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Vice Chairman:

Vacant

Membership Secretary:

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

Meetings Secretary:

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

Treasurer:

Beryl Jones
37 Lingham Lane
Moreton
WIRRAL
CH46 7SA

Competition Secretary:

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

Publicity Officer:

Jenny Chamier-Grove
jchamiergrove@hotmail.com

Diary

Presentation for Publication -
Workshop
Saturday, 7th March 2009

AGM
Saturday, 23rd May 2009

Annual Luncheon
Saturday, 17th October 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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Poetry Editor:

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

Editor:

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

THE SCPSW AUTHOR

NUMBER 185

SPRING 2009

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

Just to be sure of the true meaning of the word prose, having uncertainty after reading some poetry, I looked it up in Collins English Dictionary, from which I quote, “ordinary language in speech and writing.....not poetical; v.i. to write prose; to speak or write in a dull, tedious manner. At last I know what’s wrong with my writing – it’s prose.

Well that should precipitate a few words for our letter column.

I trust you are all metaphorically gambolling like spring lambs, quills quivering in anticipation of the pending product of your creative genius. Well maybe not; perhaps you are still following my recommendation that you look at the ceiling for inspiration and found only cracks, but it is only a matter of time before you win one of our competitions and get taken to a remote island as a celebrity.

At the time of writing I am not sure if I’m heading for an island, (more likely an asylum) I only know that the “For Sale” notice has gone up outside our house and I can foresee more chaos in my crystal ball. My memory is not too good these days, but I do have that *déjà vu* feeling.

We are still going through the selection process for our proposed Anthology, as it is taking longer than anticipated. Speaking for myself, this is because there is so much good work published in Author over the years that it is difficult to select those I think are best. One thing I have had from the exercise is the pleasure of reading work for a second time. I often read Dickens and the like; always finding something new, but I now realise that our own work can also give much pleasure on a second reading. So keep some space in your bookcase for old copies of Author; perhaps pack a few when preparing for your holidays.

I hope we will have space for the Froud Memorial winning entry, read out to us by the author at the New Year Party. I am sure you will all agree that it is a most entertaining story and will undoubtedly be enjoyed by the children for whom it was written. It has a touch of Rachmel Crompton’s “Just William” in it. The author is not a member. We wish her good fortune with her future writing and if this tale is anything to go by she certainly merits success.

I recall enjoying Magic Roundabout when my eldest son was about five years-old, thinking that it contained so much subtle adult entertainment that it should have been repeating at a later hour. Some of it was clearly tongue-in-cheek reference to certain politicians of the day. Not all children's stories are quite so sophisticated, but I am sure you will find "My Mother's A Secret Agent" very enjoyable. I think it is commonly held that children's stories must be simple and written in simple language. If my favourite "Water Babies" by Charles Kingsley is anything to go by, this is not the case. Reading the name Mrs. Do-as-you-would-be-done-by did slow me down, though effectively communicated a powerful moral that has guided me through life.

Regarding our name change, the only responses I have had from members who joined after we had changed our title, confirmed that the old title would have had absolutely no affect upon their joining our Society. However, dropping the reference to the Civil Service was also intended to reflect our embracing all in the public service. Sadly that change also has failed to show any sign of increase in our membership, probably due to our difficulty in communicating with such potential members, to advise them of their eligibility.

Having received no poetry from Terry James, I must assume is because he has received none.

I hope we will not be deprived of the pleasure of our poetry pages in future issues. Otherwise you may be presented with my own awful work – that should have your hair standing on end.

Chairman's Chat

First and foremost, the Poetry Workshop subscription. This was increased from £3 to £5 per annum, with effect from 1st January, 2009. The increase was notified in 'Wavelengths' and on the subscription renewal form with which it was accompanied. It was unfortunate that the Society subs. flyer that went out with the most recent 'Author,' did not indicate the increase. I should be most grateful if PW members who have paid £3, would send a cheque to me, wearing my PW Treasurer's hat, for the additional £2 please.

One or two of the poetry and short story folios need more contributors, I'm sure members are aware of their existence. The folios are a useful way to exchange ideas and receive helpful, criticism and comments; apart from that, they are a 'good read.' Any member who is interested should contact me in the first instance.

Most years throw up an anniversary of some kind, 2009 is no exception. Two bicentenaries are of particular interest, Charles Darwin, 1809-1882 and Louis Braille, 1809-1852. Darwin was born in Shrewsbury into comfortable surroundings. His grandfather, Erasmus, had been a notable doctor with an interest in botany and his own father a doctor too. Darwin is recognised as one of history's greatest scientists and thinkers and for his meticulous and painstaking observations. Much of the latter was undertaken in the garden of his home at Down House near Bromley in Kent, notwithstanding the vast amount of material he gathered on his voyage to South America on the 'Beagle.' Two of his most famous works are, of course, his account of the voyage on the 'Beagle' and 'On the Origin of Species'. His house at Downe is in the care of English Heritage and makes a most interesting visit.

Louis Braille was born at Coupvray, near Paris, where his father was a saddler and shoemaker. He lost his sight as a result of an accident he incurred in his father's workshop, stabbing himself in the eye with an awl; later, infection spread to his still sighted eye and he became totally blind by the age of five. Despite this disability he attended school but it was apparent he would not make progress. Through contact with a former artillery captain, who had developed a phonetic system of communication, for military use, Louis devised his own raised dot system based on the alphabet. This system, known universally by its name, 'Braille,' is still used today enabling the visually impaired to contribute and enjoy the pleasures of reading and writing.

Should any eagle-eyed member delight in an apparent typo, missing the 'e' off the house name, it's the village of 'Downe' that carries it, not the house!

Best wishes and enjoy your writing.

Terry Rickson

Letters

In Defence of the Short-Short Story

It isn't difficult to write 'short-short' stories so I disagree with the Lewis Wright Story judge's comment in the Society's Autumn magazine. Characters can be defined adequately in few words, in dialogue and also in description if the writer credits the reader with the ability to assume much of what is left unwritten. In fact a shortie can be better left as it is rather than lengthening it and of course a word count in competitions (such as one having a 1,500 word limit and entered regularly) restricts the writer to the short-short.

A tight plot isn't always necessary either. Who says short stories must have a plot anyway? It would be interesting to read of other members' views on the short-short story.

Jan Jefferies

(Judges comments were quoted at the end of each of the in the latest Froud Competition winning entries, so members can consider such comments and their own views on the stories. It is very unlikely that everyone will concur with all the judge's comments, but probably with some of them.

In my opinion, all criticism or comment should be taken as intended to be helpful, but is not necessarily that with which one may entirely agree or is obliged to accept. This may reflect the difference in the experience, taste and knowledge of the market by the judge and that of the author. – Ed)

Obituary

Long standing member Betty Griffin from South London died suddenly on Christmas Day.

Many of those who attend the AGM and New Year party will have met her. She wrote and gave talks on nature and on the history of South London, especially Norwood and Crystal Palace. Her recent booklet on Biggin Wood was acclaimed as an extensively researched and illustrated publication. She will be sadly missed by those of us who knew her.

If anyone wishes to make a donation in her memory to the British Heart Foundation or Cancer Research, please send it to me and I will forward it to her family.

Ethel Corduff

Market News

Ethel Corduff (Based on the work of the late Gordon Gompers)

The Great Outdoors

Whilst the days are still short and time for outdoor pursuits are less, why not take advantage of a cosy evening indoors with Spring looming to write about the great outdoors. Here are some ideas and markets to get started.

