

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
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## 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:

Nina Mattar  
4 Redruth House  
Grange Road  
Sutton  
SM6 6RT

## Publicity Officer:

Jenny Chamier-Grove  
jchamiergrove@hotmail.com

## Diary

### New Year Party

Saturday, 30th January 2010

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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

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## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 5 Chairman's Chat
- 6 Gordon Gompers' Article Competition  
*Judges Report by Don Nixon*
- 10 Poetry Workshop
- 12 Poetry Pages
- 19 Report on the Annual Literary Lunch 2009  
*Ethel Corduff*
- 20 SCPSW Annual Competitions 2010
- 21 Marie Bashkirstseff of Nice *Brian Jones*
- 24 Juvenile Delinquent (2): My Last Day At School  
*Brian Scott*
- 26 Birds of a Feather *Elvira Bridges*
- 31 Fete Accomplished *Fred Jeffery*
- 36 Singularly Beautiful! *Oliver Eade*

## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

Season's greetings to everyone and may you all enjoy health, wealth and happiness in our 75<sup>th</sup> Year.

They say time flies when you're having fun. I hope you're having fun and feeling in a good mood, because it's that time of the year again. Reduced membership has put our survival into jeopardy, such that we need virtually all members to renew and to add anything extra that you can spare. Those who send me personal notes say that Author provides much entertainment and is "A jolly good read". I hope that alone makes the renewal fee worthwhile. The prospect of immense wealth from winning one of our competitions surely makes it even more so.

Though we cannot compete with professional publications, I believe the prevailing quality of the contents of our magazine and my feeling that we are a family of writers, makes us a different proposition. I hope you agree and that our family will prevail. In this context, one thing lacking of late is your letters. Please write to me on anything, be it praise, or criticism of published items, requests for specific items, humorous comments or controversial views; anything will be considered.

As you will see in my Anthology report, copies of our long awaited masterpiece are now available to members at the bargain price of £6.65. Please send your cheques to me, made out to SCPSW, and I will forward your copy of this excellent book. Surely it would make a better Christmas present than another pair of socks. For the sake of our finances I hope you will buy more than one copy.

## **75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology Report**

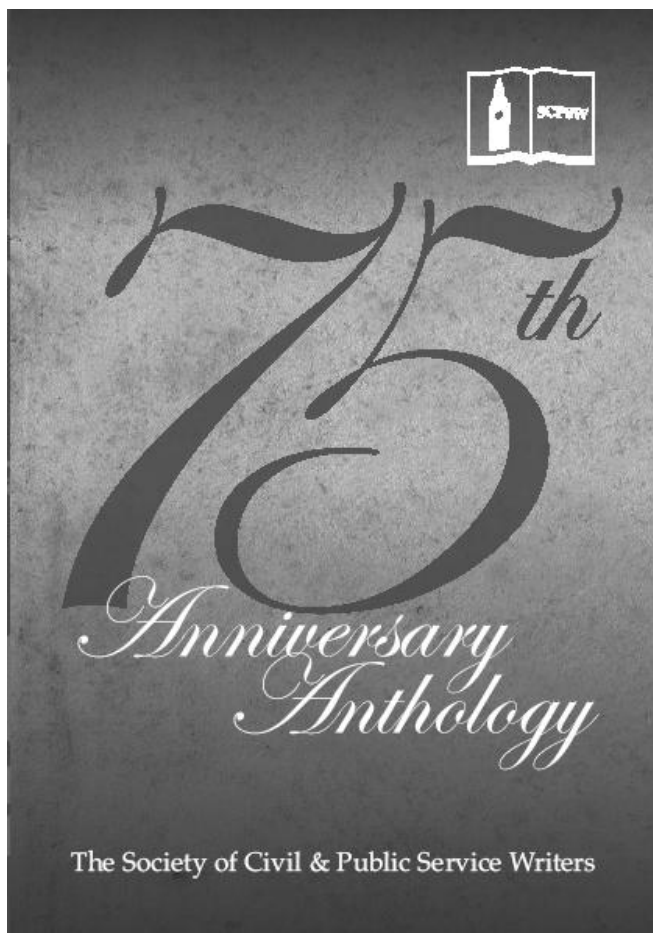
Adrian Danson

When the Civil Service Insurance Company offered £1,000 towards the cost of publishing an Anthology we had little idea of how far such a sum would take us. However, we ploughed ahead and four committee members selected short stories, poems and articles from "Author" that we considered the best from a twenty year period ending 2004.

