printed in Northern French and he sometimes painted scenes of the bays and hills which were quite attractively done, showing the intense colour of the scenery.

He never seemed to hanker after a change of address and always lived in the family house. He once gave a talk for the Streatham Society on how he came to Streatham, saying that he couldn't think of a nicer place to come to and he still liked Tooting as well. At the end of the talk he recited one of his poems,

"When I go to sleep at night, I go to an exotic clime,  
But I still wake up in Streatham and I'm happy every time."

## **A Head and Two Legs**

Alan S Watts

My old Headmaster collected blunderbusses, arquebuses, matchlock guns, flintlock pistols and such like devices for blowing other gentlemen's heads off.

There came the day when this Headmaster had to retire, and a new Headmaster was appointed in his place. This new Head was not as sympathetic as his predecessor. He was also a stickler for discipline and some of his innovations caused a lot of resentment among both Masters and pupils. Especially his insistence on the class standing up when he entered the room. This wasted time and disrupted lessons. Masters lost the thread of what they had been discussing and it was not always easy for the flow of lessons to be resumed.

However. I do not want to talk so much about the new Headmaster as about an old school pal. Let's call him Colin. Colin, I believe. was made of rubber. Like Gunga Dhin in the poem, he had been belted and flayed, but he never seemed to lose his sense of humour. In fact, he had more than a sense of humour, he had an infectious laugh, and he would quickly have the whole Form laughing, even though it had begun by Colin being reprimanded or punished. For example, he was once asked to read aloud from W.H.Hudson's "A Shepherd's Life", the chapter entitled "Bird-life on the Downs". This struck him as inexpressibly comical. Hudson, of course, had not intended this,, but Colin saw a double meaning in the words "bird" and "birds". To him this referred not only to the feathered creatures. but to the young ladies of his acquaintance. So when he was reading this passage it struck him as so funny that he could not restrain himself. He just roared with laughter until the tears rolled down his face. It was all very well for the Master to order him to be sensible. The more frequently the word "birds" was used the more uncontrollable became Colin's laughter until the whole class was affected.

The new Headmaster did not realise Colin's propensity to laugh uncontrollably whenever something struck him as being unusually comical. What further transpired however was not, from the new Headmaster's point of view, comical at all. He was going to write on the board which was the old tripod style, the titles of other books by

W.H.Hudson, but he did not take enough care to ensure that the blackboard was firmly balanced on its three legs. The class was suddenly surprised to see their dignified Headmaster lying on his back with his feet in the air and his mortar board flying off, together with the tail of his gown.

This was far too much for Colin. He too lay on his back, and when the Headmaster said in reproachful tones. “That’s right, that’s right! Laugh, when your Headmaster has nearly broken his back!” Colin only laughed the more. “Laugh,” said the Headmaster “Laugh”, and Colin could only gasp out “Oh, dear me! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” which added to the general mirth.

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