Tennis fans with inside knowledge could provide some news for Ace Tennis Magazine, a Monthly specialist magazine (250 words max) features (2000 words max). No unsolicited mss; send feature synopses by e-mail in the first instance. Payment is very good £200 for 1000 words. Contact Nigel Billen, 9-11 North End Road, London W14 8ST. Tel: 020 7605 8000, Fax: 020 7602 2323 or Email: Nigel.Billen@acemag.co.uk

Why not write about your travel and leisure activates for 'Active Life' a monthly magazine aimed at over-50s. General consumer interests including travel, finance, property and leisure. Opportunities for freelancers in all departments, including fiction. Approach in writing with synopsis of ideas. Paul Jacques, 221-223 High Street, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire HP4 1AD. Tel: 01442 289600. Fax: 01442 879903

Gardening enthusiasts can turn to 'Amateur Gardening' especially if you have any gardening tips or pictures you can share. New contributions are welcome provided they have a professional approach. Colour pictures are needed to enhance items submitted, but they can be supplied by the magazine. Features topical and practical gardening articles. Maximum 1000 words. Payment negotiable. Editor: Tim Rumball, Westover House, West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1JG Tel: 01202 440840. Fax: 01202 440860

Athletics are very much in the news with the Olympics looming. Marathon runner Paula Radcliffe has pleaded for the Olympic Stadium in London to remain an athletics centre instead of a football stadium after 2012. Do you have views on this or any athletic local news? Why not send it to Athletics Weekly which covers track and field, road, fell, cross-country, race walking, athletic features and sports politics. Approach in writing. Payment negotiable. News: Steve Landells,

maximum 400 words. Features: Tony Ward, maximum 2000 words. 83 Park Road, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire PE1 2TN Tel: 1733 898440. Fax: 01733 898441. Email: results@athletics-weekly.co.uk Website: www.athleticsweekly.com

Lack of exercise for children and concerns about the rise in childhood obesity have sadly led to some very overweight children been taken into care. Exercise and outdoor pursuits for children are more important than ever in this computer age. For the children's writers among our members why not write on an outdoor topic this could include sports, games, pets and camping.

AQUILA Magazine is owned and run by New Leaf Publishing Ltd, a small independent publishing house situated in the coastal town of Eastbourne, East Sussex, They are dedicated to encouraging children aged 8-13 to reason and create, and to develop a caring nature. AQUILA believes that all children have brilliance and multiple intelligences that can be developed. It aims to encourage high achievement by offering a mixture of extension material encouraging broader views rather than specialization.

Short stories and serials of up to 4 parts. Occasional features commissioned from writers with specialist knowledge. Approach in writing with ideas and sample of writing style, with sae. Length: 700-800 words (features), 1000-1100 words (stories or per episode of a serial). Illustrations: colour and b&w, cartoons. Payment: £75 (features); £90 (stories), £80 (per episode). Jackie Berry, New Leaf Publishing Ltd, PO Box 2518, Eastbourne, East Sussex BN21 2BB. Tel: 01323 431313. Fax: 01323 731136. Email: info@aquila.co.uk Website: www.aquila.co.uk

Why not send off an article about any aspect of exercise now for possible publication in a Summer issue of a magazine. Or if sent in the Autumn there is a good chance of acceptance for the Winter issue when people are making New Year resolutions to lose weight after the Christmas feasting.

WF and FG Froud Annual Children's Short Story Competition 2008

There were 47 entries, 12 from members and 35 from non members, some of whom have now joined the society. The judges were Cass and Janie Jackson, members of The Society of Authors who run 'Flair for Words' (www.flair4words.co.uk). They completed the following professional and comprehensive report, for which we are very grateful.

Judges' report on overall entries

The standard of presentation was very high, everyone complying with the competition rules. We have to admit that this is unusual in National Competitions and makes the judges' job so much easier. We were able to concentrate on the actual content of the stories. Thank you all for that.

There was a fascinating range of subjects for the entries showing the result of some rich imaginations. Also it was interesting to see that the full range of ages that were stipulated in the rules was covered.

Choosing three for the prizes was extremely difficult and we had to use different criteria before we could come to any firm decision, reading each story in our short list several times.

Many stories could be improved if the author had remembered two of the main writing principles. The first is that, especially with a short story, it is important to begin with the main action of the story - there's no room for introductions and scene setting. The second principle is that the story should be shown and not told. This helps to keep the young reader inside the story. Having a narrator tell the reader that Jimmy was nine-years old and had red hair smacks of author intervention.

We were disappointed that so few stories exhibited any humour. Although this not an essential ingredient in children's stories, it does find favour with young readers.

Overall these were all good stories which anyone could be proud of. Most could be improved with a little more thought and work. It was pleasing to see that very entries few fell into the trap of writing a children's story but spoiling it with an adult vocabulary.

First prize is awarded to 'My Mum's a Secret Agent,' a hilarious story that holds the reader from the first words to the last.

Second prize we give to 'The Red Shoes,' a story of Trolls, written with a good story-telling technique and vivid descriptions.

Third prize goes to 'Blaze,' a story that combines a touch of fantasy with some comic exploits by its young central character.

Highly commended were 'Dopey's New Diet,' by Oliver Eade from Melrose, and 'Archie and the Blue Juice' by Mrs H. E. Lowry from Leeds.

My Mum's a Secret Agent

Ann Wright from Eastbourne (Froud Competition Winner)

My Mum's a secret agent. I've suspected it for a long time - well, most of this week.

Mum says she works in a boring office. It's obvious she does something secret though. Last week she went away for several days.

"I went to a conference, nowhere exciting," she told me.

"What happened there?" I asked.

"Lots of people gave speeches," she replied with a big sigh. "Run along and play. I'm really tired."

Of course, she wouldn't be allowed to tell anyone about her missions.

Monday

I told my friends at school today, but they laughed. They said it was just another wacky idea of mine. "Prove it," they said. So I will.

For a start, Mum doesn't dress for an office job.

"Why don't you wear skirts to work?" I asked her at tea.

"I like trousers," she said.

"Why don't you wear high heeled shoes?"

"They hurt my feet."

"But your shoes are like trainers," I said.

"No they're not. They're comfortable," she protested, clearly upset that I'd noticed. Trousers and trainers means she can run fast, to chase the bad guys or make a quick getaway.

In the middle of tea, she disappeared. I'm not sure where she went but just before she left the table her ring shone brightly. It's happened before. This is a signal to contact base. It's a shame I can't inspect the ring. She never takes it off her finger.

Tuesday

Mum keeps a diary in a locked box, in a locked drawer by her bed. It must have all her secret codes written inside. I'm using one of Mum's hairpins to try to pick the lock of the drawer (must be why she wears hairpins).

Gosh, that was dead easy. Now for the lock on the box - it's much smaller. It's harder, made so spies can't open it. There must be a smaller pick around Mum's dressing table.

Mmm... Nothing in this drawer.

"Josh, what are you doing?" Mum shouted, shocked. "That's private."

"Errr... Sorry, Mum," I said, and made a quick exit. I didn't know what else to say.

I managed to borrow Mum's earrings. Mum always wears the same long, dangly earrings to work. The big stone in each one is a camera so M15 can monitor Mum's missions. I should be able to find the micro-camera if I dig out the stones with my penknife...

... This is hard.

... They won't budge.

... Ouch, I've cut my finger. I'll have to clean the blood off the stones. I hope I haven't scratched the lens.

Wednesday

Tonight I've borrowed Mum's mobile and watch.

Every spy needs a mobile phone. I bet the names of Mum's contacts will be entered in the address book. I'm going to try phoning one of them...

... Oh great! The lock's on the phone and I don't know the password. Still, Mum can't have just anyone ringing her co-spies. I'll have to leave it and try her watch.

Mum's watch isn't a stylish ladies watch. It's big with lots of buttons. These buttons activate a laser beam to cut through metal. If I remove the back of the watch and take out the bits...

"Josh, what are you doing?"

“Er... nothing Mum,” I replied, quickly hiding the watch behind my back. My reactions were too slow though.

“What’s got into you?” she yelled in a high pitch voice.

I finally escaped after Mum gave me a long lecture. She’s furious with me. I’m not to touch things in her room anymore.

Thursday

Today I’m going to try to open the cupboard under the stairs. This is where Mum stores all her spy equipment. Finding proof that she’s a spy would be easy if I could get into it. I could borrow some of her spy equipment to show my friends.

First I’m trying one of Mum’s hairpins. It worked to open her drawer.