A later date would have resulted in the inclusion of work so recent that most members would still remember it. Earlier may have resulted in the majority of work being that of members who are no longer with us, though this still applies to a good proportion of the contents and serves as a form of memorial to them. I belatedly became aware of the suggestion that the contents be restricted to work by current members. This would have

excluded work from some remarkable members who have died and are much missed, e.g. Victor Negus Moore, Humbert Wolf, Iain McIntyre, John Gatrell, Albert Thornton etc., whose work has in fact been included. I believe the contents are something we can be proud to claim our own, the more so for the inclusion of work by such members.

Our selected work far exceeded that which could be included within the sum available and we also had to use the publisher normally employed by CSIS. Any inclination to question this became untenable when CSIS increased the sum available, first to £2,500 and finally to £3,000, subject to our contributing £1,000. The latter comprises £500 from the Gordon Gompers' bequest and £500 from loans by members. If all 200 copies are bought by members our contribution will be fully recovered. The original total sum of £5,000 was reduced to £4,000 by our proof reading and other actions that the publisher would normally have undertaken.



To commit so large a sum from our miniscule resources took much soul searching, but we had applied much time and effort on this project for over a year, a desire to create of an anthology has been expressed for many years and there was a feeling of now or never. Having said that, I hope this will create the impetus to create volume two at some stage in the near future.

After months of negotiation with the publisher, our selected work has been reduced by only 16% and the Anthology now comprises 204 pages. The production cost is some £13.50 per copy, but is offered to members for just £6.65, including packing and postage. This Anthology has been produced to a professional standard, will certainly justify a place on your book shelves and, subject to P.O. industrial action, will make a very desirable Christmas present to send to all your fans. I shall be sending one to mine.

## Chairman's Chat

This year marks the centenary of the publication of Thomas Hardy's third poetry collection, 'Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses,' in 1909. It contains several of his most well-known poems, including, 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy,' - which Hardy considered one of his most successful poems - 'The House of Hospitalities,' 'A Church Romance' and 'The Roman Road.'

In the Preface to the collection, Hardy wrote of the poems 'they are to be regarded in the main, as dramatic monologues by different characters.' This is borne out, for example, in the sonnet, 'A Church Romance,' where it is the poet's own voice which is heard putting into his words, based on what he had been told by his mother, how his parents '... hearts' bond began .....

If you have not read Hardy before or have not done so for a time, read him. Better still, pay a visit to his birthplace at Stinsford and his home at 'Max Gate,' both near Dorchester in Dorset; they are maintained by the National Trust and make a great day out. The County Museum in Dorchester honours Hardy and the other Dorset poet, William Barnes, a friend of Hardy's, many of whose poems are written in the Dorset dialect. [Some 50 years ago Dorchester Grammar School was renamed Hardy School, in tribute to their local "Celebrity" - Ed]

There are any number of good poets around, Simon Armitage, Mimi Khalvati, Jacob Polley, for example, whose work makes good reading and of course the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. I liked her poem for National Poetry Day on 8th October, 'Atlas,' although one or two of my 'poetic acquaintance' were not so keen.

Our President, Alan Watts, has 'collected' many of the poems he has written over a long period of years and published them under the title, 'Various Verses', they cover aspects of his life and make a pleasant and interesting read.

I am enjoying reading at the moment, two books by the former Children's Laureate, Michael Morpurgo - you have to keep up with the grandchildren. -entitled, 'Kaspar, Prince of Cats' and 'Private Peaceful.' Morpurgo's book 'War Horse,' has been dramatised and put on stage by The National Theatre to huge acclaim.

With my best wishes for Christmas and the New Year which is, of course, the Society's 75th Anniversary.

## **Gordon Gompers' Article Competition**

Judges Report by Don Nixon

### **First Prize**

'Booze in the Wardrobe' by Joan Lewis

### **Runners Up**

'A Glimpse of Stocking' by Beryl Jones

'It Really Makes Me Mad' by Ethel Corduff

There were eleven entries for this competition. It was difficult to judge as though all the entries were fluently written, the subject matter ranged from the lighthearted feature that one might see in a popular magazine to the well researched historical topic and the serious treatment of a contemporary issue. One article was written by a cat which gave the piece an interesting twist while two entries, though delightful in themselves, were basically children's short stories and should do well if submitted to a children's fiction anthology.

The length of the entries on the whole was well suited to the material. Perhaps in some cases a more arresting opening would have helped as would have a stronger conclusion. Some entries tended to peter out a little at the end. (One entry had a problem with ITS and IT'S )

I finally reduced the list to three, all of which I thought could have been winners. I liked "It really makes me mad!" a treatment of a serious contemporary issue which was written with the vigour of an investigative journalist. "A Glimpse of Stocking" was a well researched piece which held the reader's interest all the way through.. For the first prize I chose "Booze in the Wardrobe". Here a serious theme was handled with warmth and humour and the article had a good beginning and ending.

I greatly enjoyed reading all the entries and congratulate all who entered.

### **Booze in the Wardrobe**

Joan Lewis

‘When I am an old woman I shall start wearing purple With a red hat which doesn't go’ - Jenny Joseph.

You've been going to visit your Mum every week since Dad died and you've bricked off the thought of what loneliness she must feel

after nearly fifty years of marriage. All right, so they bickered and Mum sometimes sulked, but underneath they were rock solid. She had no one to cook for so gave up cooking unless we bullied her. When that didn't work we arranged Meals-on-Wheels. She stuck that bravely for a couple of years before cancelling, off her own bat, Friday's fish - she told me quite sharply, old she might be but she could still remember what fish and chips should taste like, and it just wasn't the same when it had spent two hours touring Kingston upon Thames. She had a point. I began to wonder about the fish at that seaside hotel I'd promised myself in my old age.

Our next move was to persuade Mum to go to a Day Centre three days a week. At first she wasn't too sure and said firmly that she'd just try it. Luckily she was hooked, she enjoyed the 3-course meals and the quizzes and the outings but the real gain was friendship. She soon had three firm friends. They were all hard of hearing and all talked at once but it didn't matter a jot. They were friends.

I progressed inexorably towards sixty and retirement and Mum reached her nineties. She could not be left on her own as she lost track of time, would get up and dress at 2 am and then fall over - my brother, living upstairs, would find her, cold and bruised, as he left for work. After one of these falls she was hospitalised and became even more disoriented - so sad to see a once energetic lady, beloved by her grandsons, so patient with her great grandchildren, reduced to being fed a cup of tea and a Marie biscuit. One afternoon when I managed to get this tiny amount down her the nurses were thrilled - and I realised that normally she wouldn't eat for them. She lay in bed, confused, restrained by the cot-sides and I cried. It was time for a Council of War - a lovely social worker persuaded my brother and me that we couldn't look after her and that we mustn't feel guilty.

Easier said than done. I was Guilt Personified but agreed with my brother that we must look sensibly at this. We were so fortunate to find Mum a place in a residential home which was joined to the Day Centre she knew and loved - the staff were so kind that on her transfer from hospital they arranged to have one of the longest-standing carers Mum had known waiting for her. She said 'Hallo, Ida' so naturally that Mum accepted her new home and the rest of us wept. She had three happy years there until she weakened, gave up eating and confessed quietly one day that she was too tired to struggle.

So I was an orphan at 70 with no reason to do the trek down the A1 and round the M25. I saw less of my brother who was only 57, a kid really. I filled the gap with writing and joining things, becoming Secretary twice over (I always knew I had 'Secretary' engraved on my forehead) and avoided thinking of that South Coast hotel. But gradually something pushed its way to the front of my consciousness. I had the same aches and pains as my mother had had, the same unreliable internal combustion and the same habit of repeating things - it had driven me up the wall when Mum did it. I began to panic - had I reached the age of decision, the rice pudding on Monday and parsley sauce on Friday? But I took heart from the fact that my mother, bless her, wore matching clothes at the age of ninety-two and only occasionally had a nip of rather sweet sherry, was lovely to those who helped her and was still her kind and gentle self

So I've decided to fight. I'm still driving, still Writing, eating curry and Chinese. But I've found myself looking at things purple and seeking a red hat in the charity shop. I'm laying up my store of Scotch, week-by-week, and buying knitting needles.

And now it's my turn -

I'd always threatened my sons with disgraceful behaviour when I got old. I thought I'd be on my own in my old age and so had decided I'd move to a seaside town on the South Coast. It would have a row of those hotels where old ladies go and find they are targeted by gentlemen of a certain age with an eye to a widow's inheritance or a divorcee's alimony. These gentlemen will claim to be retired colonels or explorers.

The hotel I'd pick would have a residents' lounge, probably panelled, with the TV on loud (to drown the arguments about choice of programme) and groups of armchairs. Each inmate - or rather hotel guest - would know her own chair and woe betide a newcomer who sat in the wrong place. I felt the only way to stay sane but to send the rest quietly barmy would be if I knitted the whole time. I'd buy those metal needles that click and rasp and set the teeth on edge - but can you set on edge false teeth? At the moment I still have my own - or most of them - and I'll definitely be a little superior about that.

But diet, or more happily expressed, food, would be a prime source of interest and concern. The hotel would have a policy of giving their



dear old things plain food, full of nourishment, and dead boring to boot. Now milk puddings must be good for the elderly, no problem with their teeth, full of protein and topped with a dollop of strawberry jam would look attractive, too. Never mind that the jam was of the quality once referred to in the family as 'slurry' - with their eyesight, they wouldn't see that. So, Monday lunchtime after the mandatory cold joint, beetroot and some poorly mashed potato, rice pudding would be the order of the day. Three days of indeterminate 'meat and two veg' follow and we've arrived at Friday - can't wait, if it's Friday, it's fish. Everybody loves fish and chips but doubtless it'll be white fish, white mashed potato and largely white parsley sauce. With luck some mushy peas might provide a bit of colour.