It’s very fiddly. Oh no, I can hear Mum coming.

I’ve dropped the hairpin.

Disaster, my foot’s pushed it under the door.

Hide...

Quickly...

... Phew. She’s gone up to her room. She didn’t see me. But I can’t get another hairpin either. What else can I use?

What’s that noise? I keep hearing strange noises coming from inside the cupboard. It sounds like someone moaning - probably a baddie Mum caught, tied up, and left in there until M15 can take him away. If I find a glass and press it against the door I might be able to hear a bit better...

... I still can’t make it out properly. It’s mostly whining. I need to find the key to the cupboard. Mmm... I wonder where it is...

Friday

I know I’ll find the proof I need today.

I’ve borrowed Mum’s handbag - that wasn’t in her room - while she’s cooking tea. Mum thinks I’m in my bedroom doing my homework - well, this is homework of sorts.

Wow! You should see the gadgets in here.

First out of her bag is a pen. The ink in the pen must be poisonous. I need to test it. I will stab myself with the nib.

No, that's a bad idea. I'll have to explain to Mum if I'm sick. I'll try it on Tabitha later. That's if Tabitha, Mum's black cat, comes home. She's been missing since yesterday morning.

Next I've found her sunglasses. Mum says these are expensive. They look normal when I put them on. If I press different parts of them I should be able to find a button to switch them to x-ray vision...

... Oooops, the arm has fallen off. I'll need a screwdriver to mend them. I'll put them to one side and fix them later.

Next item - a Dictaphone. This is obviously to make important notes. I reckon I should listen to the recordings then I'll know the details of her last mission...

... The tape's blank. Pity. She must wipe it clean after reporting back each time. She has to be very careful in the spy business.

This is a curious item. I can't imagine why my Mum would carry lipstick in her bag? She never wears lipstick. I'll take it out of the container to look for a homing device.

What a mistake! Lipstick is messy stuff.

Yuk! There's red all over my sheets.

Help! It's smudging. I can't get it off.

Oh no, the light's flashing. Mum's coming

That was a close call. I pulled my quilt over everything when Mum came in. It's a good job I had an electronic kit for my birthday. I connected the spotlight in my room to a wire that runs under the carpet and down the stairs. It's attached to a connector on the bottom stair. When Mum treads on the step, my light flashes to warn me she's coming. I'm thinking like a special agent. I could be a spy like Mum.

On with business: next up is Mum's brooch. Every time Mum leaves the house she wears this small tortoise brooch on her jacket. She says Gran gave it to her before she died. I reckon it's from M15 and there's a microphone hidden amongst the little stones...

... I've dug out all the stones but I can't find a microphone. I need a microscope for a closer look. There's probably one in the cupboard under the stairs.

Mum's calling me for tea. I'll have to finish later. I'd better hide everything. If she finds the brooch, she'll go bananas. I'll hide it in her handbag and continue this investigation after tea.

Hang on! What's this at the bottom of her bag?

Yippee! I've found the key to the cupboard. I'll put it in my pocket and unlock the door when Mum's not looking.

Friday - after tea.

Mum was happier at tea, so I asked her if she was a secret agent. She stopped dishing out the mashed potato and laughed. Then she looked me in the eye, and smiling, she winked at me. A wink that says, *DON'T TELL ANYONE*.

I knew it. I just knew she was a spy. I wonder what her code name is. I'd better fix her brooch before she receives a signal on her ring and has to go out. I hope I put the stones back in the right place.

“J O S H”

Uh oh. Too late. Mum sounds angry.

Where can I hide?

I know, in the cupboard under the stairs. I can also check out her spy equipment.

Friday - later.

I've been sent to my room.

The hallway's a mess. The cupboard was full of brooms and a huge pot. Everything fell out on Tabitha when I opened the door. That stupid black cat must have chased a mouse in there and has been whining for help.

Mum's sitting on the floor pulling her hair out, crying loudly. “Why can't you play football with your friends?” she keeps sobbing. “Why does your brain run wild and invent silly ideas?”

I'm not sure what she means.

But I have a new theory to work on. My Mum's a witch. Wearing trousers would make it easier to ride a broomstick. She goes to witch's conventions on her days away. I'll have to see if there's a full moon on those days and report back.

Josh, 8 years, detective.

Judge's Comment

With its whimsical humour this story will appeal to children of all ages. The story wins on several counts. It starts straight into the story and grips the reader from that first sentence which sets the tone for the whole story. It starts off at a cracking pace that is maintained throughout -something many writers find difficult to do. It is written from the first person viewpoint which immediately draws the reader into the storyline, making it seem personal.

The beauty of this story is that it is all *just* possible. The scrapes that Josh gets into are all those things that children would love to do as they are completely unacceptable to adults.

This story is very well written and deserves the first prize. We offer only one piece of advice - Let your readers know the name of your central character early on in the story. We don't know that it is Josh until the bottom of the second page. This not only helps with reader identification, but also lets the reader know the gender of the character straight away, which is important.

The Red Shoes

Don Nixon from Albrighton

The Great Troll Invasion was over. It had been a fierce battle at the foot of the glacier in the freezing winter cold but the Trolls had finally been driven back to their northern mountains by the men of the southern fjords. It was a great victory but Sigurd, the young warrior, could not join in the rejoicings. Bente, the girl he hoped to marry, had been captured by the Troll army when it swept through their village. He had heard her cries as the Troll General's men seized her and threw her in the back of his sleigh. Sigurd had tried to reach her but the reindeer pulling the General's sleigh were sleek and fast and he had soon been left behind in the snows of the battlefield.

There was a great feast to celebrate the victory but Sigurd had no heart for it. That night he left the victory feast and went down to the rocky shore of the fjord. There in a dark cave, Gudrun the witch lived. They said Gudrun was descended from the sea sprites who lived in the depths of the fjord and had great magical powers.

He picked his way carefully through the slippery ice. Her cave looked out over the dark deep waters of the fjord. "I was expecting you, Sigurd," she said in her hoarse whisper. "You are a good man. You never called after me and mocked me like the other boys when you were young and many times you have gathered wood for me when I could not go to the forest in the winter. I will do what I can to help you."

He followed her into the cave. A fire burned in the hearth and shadows flickered on the walls. For a moment he felt afraid but she took his arm and smiled and motioned him to sit on the seal skin that was thrown over a roughly hewn wooden bench. She squatted by the fire and cast the runes, the magic dice that could tell the future.

The carved walrus tusk bones fell on the earthen floor where they moved and scuttled like crabs to form patterns. She touched them lightly and they became still. The witch closed her eyes and rocked back on her heels. She began to utter strange moans, eerie sounds like those the seals on the rocks make as they sing to the Northern Lights high in the sky. From far away he heard faint echoing cries that seemed to come from way out to sea beyond the mouth of the fjord. Gudrun stood and touched her eyes.

"I see her," she croaked- "Bente is alive but she is held in the prison of the Troll king in the Fjord of the Far North. The prison is a great cage of ice by the shore. No mortal has ever been imprisoned there in the ice cage and survived. The king is angry because of his defeat and he will take his revenge on Bente." She grasped his arm. "You have only a little time to save her." He shook his head in distress. "But Gudrun, it is a long journey to the Far North. Even with favourable winds, my little boat will take too long." Gudrun thought for a while and sighed as she finally made her decision. She took a gold ring from a finger and pressed it in his palm. "This ring belonged to my mother. She was a sea sprite who came to live on land when she married my father, a mortal and became a mortal herself. She stole it when they drove her out for marrying him. It was part of the treasure they guard in the deep caverns at the bottom of the fjord. The sprites of the fjord have always wanted it back. Go down to the water's edge and hold it high. The ring will sing to them. You will not hear its song but they will. They will come to you and in return for this ring, they will help you." Sadly she turned away and went back into the cave.

Sigurd climbed down to the water's edge. As he raised the ring he saw a swirl of water like a small whirlpool in the middle of the fjord. Quickly it came towards him and rising in its centre he saw the form of a woman. As she swam to him, he saw she was followed by others. Sigurd dropped to his knees. He had heard tales of these guardians of the fjord though he had never seen them before. They must be shown the greatest respect as no mortal could hope to withstand their powers if they were offended.