This was all so depressing that my next promise to my kids came into play. I was going to keep booze in the wardrobe. Youngsters put down old ladies with 'been at the sherry again, Ma?' And gin, mothers' ruin, will be the choice for some. But for me, none of these - at a time of stress in the past I'd washed down my Mogadon with Scotch and got quite hooked, so whiskey must be my tippie. Granted it had given me only a few hours sleep and a thumping headache, but everyone knows that was the Mogadon, and not the Scotch.

All this seemed terribly amusing when I laid it out for my sons. They were in their early twenties and I was only just batting my half-century. In the same way that when you're fifteen, thirty is over the hill and beyond the pale, when you're moving through your fifties sixty is impossible, sixty-five unthinkable and seventy-five- well, that's what your mother is, poor old thing.

In due course I became an orphan at the age of seventy and a bride at the age of seventy-one. Wow. What now for my plans for old age? As I said, my mother still wore matching clothes at ninety-three. But she did repeat herself and so do I. She forgot lots of things and I'm moving in that direction. As my new husband is hale and hearty for the moment I won't fear the Eastbourne hotel or the retired colonel and I'll resist serving up rice pudding on Monday and parsley sauce on Friday. I'm not supposed to knit so I can't drive him mad with the clicking. So what's left? Ah, the booze in the wardrobe. But I don't have to hide it, hubby and I are quite happy to have it in full view on the sideboard. Anyone for a tippie?

## Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

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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

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### **Review of the Year**

As 2009 draws to a close, I'm happy to report that the Poetry Workshop continues in a healthy and vibrant condition, with membership currently standing at 70. 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 at the end of July at the Hillscourt Conference Centre at Rednal, Birmingham . PW members attending enjoyed a varied programme of poetry-based activities. A full report of events at the Weekend appeared in the autumn edition of **wavelengths**. We are booked into the Hillscourt Conference Centre again for next year, the dates being **16th to 18th July 2010**. A Booking Form will be included in the winter issue of **wavelengths**.

#### **Bill Barnes Competition 2009**

The competition, named in memory of the founder of the Poetry Workshop, attracted a total of 38 poems this year. The results were as follows:- 1<sup>st</sup> prize Muriel Stammers; 2<sup>nd</sup> prize Sonia Royal; 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize Sheila Nichols. The Competition was judged by Norman Bissett, who also singled out a poem by Andrew Millican for Commendation. The winning entries and the Judges Report will be published in the spring issue of **wavelengths**.

#### **Waves**

This is the annual showcase anthology of PW members' work and was edited for the first time this year by Angus Livingstone. See the winter issue of **wavelengths** for details of how to submit work for consideration for the 2010 anthology, again to be edited by Angus, but

PW members should note that the closing date for submissions is 31 March 2010.

### **Postal Folio**

There are four circulating postal folios in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. 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)

### **e-folio**

PW members with access to the internet are able to take part in a new venture introduced this year, namely an e-folio. Anyone interested in joining the e-folio should contact Sylvia Neumann. Her email address is: [sylvia.neumann@btinternet.com](mailto:sylvia.neumann@btinternet.com)

### **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 in the summer (by Terry Rickson on the modern poet Owen Sheers), poems by members, the Minutes of the PW's AGM plus 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 2010 remains at £5 for Society members.

### **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
- Access to the new e-folio scheme

- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition ( open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend.

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 2009</b>  | <b>wavelengths # 21 publishing date</b> |
| <b>1 January 2010</b>   | <b>PW Subscriptions due</b>             |
| <b>1 February 2010</b>  | <b>deadline for wavelengths #22</b>     |
| <b>1 March 2010</b>     | <b>wavelengths # 22 published</b>       |
| <b>31 March 2010</b>    | <b>deadline for Waves 2010</b>          |
| <b>16 -18 July 2010</b> | <b>PW Weekend</b>                       |

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

Best wishes,

*Mike Boland*

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### **Poetry Pages**

Edited by Terry James

### **Red Chrysanths**

Norman Bissett

Twenty four flowerpots ranged along the wall,  
 snug in wire frames, hang from cemented nails,  
 catching the sun this April afternoon,  
 each filled with multi-purpose compost,  
 a wholesome, rich, nutritious, damp, brown mould  
 from B & Q. I dibble bulls'eyes in the heart of each,  
 creating along the wall two dozen wombs.  
 Into each I drop a small green plug, and with my fingers  
 neatly tamp down the nurturing soil. I nod  
 with satisfaction and stand back, awaiting Andalusia.

## **Lamplighter**

A E Hobbs

As the dusk begins to settle,  
and the day yields to the night,  
the lamplighter turns the corner,  
and the street lights he will light.

Wheeling his trusty cycle,  
ladder also in tow,  
he will tend each lamp post,  
to provide a cheery glow.

You can chart his progress,  
slow though it may be.  
Now the lamps are lit,  
one can clearly see.

It is the same routine each evening  
and in the dawn as well.  
I wonder what stories,  
that old man could tell.

## **Two Winter Poems**

Terry Rickson

(1)

Patterns of frost  
on leaves;  
footprints of fox;  
purple sloes in the wind-rattled hedge

(2)

In storms and hail old Winter comes  
and wipes a mirthful eye,  
a holly bough in hand he bears  
to Christmas revels in the hall.

(My apologies to Christopher Barnes, whose following two poems were sent to me with the words displayed below, but written inside the door of a washing machine that I have been unable to reproduce for the magazine. Perhaps you can imagine such, or use a pencil to draw two circles around the words with a flat side on the right of the inner circle, where the door handle would be. ED.)

### Washing Machine No.1

Mills  
& Boon is  
Buddha's tree to  
Indrani. He & she draw  
Near, wed, then  
Unbuckle. Viscose  
Accordion pleats flow  
From a braided jacket.  
Pushrods fuse sealant,  
Chattering noises. A  
1,000 rpm spin cycle.  
Fate – characters  
Sloshed together, a  
Wedlock of soap  
Spun joy.

### Washing machine No.2

Ganapati's  
Bud 'n' blossom  
duvet cover arouses  
days gone numb: -  
Fadeela on a backwoods  
green, skips a right –  
track, her blue-fern  
dress jiggling the  
breeze. A picnic of saag  
aloo, chapattis laid by  
prickly lettuce – as if  
she wasn't even dead.

## **Lay In**

A E Hobbs

My Word, it is early,  
no need to get up yet.  
Another hour at least,  
that's the safest bet.

When the rest is over,  
work can then begin,  
But now I'll just turn over  
and go on slumbering.

## **Hedgehog**

Norman Bissett

Ball-shaped chimney-brush,  
it is pigeon-toed, round, slow,  
with an upturned snout,

It stops, uncertain,  
in the middle of the path,  
aware of our shoes.

Its eyes are red-rimmed,  
suggesting a lack of sleep.  
Did we disturb it?

We beg its pardon  
and tip-toe softly away,  
leaving it in peace.

Then stop and look back.  
Having waddled on its way,  
through the dead, dry leaves,

it's now setting off  
on its Toulouse-Lautrec legs  
across the tundra.

Nothing phases it.  
It would tackle Nullarbor  
in the same spirit.

### **People-Watching**

Bill Torrie Douglas

The faces ever changing,  
smiles, scowls, grins and girns,  
pain and pleasure  
in the sparkle of a laugh  
or the twitter of conversation.  
Concern, apprehension,  
someone who is unaware,  
caught in the memory as in a lens,  
wide-angled or zoom,  
and who is picking their nose.

A goldfish bowl café,  
window on the world,  
big brother's CCTV,  
the view from a roof terrace,  
binocular or telescope,  
catch the terrorist,  
capture the criminal,  
invade the privacy.

Never think you are not being watched  
just hope that you are in positive  
rather than negative mode  
and do not make  
a spectacle of yourself.



## **Scarecrow**

A E Hobbs

On a frame of rustic wood,  
in this field I have been stood.  
With a battered hat, torn coat,  
trousers tied up with string.

I am not a fashion item,  
just a scarecrow of a thing,  
no one notices, nor cares for me  
but here I stand, as you can see,  
all alone and forlorn  
watching over the fields corn.

Ignored by birds, and people too  
my thoughts on life are very few.  
Other things I would like to have been  
but here I am in this country scene.

So perhaps if you are passing  
and enjoy me from afar  
give a friendly wave  
or a toot from your motor car.

For I shall be here  
all weathers, night and day.  
I cannot move you see,  
my feet are made of clay.

## **Anniversary**

Terry Rickson

“I didn’t expect to see you again  
so soon,” I observed  
to the window-cleaner on his ladder.  
“Four weeks exactly,” he said  
indicating his notebook,  
“the seventeenth.”

“Today is the eighteenth,” I said,  
“I know; it’s my Anniversary.”  
My reply was not  
what he expected.  
“Are you still happy?”  
he tried, conversationally.  
“Yes,” I answered,  
“it’s a way of life,” and smiled.

### **Wild Flowers, Once Picked, Quickly Wilt**

Bill Torrie Douglas

The days have passed the milk is spilt,  
The blooms have faded with the sun,  
Wild flowers, once picked, quickly wilt.