And so Sigurd made his bargain with the fjord sprites. In silence he offered the ring and the Queen of the Guardian sprites took it and placed it on a long green finger. She smiled and spoke to him. Her voice was deep with a strange accent and her silvery green hair flowed in the foam as she floated in the shallows at the edge of the sea. "You have given back our precious ring so I will help you. You must bring your little boat here and my swift sea horses will pull it north through the great ice pillars to the land of the trolls. Only they are fast enough to get you there in time to save your maiden."

Two scaly giant sea horses reared in the water at the prow of Sigurd's little vessel and he harnessed them, throwing ropes round their long arching necks. The Sprite Queen placed a pair of pointed leather shoes on the deck. "You must wear these shoes," she said. "The winter cold in the ice regions you will pass through will freeze the blood of any mortal and you will die. These shoes will keep you warm. As the cold increases, these shoes will glow red and their heat will keep you safe." She watched him as he pulled on the soft leather shoes. Immediately he felt a warmth throughout his body and the shoes glowed a pale red. She nodded.

The cold here is bearable for you. Here they will colour only a little. They will turn a fiery red when the cold becomes dangerous. Go now, there is little time left." She waved her hand in farewell and slowly sank out of sight.

The Sprite Queen spoke the truth. The giant sea horses were fast. They moved swiftly through the water and soon Sigurd's boat had left the home fjord and they were in the open sea. He glanced down at the shoes. They were only faintly red but as the boat reached the huge ice floes and began its perilous way through the zig zag cracks in the ice, the temperature was far below freezing and now the shoes glowed a

deep crimson and Sigurd felt as warm as if he were by the great open fire in the king's hall.

They sailed on through the great ice bergs that guarded the entrance to the fjord of the Trolls. The cold was now intense but wearing the shoes, Sigurd felt it was like a day in the meadow in high summer. From the sea bed a few hot springs rose to leave a gap through the ice and so they sailed up the narrow passage that was still open in the middle of the fjord. There on the shore he saw the ice prison of the Trolls. It was a huge cage of ice. The bars were close together but through them he saw a figure he knew well. It was Bente. She was wrapped in furs but he could see that she was shivering and her lovely face was pinched and blue with the cold. On the hill behind the ice cage stood the massive fortress of the Trolls. Its pinnacles and turrets carved in ice shone in the bright clear winter Arctic light which never faded.

Sigurd jumped from the boat and ran to the shore. He stabbed the toe of a shoe against the base of one of the ice bars. The shoe turned to a fiery red and immediately clouds of steam rose from the ice bar and it began to melt. He reached through the opening and lifted Bente through the melting ice. She could hardly stand and he turned to carry her across the frozen water back to the boat.

A shout from the battlements made him look back. A Troll was pointing at them and shouting. "A mortal! A mortal! To arms." A horde of Trolls came charging through the gateway, shouting and waving their gigantic clubs. Sigurd ran hard but half carrying the fainting Bente he was too slow and the Trolls began to gain on him. He turned to face them. The Trolls shrieked with delight as they saw their quarry almost within their grasp.

Sigurd dug the points of his shoes into the ice. The shoes were now a flaming red. The ice steamed and began to crack. A great split in the ice opened up between them and the Trolls were forced to come to a halt at the edge. They howled in anger. One threw a spear but the distance was too great and it fell harmlessly in the sea in the widening gap of the ice.

Sigurd managed to carry Bente back to his boat and as soon as they were on board, the giant sea horses pulled away and they were soon back at the open sea. Bente's eyes were closed and her cheeks were as

pale as snow and her lips were blue with cold. Quickly he took off one of the red shoes and slipped it on her foot. It burned a fiery red. Immediately the colour came back to her cheeks and her shivering stopped. She opened her eyes. "At last I am warm," she murmured and nestled in his arms. They held each other close protected from the cold by the red shoes as the little boat sped down the coast. Soon they left the great ice bergs and floes and as they sailed further south the temperature increased and the shoes lost their fiery glow. The sea horses recognised their own fiord and pulled the ship even faster to the shore where they had first been restraining ropes and they swam away, shaking their silvery manes as they enjoyed their freedom.

A smiling Gudrun stood by the shore.

You must give the shoes back now," she said. "Look the Queen is waiting." An arm had risen from the waves and on the hand Gudrun's ring glistened in the spray.

Sigurd took the shoes which had saved them. Now there was no colour in them. They were just the dull brown of seal skin. He threw them out into the fjord and the hand caught them. As the fingers curled around the leather thongs once again the shoes began to glow. Slowly the hand sank below the waves. For a time they could see the red gleam of the shoes through the clear water until at last they disappeared in the depths.

Although Sigurd often went down to the shore and stared out into the fjord, he never saw the Queen of the Sprites again but sometimes at night in the height of the summer when the light of the midnight sun bleached all colour from the landscape, he thought he could hear strange sounds from far out in the fjord. Some said it was the cry of the seals but Bente and Sigurd knew better. In the harsh Northern winters, they piled the logs high on the fire that blazed in their hearth, but they never again felt a warmth as wonderful as when they wore the magical red shoes.

Judge's Comment

The author of this piece is a natural story-teller who knows how to use a vivid imagination to capture the true essence of the story being told. This story is an object-lesson in compact writing, with every word carefully chosen and none being wasted.

All the descriptions here are vivid without being overdone and help to paint a fully rounded out picture of the different scenes. This is far removed from true fairy stories, but still falls within that delightful genre of folk-tale fantasy that is forever popular.

We offer only one piece of advice which you will find useful if the writer wishes to take up their writing to another level. The layout is not the standard layout for manuscripts. Although paragraph indents are used on the first page this is not continued on the second. Note that one should indent the new paragraph for the start of each speech.

Blaze

Margaret Bulleyment from Bicester

I'm going to be a doctor. I want to wear a white coat and listen to people's chests with one of those shiny steth-o-scope things. I've got one of those in my doctor's set. Mine's yellow and red, but Grandpa's doctor's got a big, black, shiny one.

I took my doctor's set to the hospital, when we went to see Grandpa. I'd made him a card with a big, red plane on the front and *Get Well Soon* in blue, glittery letters. Mum said the glitter would make a mess on the bed, but I knew Grandpa would like it. Grandpa likes planes. He used to fly them a long time ago.

Grandpa was looking sad in the hospital. He was sitting up in a big bed with loads of pillows behind him. There was a lump at the bottom of the bed and he kept pulling himself up with a dangly thing on a chain, over his head. The doctor was just going, so Mum gave Grandpa some grapes and some magazines and went to talk to the doctor outside.

Grandpa really liked my card. "You're going to be an artist one day, David," he laughed. Grandpa's face gets all crinkly when he laughs.

"No, I'm going to be a doctor, or I could fly planes like you used to. Can I listen to your chest?"

I climbed on to the bed, but Mum came back in and told me to get off. "Be careful, David, Grandpa's got a broken leg and it's his good leg."

“I’ll be walking again in no time, don’t you worry,” said Grandpa, “on both legs.”

Grandpa has always limped and walked with a stick. The very last time he flew his plane, it came down and he hurt his leg. Since then, he’s had a good leg and a bad leg. Now he’s got two bad legs.

“The doctor says you can’t rush it,” Mum said, legs take longer to heal when you’re older.”

Grandpa looked angrily at her. I can’t stay in here much longer, Mary. It’s so boring and there’s so much to do at the cottage.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” said Mum. She put her arm round Grandpa. “David and I will take care of the cottage for you. We’ll go there this afternoon and see what needs doing.”

I like going to Grandpa’s cottage. Our little house is in a row with lots of others and we don’t have a garden. Grandpa’s cottage is all by itself, on the edge of the village. It’s really old and looks out over the moors. He’s lived there all his life. When he was a little boy, he could play on the moors with his dog every day.

The cottage was all shut up when Mum and I got there and it took us a long time to get the door open. We both had to push very, very hard. It was stuffy inside, so Mum went round opening all the windows and doors.

There’s model planes everywhere. Some are on strings hanging from the ceiling and some are on shelves all round the rooms. Grandpa lets me play with some of them, but not the really old ones. I started to play with my favourite, but Mum saw me. “Don’t start messing around with that plane, there’s too much to do,” she shouted.

She’s shouted at me a lot since Dad left. It seems a long time ago and I can’t remember much about him now. He was never at home much.

Mum pulled the vacuum cleaner out of the cupboard and plugged it in. “I’ll do that” I said. I grabbed the cleaner and started to push it around the furniture. It was really heavy but I like using it. I went round the back of the sofa very carefully, but I was too near the curtains and whoosh! - the cleaner sucked the curtain in and wouldn’t let go.

I pulled and pulled at the curtain, but it wouldn't come out. Then there was a burning smell. "Mum, the cleaner's on fire!"

Mum rushed in, turned off the cleaner and started pulling the curtain out. There was a big bum mark on it. "What've you done now?"

"Nothing, the cleaner ate the curtain. It wasn't my fault."

I was going to shorten those curtains for Grandpa, now I'll have to mend them too. As if I haven't got enough to do."

I was only trying to help. Grandpa lets me help."

Mum sighed and looked like she was going to cry. "I'm sorry, David. Why don't you go and feed the fish."

"Yes, yes," I shouted. I love feeding Grandpa's fish. I grabbed the box of fish food from the cupboard and ran out into the back garden. Grandpa's pond is really big and it's full of goldfish and frogs and dragonflies. The fish are really funny. They crash into each other; jump up out of the water; grab the food; make funny slapping noises; chase each other around and sniff each other's bottoms.

The biggest fish, I've called Goldie. I don't have a pet, but I have Goldie. He looks like a submarine. I tried to drop most of the food right in front of him. I aimed very carefully but ... splat!... the box of food fell straight into the pond and disappeared under the water. Mum was going to shout at me again.

I ran quickly out of the back garden gate on to the moor. There's nothing you can do wrong up there, I love it. I didn't stop running until I got to my favourite place beside the beck. There's a big flat rock under the trees. You can sit up there watching the water rush down to the waterfall. It's Grandpa's favourite place too. We've often made twig boats together and raced them.

I stretched out on the rock and dangled my toes in the water. The water's always cold, even in the summer, but if you paddle in it the stones are really sharp and cut your feet. Stepping stones! Why didn't I think of that before? All I had to do was roll some big stones into the water. Then, I could walk across them.

I found a flat, mossy stone on the bank and I rolled it very carefully a little way into the beck. The water was trying to push me over, but I kept rolling. Then I let go and jumped on top of the stone. Brilliant!

Then I found another. I had to roll that further, but I did it. Then I had a rest as my feet and arms really hurt.

Something moved the other side of the stream. The sun was in my eyes, but it looked like a dog. I blinked and it'd disappeared. I hoped it'd come back so I could play with it.

The dog did come back. It lay down on the bank and just watched me. It was big and black with white hair on the top of its head and down its muzzle. I picked up a stick and threw it across the beck, near the dog. It didn't run after it. It just sat with its head on its paws and watched me.

I found another big stone and started to roll it into the beck, but I trod on something sharp under the water. It hurt like crazy and I hopped around on the other foot, but it was so slippery and the current so strong, I crashed backwards into the water.

The next thing I knew someone was dragging me by my T-shirt towards the bank. My head really, really hurt and there was blood in my mouth. I fell on to the bank and was sick. When I looked up, the dog was there looking down at me; the sun was shining on his white, dripping fur. I put out my hand to pat him, but he'd gone.

'David, David, where are you?' I could hear Mum shouting. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. What's happened? What've you done to your head?'

Then I don't remember any more until I woke up in the ambulance. It was really exciting hearing the siren and knowing it was for me!

So I ended up in the same hospital as Grandpa. He looked really surprised when Mum wheeled me in. 'What on..?' he started to say.

'You'll never guess what your grandson's been up to,' Mum interrupted, 'he's...' and then she started crying.

'Let me tell him, Mum. I fell in the beck Grandpa, but the big dog rescued me.'

'He could've drowned,' Mum sobbed, 'and he keeps on about a big dog. I never saw any dog. I...'

'There, there lass,' said Grandpa. 'He's safe now. I used to get up to all sorts of things when I was his age.' 'There was a big dog, Grandpa,' I shouted. 'He was black, with white fur on the top of his

head.” Grandpa looked at me very strangely. “Blaze,” he said slowly. “It’s Blaze, David. I used to play with him on the moors, when I was a lad.”

“Really, Dad,” Mum said, “you’re as bad as he is. It’s not going to be the same dog, after all these years now, is it.”

“Listen Mary, just listen, Grandpa said quickly. There’s something I’ve never told you. It’ll sound stupid, but it really happened.”

Grandpa looked at me very hard. “When my plane was shot down in France, in the war, I was trapped in the wreckage. I couldn’t move and I was really scared the plane was going to burst into flames. Then suddenly, Blaze, my dog Blaze, was there beside me. He dragged me out of the plane and saved my life. To this day, I don’t know where he came from, or where he went to, but he saved my life. Now, he’s saved David’s.” Then Grandpa started to cry too. Why does everyone cry all the time?

Mum won’t let me go on the moors again by myself, but Grandpa takes me sometimes. He walks very, very slowly now. We haven’t seen Blaze again. Grandpa says that one day his cottage will be mine and then I can have my own dog. I really like animals. One day, I’m going to be an animal doctor.

Judge’s Comment

This story manages to combine fantasy, humour and pathos to great effect within the given tight word limit. This is an achievement in itself. A first person viewpoint was chosen here which is appropriate to the story-line, following David through his various adventures which vary from being comical, to being dramatic.

The introduction of the supernatural was unexpected and adds greatly to the story making it that little bit different from the straight run-of-the-mill stories.

The author has successfully combined some great story-telling techniques here and including rounding the story off beautifully by, unexpectedly, tying the ending to the opening.

If we were to offer one piece of advice it would be to get into the meat of the story a little earlier and leave out some of the unnecessary descriptions that slow the pace somewhat.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Barbara Stewart, The Old Malthouse, Brockhampton
Mews, Bringsty, WR6 5TB

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

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

Bill Barnes Competition 2008

The results of the 2008 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition are:

First Prize: Sylvia Neumann (Dreaming in Stone)

Second Prize: Sheila Nichols (At 7am the light is blinding)

Third Prize: Norman Bissett (Mearns Idyll)

Also Commended were poems by Jonathan Atkinson, Sheila Nichols and Sonia Royal

The judge's report and the three winning poems plus those receiving Commendation will be published in the spring issue of **wavelengths**.

Details of the 2009 Bill Barnes Competition will appear in the summer edition of **wavelengths**.

PW Weekend 2009

The annual Poetry Workshop Weekend will take place on **31 July - 2 August** at our new venue of the Hillscourt Conference Centre, Rednal, Birmingham. The cost of the Weekend is £210 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 2009

As previously announced, we have a new editor of **Waves**, the annual collection of PW members' work, namely Angus Livingstone. Contributions for this year's anthology should be sent to him at 1 Scott Street, Largs, Ayrshire KA30 9NP by **31 March 2009**. Angus writes:

“Please send a poem, preferably 2 and ideally between 3 and 6. There are no restrictions on theme or form. Entries should be no more than

34 lines including stanza breaks and should not have been published previously. As usual, to assist with marketing costs, contributors of published poems will be asked to purchase 6 copies at a total cost of £15.

Subscriptions 2009

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2009. Please note that the cost of membership for 2009 has risen to £5 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 March 2009 **wavelengths** Spring issue

31 March 2009 Closing Date for Submissions to **Waves**

1 June 2009 **wavelengths** Summer Issue

31 July - 2 August 2009 Poetry Workshop Weekend

At the time of writing, Ethel Corduff is taking a well deserved holiday cruising in the Caribbean, so has not produced her traditional report on the New Year Party, so I will offer a few comments.