My mind is lined with veins of guilt,  
My deeds complete, regrets re-run,  
The days have passed the milk is spilt.

Look back at life, what has been built,  
Could I foresee when it begun,  
Wild flowers, once picked, quickly wilt.

She blessed my youth, those days were gilt  
With threads of gold and silver spun,  
The days have passed, the milk is spilt.

Oh how I missed my chance to lilt  
My love for her when she had none,  
Wild flowers, once picked, quickly wilt.

The years advance, no chance to tilt  
The music’s stopped, the harm is done,  
The days have passed, the milk is spilt,  
Wild flowers, once picked, quickly wilt.

## **Ron Jeffreys**

Competition Secretary 1968 – 2009

In 1968, at the National Liberal Club, Ron was awarded a prize for winning a Play Competition run by the Society of Civil Service Authors. Ron suggests that the opulence and grandeur of the place may have been responsible for his rash acceptance of the post of Competition Secretary.

A lady member to whom Ron confided his doubts about taking on such a post reassuringly said ‘You’ll only be a ... well, a sort of glorified post office.’ Ron felt he’d been conned into a dogsbody job that no one else wanted.

Glorified post office and dogsbody are most inapt words to describe the man who exercised meticulous care as the Society’s Competition Secretary. Each year Ron took in dozens of entries to the various competitions run by the Society, which involved big events like the PD James and the ongoing Froud, as well as the regular annual ones. He liaised with judges and reported the results with great care to the ‘Author’.

Ron was a Post Office Telephone Engineer then Stores Manager. His wife, Eileen, has always supported his endeavours and has helped him a great deal in recent years. She says that Ron enjoyed meeting well-known people over the years at the social events organised by the Society.

He didn’t want to give up the post but ill health forced his decision. The Society thanks him for 40 years dedicated service and wishes Eileen and Roy many happy years of retirement, both in London and at their cottage in Wales – Ron particularly enjoys Bonfire night in the Welsh valley that is his second home.

Joan Lewis

## **Report on the Annual Literary Lunch 2009**

Ethel Corduff

The Annual literary Lunch held on 20<sup>th</sup> October was attended by members and guests from London, Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Suffolk, Dorset, Hampshire and Essex. As always the Civil Service Club provided a substantial meal and good service.

Writer of the Year, Alan Watts was unable to attend, but his daughter Fleur Hogarth accepted his framed certificate and gift of a letter opener (to replace his missing one) and chocolates from our chairman Terry Rickson.

Our Guest Speaker member Steve Pilley who is an actor, poet and musician, provided us with a rousing poetry performance and encouraged us to join in which we did enthusiastically. Steve is a member of Southend Shakespeare Company and has acted in many productions as well as being stage manager and director. He has also undertaken roles as a tax evading assistant manager and a bullied employee and drug smuggler suspect for customs and excise videos and training films.

## **SCPSW ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2010**

### **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; 2<sup>nd</sup> £30.

### **Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition**

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum 40 lines and one poem per sheet of paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.00 for first and £1.50 for each subsequent poem. Prizes: 1<sup>st</sup> £30; 2<sup>nd</sup> £20. (Writers of humorous verse will be accommodated by a new competition in place of the George Farley Prize, details of which will be provided in the next "Author").

### **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 £4.00 per story. Entry Fee £2.50 per entry. Prize: one only £30.

**Two or three further competitions will be held during the year.** Details of these will be provided in future issue of Author.

### **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, Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton SM6 6RT not later than 28<sup>th</sup> February 2010.

Nina Mattar  
Competition Secretary

## Marie Bashkirstseff of Nice

Brian Jones

**M**any artists, from all over the world, found inspiration in the gorgeous part of Southern France we call the Cote d'Azur. A fine selection of their work can be found in the museums and art galleries of Nice, which has the largest art collections outside Paris.

Mass tourism can not dispel the abiding charm of Nice and the Riviera. In the words of my guide book: 'a cerulean sky, a cobalt sea, terrace slopes in the shade of olive, orange and lemon trees, all this beautiful coastline, fetes, luxury hotels, casinos, palaces, festivals, luxury, beauty. In a word: paradise'. The guide book could also mention the nut brown girls of the Riviera, on the beach or the Promenade des Anglais, surely the prettiest in France.

Nice had been a small fishing village until the coming of the railway in 1864. Gradually, every winter two colonies of rich and splendid foreigners - the princely Russians and the aristocratic British brought the glitter of fashion to the hitherto secluded resort. The rich and famous met at the Casino, the pigeon shooting matches, the races and the opera. The visitors left Nice in the spring, to be tanned by the sun was not done.