For a number of reasons the numbers were less than we have been accustomed to in recent years, but those who attended showed every sign of enjoying themselves, not least on hearing the Froud winning entry read out to us. Restricted to the subject “caravan” the usual round of reading short stories and poetry followed, though I have not yet received the promised winning entry for the latter, so offer my own poor second so that our magazine is not completely devoid of poetry, for what would surely be the first time in its history. Fighting my natural modesty I also include my winning short story. – Now bite your tongue, we don’t allow language like that in our magazine.

....Of Mice and Men

Adrian Danson

I once made a journey quite special
For on it did my future depend
So set out earlier than I might have done
For the splendours of sunny Southend

‘Twas before the days of satnavs
And I was entirely on my own
So I wrote the route on a toilet roll
To briefly scan, oh if only I’d known

In the time it took I could have written a book
Or walked the thirty miles from my home
To the place where they would interview me
In a building all concrete and chrome

The route I had chosen, the old A25
Brought the traffic from slow to a halt
Then we crawled with snail-like progression
To discover the reason; the cause or the fault

A Civil Service promotion
Is all that I'm asking man
I've swotted, I'm mentally ready
I'm polished, I'm spick and I'm span

Though I shouted and screamed in frustration
All was lost to this unforeseen flaw in my plan
And I sobbed as I saw the reason on slowly cresting the hill
Fronting the queue, all shiny and new was a blasted caravan

And now for the short story – stop me if you've heard it.....

The Travails of Abdullah

Adrian Danson

Abdullah had the only bus in Abu Hamad and agreed to drive the Christian nuns to Salalah, a journey that involved crossing part of the Nubian Desert. In each place was a school run by nuns, but their conference at Salalah required the attendance of all the nuns, so to Abdullah fell the honour of bringing this about for the nuns of Abu Hamad.

As the journey had to be made in daylight, it involved surviving the desert sun. Although it was winter the temperatures were too much for the elderly bus's air-conditioning, this comprising no more than a fan mounted on the dashboard. So bottles of water were provided for the passengers and Abdullah ensured his own plentiful supply.

As the journey progressed and the temperatures rose, the water consumed was considerable. Unfortunately the ancient vehicle provided no facility for relieving the discomfort that time and the pitching and tossing of the bus brought about, as they travelled the uneven desert road.

Several times the nuns asked Abdullah to stop, each time they walked fifty yards from the bus, formed a circle and one of their number would squat out of sight of Abdullah in the centre of the circle. They took it in turns and having found due relief whilst maintaining their modesty, they returned to the bus and the journey continued.

After the third occasion that this manoeuvre was conducted Abdullah was himself becoming quite uncomfortable. He thought of going on the far side of the bus when they formed their circle, but there were always a few of them who stayed behind and might see him through the window. By the time the nuns asked to stop for a fourth time, Abdullah was becoming desperate, but shortly afterwards he spotted Ali Mustapha Akhbar leading a caravan of camels only a short distance from the road.

He pulled up sharply, bringing girlish cries of complaint from his passengers, but he didn't care as he rushed across the uneven sand and stone of the desert, calling for Ali to stop.

As he reached the caravan Ali dismounted from the lead camel and met Abdullah. "As-Salaam Aleikum," said Abdulah. "Aleikum as-Salaam," replied Ali with a hug and kiss upon the cheeks.

"It is good to see you my friend," added Ali, "but why do you look so distressed?"

"It is nothing," replied Abdullah, "but tell me Ali, as you are one who knows so many things, perhaps you can tell me where I might buy two white horses?"

Ali scratched his bottom in pursuit of inspiration; then it came to him. "In Al Karaba Market last week there was a Bedouin who had a dozen white horses. I'm sure he didn't sell them all. If you can go there next week Allah may favour you."

"Allah be praised," said Abdullah, "And can you tell me also, where I might find a good racing camel?"

"You could try Marawi Market, although those with much wealth go to Al Khartoum where the best racing camels are sold, but in the name of Allah, why are you peeing down my leg?"

Enter the Clown

Fred Jeffery

How the mind plays tricks. Today mine is giving me the unreasonable fear that I may be due for a visit by the Clown!

I do a dozen jobs, but end each one by gazing nervously through the front window.

The Clown? Coming here? No chance. Not today, thank you.

And yet, isn't that her heap, the green Nissan Microbe, as Gordon calls it, pulling into our drive. Lacking gates, we couldn't keep her car from our property. But entering the house - the Clown? Never.

How do I deal with the problem? A rude rebuff? No, the word would get around. Respect and reputation are everything in this neighbourhood.

To reinforce my resolve, I secure the front door.

Pretending that we're out may seem infantile, yet it is the only diplomatic solution that comes to mind. Others may see my predicament and solution differently. Let them.

Beside that, it's pouring and I've just cleaned the house.

'It's a question of perception,' Gordon, who should really save his thinking for the office, had told me last evening. Everyone is different and so no two people take the same view.

I think he must have been thinking then about the Clown. Sarah, whose surname is actually Bown, had always seemed to me to be an interfering little woman, one of those forever offering aid to other people, because their own lives are boring. To some she may appear a cheerful, helpful old soul. To me she remained a clown.

And, at the back of my mind, lay the problem of that other woman, Peggy. Why should my mother-in-law nag my conscience?

Yes, she had been great when Gordon and I married, especially with my lacking the support of a family. The ideal mother-in-law in every way.

When Gordon's father died, Peggy came down from Scotland, where people in communities lived as communities, to live near us. It must have been a wrench, leaving her roots for an entirely different way of life, only we did try to make her feel at home in Cheshire. It is a great county and the city of Chester, with its shops, history and

pedigree cannot be bettered. I felt the quality of all our lives was improving daily.

But then came the trauma of a pregnancy going wrong. Where was Peggy in my hour of need to offer help and encouragement?

From her neighbour I gained the impression that she was seeing some Scot, a knight of the realm, no less. At her age! And, though it seems incredible, someone said she had stayed with an actual countess. Knowing her social standing, the thought of Peggy mixing with the 'right people' seemed unfair, especially with health problems causing me to draw in my reins on the social engineering front.

And I was annoyed, too. Not once did she call on me during my long stay in hospital. With some justification I severed all connection.

Gordon hated the idea of my ignoring every telephone call and letter, though he did acknowledge my principles.

In time along came little Jason and all was well. Health wise.

Of course, our future still awaited consideration. For instance, how could I resume my career, boost our social standing and improve our financial stability? Meeting the right kind of people would help, if we could only make the right connections.

Now progress is on hold. The Clown's car is in the drive and my heart is in my mouth. I just hope the Microbe doesn't stay there long enough to be noticed, especially by the lady who had promised to enrol me on the committee of the local charity. Only, what do I do if they meet, the lady and the clown?

The Clown is at the door!

Pull yourself together, woman.

Oh, those chimes!

Then all at once Fate steps in to remind me of some tale that Gordon had mentioned as we lay in bed last night. He does go off at a tangent sometimes. I think it must be his hormones.

'I know we don't go to church,' he had told me, 'but this story intrigued me.'

O God, I thought. Don't let him go all churchy on me!

'It seems that back in the Middle Ages, a jester made dangerous enemies at court and fled for his life to a monastery. The monks granted the jester sanctuary in return for his carrying out menial duties

and showing great respect. Sadly, as he was just a jester, he failed dismally at monastic duties.'

'Not quite bedtime chat, Gordon?' I teased.

Undiscouraged, he went on, 'Not only did the jester become depressed, but he caused so many disasters that the monks seriously considered returning him to his enemies - for the chop.'

'And, if they did, perhaps you'll tell me in the morning.'

'It gets worse. One night, the monks heard noises and inside the chapel they found the jester in front of the altar, going through his repertoire. He was performing acrobatics, juggling, conjuring - everything. All this in front of the cross - at a fantastic rate - as though his life depended on it. And all in front of nobody. This was the greatest sacrilege of all. He would have to be dragged from the church, beaten with the birch and cast out of the House of God for all time.'

As I reached for the light switch, he said. 'Then, according to records, the impossible happened. The figure on the cross stooped over and actually wiped the brow of the jester. Of course, it was mass-hallucination, light playing tricks on the minds of the monks. However, the wise old abbot had some compassion and allowed the jester to stay, though he did employ him in a more appropriate way - entertaining outsiders to raise money for charity.'

'Happy ending then. Your turn to make the tea in the morning.'

Jester? Clown? Had Gordon in his whimsical way been trying to persuade me that Sarah Bown was akin to the fool in his story and, that because her 'tricks' were down to good intentions, she should be tolerated?

Not by me. Not with my problems. There are medical niggles, plus the need to restart my career and find a minder for Jason. Which reminds me, it's his second birthday tomorrow. And that means I must keep calm and avoid clowns.

Sarah is at the door, working the chimes like some obsessed bell ringer. With her is Peggy, who might just have a birthday gift!

Pity I'm out to clowns and mothers-in-law.

Wait. I am actually opening the door.

Why?

My arms welcome my Peggy. If Gordon wasn't in hiding, his mouth would be gaping like the Channel Tunnel.

'Mrs Clown - Bown.' She doesn't seem to notice the obvious slip. I allow the cheek kisses from Peggy, and, although Sarah would welcome a similar reception, there are limits.

All of a sudden I am hanging their tatty coats next to mine! Could this be termed contagious dementia? In my spotless lounge I seat them on my new Italian suite and then - you may not believe this - I am actually removing my shoes and inviting them to do the same.

Surely this is the slippery slope down to the level of common folk.

'I believe you, too, had a difficult time,' Sarah is saying as I serve the tea and biscuits. 'The trouble was nobody told me until much later.'

Good, I muse. Some visitors can be of more concern than consolation.

Sarah continues, 'As for Peggy, her six week's in traction for that prolapsed disc really laid her low. So, while you were laid up, she was under the care of Sir Iain McHines at the Countess of Chester Hospital. And afterwards, that long convalescence with physiotherapy ... Still, worth it, eventually, Peg.'

My mother-in-law and that Countess? Seeing a Scot for her spine - and not socially? How could I have been so wrong?

'Anyway,' she goes on, 'with Jason's birthday coming up and Peggy feeling more her old self, I thought why not have a get-together?'

Typical clown stunt.

'Excellent idea,' I tell her, gesturing to Gordon, who has just tip-toed in, to open the sherry. 'Great chance to catch up.'

Why is my husband grinning like a gremlin?

Perhaps he has convinced himself that, as a result of my hearing his jester story, I have ended all my dreams of meeting the right people. Then again, for me, could these be the right people?

Peggy, I can tell from the way she looks at home playing with Jason, will make a first class child-minder. Sarah, too, is relaxed as though, like some pigeon that has flown in from afar, she has at last found her final roost. Or, that some spiritual hand of appreciation has stooped to soothe her brow.

How the mind plays tricks!

Sweet Thoughts

Ruth Sear

I'm off to a London Post Office to send a small parcel to my old 'friend' Mary Smith. The parcel contains chocolates that I've made myself. I bought a chocolate making kit from a firm on the internet, and everyone who's tasted the results says they're delicious. But this batch contains something special that will well and truly knock dear Mary 'for six' or something like that. And in case you're concerned the present gets damaged by the Royal Mail, don't worry; I've used plenty of bubble wrap.

I've known Mary for nearly fifty years. I never see her these days because she lives hundreds of miles away in her posh luxury home. She's one of the world's best selling authors, and has won many prizes and awards. She writes crime novels: robbery, violence, rape, poisoning, murder and so on. They're supposed to be well written but personally I don't like them. Too bloodthirsty for my taste.

But last week, when I saw her latest book on display in the booksellers in the High Street, I exclaimed: "Well, this really is the limit!"

Why?

The book's title was: *THE COCOA CONNECTION*. It was described as: *'Espionage between two rival chocolate companies.'* I glanced through the pages quickly; one company contaminated the produce of another, and fighting natives in South America were somehow involved. Somewhere in my shadowy memories that plot was familiar.

I didn't buy a copy of course. I felt like kicking the display onto the floor of the shop. It was then that I remembered my childhood promise to Mary: "I'll return some chocolates to you, one day." And suddenly I thought of a great idea.

Of course Mary Smith isn't her published name, that sounds too dull and plain doesn't it? If I were to tell you her pseudonym you would instantly recognise it. So I won't tell you; because if I did, the story I am about to relate could put me in prison. And then it would be *my* turn to get my name in print (which is what I've always wanted; but as an author, not a criminal!)

I first met Mary in the late 1950's when we were both eight years old. In the late summer the Smith family moved into the house opposite to ours. In a street where people knew everything about each other, Mr Smith soon had a reputation for drunkenness and violence, and we

became aware that he beat his wife. The Smith's only daughter, Mary, was in the same class as me at the beginning of the autumn term in the local council school. She was a very quiet, shy girl, and at first we were the best of friends. She was thin, very short for her age, with frizzy brown hair.

One evening following supper my Dad went to his 'local' to participate in a darts tournament (and the accompanying hospitality of course.) Soon after he'd gone there was a sudden loud knocking at our front door.

"Let me in, let me in, missus," a voice cried. My Mum opened the door, and there stood Mrs Smith. Her husband Joe worked in the local Metal Box factory; he was nice when he was sober, but had a terrible temper when he was drunk. That night Mrs Smith had a bruise on her forehead, which was larger and more colourful than the ones that she usually wore.

"I fell down the stairs" she sobbed. "Let me in for a while, please. I'll go home later." Mum brought her in and calmed her, and gave her a cup of tea before the unfortunate Mrs Smith returned home where her husband was sleeping off his drink. Mary had slept through the noise. I've always believed that her early background gave her ideas for her best stories.

Then one day our English teacher gave us details of a national writing competition, organized by Cadburys, that any pupil at any school in the country could enter. I was proud of the entry I'd written, and thought that Cadburys ought to award first prize to me. My story was something to do with the rainforests of *Mexico* where the *Eucalyptus* flourished; and South American Indians eating cocoa *beens*, going to war, and slaughtering another tribe. I wrote that the unlucky victims were native savages, and their aggressors were savage natives; and the terra *cotta* beneath the fighter's feet was stained with *blud*. I naively believed it must have been the best composition Cadburys had ever received. (Remember I was only eight years of age, after all.) But why oh why didn't that stupid teacher read my magnum opus before it winged its way with the other entries to Bourneville? And there I was thinking I was on my way to becoming a writer of fortune and repute! How I longed to see my story and my name published.

So I received a nasty shock when Mary won the competition, and my own wonderful, imaginative tale didn't receive a mention. I tried to think how I could wreak revenge on Cadburys, but the only idea that occurred

to me was to boycott their chocolate. I simply wouldn't buy any. But that would be difficult for I liked chocolate. I admit I became jealous of Mary – in fact I hated her – and hoped she would choke on the prize she was to receive which was, naturally enough, chocolates. Mary came to me in the school playground after the results were announced.

“I'll give you some of my chocolates when they come,” she said loftily.

Give me some? How condescending! I kicked at a small tuft of grass. “I don't want any.”

“Okay, I'll loan you some, instead.”

I dithered then made a quick decision. The temptation of deliciously luscious sweet chocolate was too much for my willpower.

“Well, only if I pay you back sometime. I'll return some chocolates to you, one day.”

Mary grinned. “It's a deal.”

She's always had a weakness for chocolate since she won the competition. (Also I suspect she's an alcoholic; surely no one could write such nonsense unless they've had a few drinks. Perhaps she was influenced by her father!) “Did you know that Billy Graham is coming to Nottingham? How about going to see him preach?” Mum said to me when I arrived home from school one day.

“Who's he?”