The famous painter and diarist Marie Bashkirstseff lived as a child at 63 Promenade des Anglais. Described as the vainest girl in France, the Russian born Marie was very advanced for her prim period. At the age of fourteen she dressed in adult low cut dresses, smoked cigarettes, loved champagne and spirits, experimented with cosmetics and gambled in the Casino. All the same, considering the heavy, ankle length skirts and dresses of the period she would have been deeply shocked by mini skirts and topless sunbathers!

Apart from her art Marie had another claim to fame - she wrote an immense diary in a style, almost unique for a female, in its passion and frankness. An abridged version of the diary, in two volumes, was published in 1887. Despite being heavily abridged the diary still caused great embarrassment to friends and relative who were often portrayed in a very unfriendly light.

In England, the statesman William Gladstone made some perceptive comments about the volumes, in translation. He wrote: 'It was not a winning book. Mlle Bashkirtseff attracts and repels alternately. Possessed of a phenomenal personality and spurred by an audacious sincerity, she sounds incessantly her own inner depths. She is Russian and she is intensely Russian, for whatever she is, she is intensely.'

However, the book that Gladstone had read was very heavily abridged, with some entries re-written, to portray Marie, the spoilt and indulged rich girl, in a more favourable light.

There were many strange, bohemian people in the artistic world of France but she must rank as one of the most original. For one thing, she was not twelve when the diary commenced, but fourteen. By her own wish, in order to make herself seem younger, dates were falsified. Marie wanted to be thought of as a child prodigy, an ambition that became harder to realise with every birthday. Today, adolescent girls dream of the worlds of modelling or show business but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century little girls day dreamed about royalty and the aristocracy. The difference between Marie and other children was her fierce, unrelenting ambition. So when, just before her fourteenth birthday, she confided to her diary that she loved the Duke of Hamilton it was not just a girlish crush but the start of a grand passion that would reverberate in so many dreams.

The Scottish nobleman, a large and robust young man, would never have imagined himself as a fairy prince, yet he was in the eyes of impressionable Marie, as he drove past in his ornate coach with its team of white stallions. He was often accompanied by his beautiful Italian mistress.

Marie wrote hundreds of impassioned pages about the Duke. They never did meet.

Eventually the Duke of Hamilton made a very suitable match with the Duchess of Manchester and Marie was devastated. The Duke, of course, was blissfully unaware that his nuptials were causing such anguish to a little girl far away in Nice.

Marie wrote: 'I feel jealousy, love, rage, envy, fury, disappointment, everything that's hideous in the world.' Marie led a very privileged life. There was the theatre, restaurants, music, painting, riding and

swimming lessons, parties., shopping, clothes, drives, yet she often complained that Nice was dull in the summer. Also, that she had no real friends, only acquaintances.

Outrageously spoiled by her doting mother Marie was immensely vain and self centred, she saw every pretty girl as a rival to be vanquished. Not given to false modesty Marie wrote in her journal: 'I am a rarity. I shall be educated if God wills me to live and blesses me, perfectly formed, a sufficiently pretty face, a sublime voice, wit, tact - and with that I shall be a woman. Happy, happy the man who is to have me.' He will have paradise on earth!

Marie was a passionate snob. Once she was forced to attend a party where middle class tradesmen were present. She shuddered through several pages: 'Holy God! What company! Mamma is so good natured that she treats everybody with distinction, but I'm not an angel, and I confess that the riffraff who dine at our house give me sovereign displeasure.'

She refused to change her clothes (I'm not going to dress up for peasants'), and must have behaved badly, being ready, she said, to sob with the humiliation of the occasion.

One characteristic of Marie that one can be admired without reservation is her capacity for study. Her lessons included English, French, Italian, Latin, German, piano, drawing and all the sciences. She excelled in singing and art. She was grooming herself for marriage to some wealthy, titled person yet her dedication is still impressive if she is compared to other rich girls of the period, who often led lives of pure idleness.

Marie gave her tutors and governesses a very hard time. They would soon grow weary of her impudence and tantrums and resign. Governesses must have been astonished by the Bashkirtseff household. Where else would one find another charge as this fair little girl dressed alternately in black or white, who, unchecked, tossed off neat brandy, who likes slaughtering birds with her rifle? Where such a household, where the ladies were impassioned gamblers, and the peculiar men folk included Uncle George, an alcoholic with a criminal record, and Marie's father who was hardly ever at home and lived openly with an actress.

Marie's mischievous pet monkey was also a great distraction, given as it was to attacking furnishings and jumping on lady's shoulders for the purpose of tearing their hats to shreds!

Also, teachers were presented with a little girl who was madly in love with a man she had never met and spent hours at night writing in some mysterious journal.