“He's a famous and popular evangelist from America and is over here to convert people who are flocking to see and hear him. He's a wonderful speaker. And those Yanks are offering a free bible to every adult who's accompanied by a child. Mrs Smith's going, and she's taking Mary, so I'm asking you to come. You two are such friends,” she added innocently.

That settled it. “I'm not going,” I said. By then the chocolates were just a bitter sweet memory, and because Mary was coming top in English all the time, I wasn't talking to her. Since that time our friendship had waned and withered away to a silent death.

“You're going,” said Mum firmly. “If you don't I'll cancel *The Dandy*.”

I groaned. “Oh, all right, I'll go.”

“He's very attractive, handsome, tall and he's got blonde crinkly hair. And lovely teeth.”

Then I knew the real reason why Mum wanted to go.

At 7 o'clock promptly the four of us caught the bus to Nottingham. Mum and Mrs Smith chattered away but Mary and I sat in glum silence for most of the journey. We passed the showground which was the site of the annual Goose Fair, now in full swing. A large stadium had been erected nearby, and a huge crowd of people were milling about. There must have been thousands there that night. We pushed our way through but in the confusion Mary became separated from us. Mrs Smith panicked. She found a ponderous policeman who took careful notes. "Don't worry missus," he said, "kids which are found are taken to the 'Lost Children's' tent, she's probably there now." Mrs Smith rushed away. I yelled after her: "If she's not there Mrs Smith, perhaps she's been murdered!"

I sniggered. There was no chance of Mary Smith being in any tent. Hadn't I seen her a few minutes ago heading for the bright lights and noise of the Goose Fair? Let her get into trouble with her mum later. And her dad!

Mum was always interested in antiques since she bought a pretty walnut chair from the local junk shop. But unfortunately when Dad sat on it, it broke and he collapsed onto the floor. Mum groaned. "Fetch the chopper" she said in a resigned voice. So the remains (of the chair, not my Dad) were used as firewood. Then some weeks after that she bought a dainty rosewood table with castors on the bottom of the legs. I remember her oiling those castors. When she was out one day, Dad stood on the table to change a light bulb. Although it appeared delicate, the table supported his weight admirably; but the legs shot from beneath him and for a few seconds he was left dangling in the air, clutching the light cord. Just at the moment Mum entered, Dad let go and fell to the floor.

Mum shrieked. "What are you doing?" She sighed. "Now I want you to put three nails in the chimney breast. It's over the mantelpiece," she added sarcastically. "Now listen; I've just bought three ducks from the junk shop. Not real ones of course. And they were a bargain. Best Chinese china. Look there's a label marked *CHINA* on their backs."

The three ducks were blue and the big one had its beak open. The middle one had its beak closed and the smallest had its beak missing. This little duckling also sported a large crack through its right wing and a hole in its left – the result of a gunshot wound, perhaps?

Dad hammered three nails in the wall and hung the birds on them.

“You silly man!” cried Mum. “They’re too close together! They look as if they’re having a conversation!”

Dad, now safely descended to earth, yanked the nails out with a pair of pincers and put in three new nails.

“No good,” said Mum. “They’re too far apart now and look as if they’re getting lost.”

“Birds find their way about the world in ways which we humans don’t understand,” came a voice from the doorway. It was Mary. She entered the room. “Excuse me for coming in Mrs Brown but your back door was open. I wrote about birds in the competition I won.” She would have, I thought angrily. Then Mary offered to mark the wall with a pencil where she thought the ducks should roost. Now why hadn’t Mum, Dad and I thought of that?

“How clever of you to think of such a good idea Mary,” said Mum. “Go ahead, dear.”

So Mary went ahead. Mum gave her a pencil. Before we knew what had happened the winner of the chocolate competition quickly grabbed the rosewood table, pushed it up to the fireplace, and leapt on the top. As she stood there with pencil artistically poised, the table lurched and skidded from beneath her, and deposited her on the floor. But it wasn’t the fall that knocked Mary unconscious. It was the two larger ducks; for, dislodged when she threw out her hands as she fell off the table, both flew down to rest on her head with an awesome *crash*.

Even I felt sorry for Mary at that moment; and sorrier for the birds, for they now were in a worse state than the smallest duck which had remained miraculously on the wall. And what did my Mum compensate (or decorate) Mary with the following day? A large bar of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk chocolate.

And what happened to Mary Smith after that incident? She wrote a very funny article entitled: *A BIRD KNOCKED ME UNCONSCIOUS*, for a popular magazine. They published it and paid her a nice little sum of money. And she was only eight years old! She continued to write; she purchased a second hand typewriter and years later became one of the world’s best selling authors!

I hope Mary enjoys her chocolates, posted in London: *‘From an anonymous admirer, with kind thoughts.’* It’s a pity I can’t send her this story, because she could probably use it to write one of her best sellers.

You see, by that time she’s eaten my sweet little home made gift, it’ll be too late for her to write anything, ever again.

Something Brewing

Jan Jefferies

Aggie went over to the window of the tiny attic room to shut out the wind and rain. Then she peered at the sprawled, ample form of Mrs Smedley on the bed. Mrs Smedley's skin had an unpleasant greyish tinge. She didn't appear to be breathing either. Aggie shrugged her shoulders, picked up the empty tea cup and went back down the steep, narrow staircase to the kitchen.

Millie and Sarah were sat around the newly scrubbed wooden table drinking tea. Aggie carefully washed out the cup and sat down without a word. She helped herself from the teapot.

“Well?” said Millie, her mouth crammed with ginger biscuit. Is she comin' down then?”

Aggie shook her head.

“Sick again is she?” Sarah looked pleased. Aggie shook her head again, slightly amused.

“Why we worryin' then. We could do with some peace around 'ere from 'er nasty, spiteful tongue.” snapped Sarah.

“an you can hold yours, Sarah.” retorted Aggie, “Madam'll 'ave to get another cook 'cus Mrs Smedley won't be cooking another meal again. Not ever as far as I can see.”

Two pairs of eyes fixed onto Aggie in surprise.

“Why?”

“She's sicker than you think.” Aggie sipped at her tea.

“Well, 'ow sick then?” Sarah said as she reached for a biscuit.

“Like 'Dead' sick.” replied Aggie, matter-of-factly.

“You don't mean she's

Millie coughed, spraying out biscuit crumbs and the words hung in the air in the uncomfortable silence that followed. Sarah turned her attention to the pan of potatoes on the range. She crunched noisily.

“I should be seein' to the grate.” Millie said, hurriedly getting to her feet. “an' the scullery needs sweeping.”

“Finish your tea, Millie, we'll 'ave to decide what to do.” said Aggie firmly. “The doctor'll 'ave to come now.”

“Oh Mrs Smedley would’na have the doctor in. Moaning about ‘er stomick and taking all them medicines in ‘er tea. Not our fault is it.” said Sarah indignantly. “I’ve seen all them medicines, I’m not surprised I’m sure.”

“The doctor still got to come this time, Don’t suppose Mrs. Smedley’ll object now will she.”

“But won’tsaid Millie, I mean..... I didn’t want ‘er I didn’t do anythin’”

Millie faltered and put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes swivelled from Aggie to Sarah.

“Didn’t do what?” asked Aggie.

“Nothin”, mumbled Millie. She sat down and with bowed head picked nervously at the frill on her apron. There was another uneasy silence.

“Madam’s got that dinner do tonight.” said Sarah, “She’s got the Gordon-Smythes coming an’ them gentlemen what came last time an’ that silly ol’ judge.”

She covered her mouth with her hand in mock horror. “No cook so who’s gonna tell Madam then?”

“Well, what’s to be will be. Another cuppa is what we need.” said Aggie brightly. “Fill the tea pot Sarah and Millie you fetch more sugar.”

“What about ‘er upstairs then?” asked Sarah.

“After we’ve had our tea.” replied Aggie. “We’ll think of something I daresay.”

Millie went into the pantry and reached for the canister of sugar. As she drew it towards her, it knocked against a small glass jar, pushing it off of the shelf. It fell to the floor and shattered.

Aggie, Sarah and Millie turned to stare guiltily at the spilt white powder amongst the broken glass.