In later years Marie, despite failing health, met her true destiny when she began to attend art college full time. At last she was content. She wrote: 'At the studio everything disappears. One has neither name nor family, one is no longer one's mother's daughter, one is an individual, and one has art in front of one and nothing else. One feels so happy, so free so proud,'

Marie died of tuberculosis, on October 31st 1884, at the age of twenty-four. She had kept her journal up to eleven days before death.

Marie's paintings and her published diary, her early death, made her into a legend, a cult figure that would live for decades. A detailed diary like Maria's gives one a deep psychological insight into a gifted but neurotic personality that no biography or auto-biography could ever do. Also, it affords us a glimpse into a lost world of privilege, though unjust, was none the less splendid for that.

('Marie and the Duke of H.' edited by Doris Langley Moore, was published by Cassell in 1966. This was the first unabridged version of the diary. Later Virago Press published the abridged version in paperback. Several volumes of Marie Bashkirtseff's journal, dealing with her later years, are lying in the National Library of France, still awaiting study and research.)

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## **Juvenile Delinquent (2): My Last Day At School**

Brian Scott

It was the summer of 1955. The school term, the school year and my inglorious academic "career" at Harrow County Grammar School for Boys were coming to an end.

It was drizzling, so my friend Tickner and I went our unauthorised way into the school building. However, as we walked down the corridor past the physics laboratory we were spotted by "Spadger"



Hayes, the ancient and wizened physics master, lurking in his doorway like a trap-door spider. He shot his walking-stick into the corridor in front of us, and demanded to know why we were in school before the bell had sounded.

“We thought it was wet routine, Sir.” we lied. This was a concession allowed when it was raining heavily.

“Well, it is not,” he replied, “and if I catch either of you boys inside again before the bell goes I will put you on detention for next term.” He was clearly unaware that this was an idle threat.

As we walked back down the corridor, I said to Tickner “As if that matters a fuck!”

Spadger, however, had better hearing than I had realised. “Scott!” he thundered (or rather squawked) “Come back here!” I did as he asked. “Now,” he continued, “What did you just say?” Leaving or not, I thought it unwise to repeat my actual words, so I replied, “As if that matters at all, Sir.” (it means the same thing, after all!)

“Go upstairs and wait for me outside the Headmaster’s study.” he commanded.

So I went up the first flight of steps, which took me out of Spadger’s sight and also brought me opposite the Sacred Entrance which was strictly for use only by the schoolmasters and prefects. Needless to say, I was not in the exalted ranks of the latter. So, adding insult to injury I exited through that doorway and went home, never to return. How I wish I could have seen poor old Spadger’s face when he struggled upstairs to find the bird had flown!

It was no surprise to learn that I had only passed three GCE ‘O’ levels. It would take me another fifty years to bring my total GCE’s to ten (3 ‘A’s and 7 ‘O’s, although I did also get a Lower Second BA in History along the way.)

Did my behaviour improve with maturity (or at least with age)? Watch this space to find out!

## **Birds of a Feather**

Elvira Bridges

I turned off the car engine, and stepped out on to a gravel path. A small, red haired woman stood, arm extended, I took her hand. The skin was tight and almost transparent.

“Hello, my dear, I am Enid Morris. You must be Jane.”

“Yes, that’s right, Jane Smith. I nodded and looked at the wide oak door. “What a lovely house.”

“It is indeed. You must come inside.”

I stepped in and saw the large old fashioned oak sideboard and magnificent table. I thought how it was past its best, not cared for as much as it deserved. The old furniture, polished and with scratches and marks removed, would look superb.

Coming in from the sunlit the room was dark, but looking into one corner of the room I saw, on the floor, a very large cage, covered with a white cloth.

I peered over but could see nothing. Standing nervously, I wondered if they had a parrot. Could be good company, though I admit, I’m not keen myself.

Miss Morris took my arm, and motioning towards a slender, elderly woman, sitting upright in a high backed chair, she said.

“This is Mrs Brent. She has been with us for several years.”

I smiled and said, “Hello, Mrs Brent.” Taking a step forward I started to introduce myself but was cut short by the woman who asked, “Do you like birds?”

Nonplussed I repeated, “Birds?”

I turned to Miss Morris but before she could speak the woman said, “Birds. That is what I said. Birds!” Mrs Brent’s narrow eyes became slits. “Well, girl, cat’s got your tongue, has it?”

I opened my mouth to answer but one look from Miss Morris stopped me so I tried to laugh off the resident's rudeness. My laugh was fast becoming a titter. For God's sake, Jane, pull your self together. I told myself.

I looked wildly around the room and caught sight of another cage, brightly coloured but much smaller than the first, resting on an oak, gate legged table. There was no cloth and the cage was empty.

"Well? Do you like birds?" It wasn't a question but a command.

I thought it best to humour the old woman. Giggling nervously I said in a bright voice, "Why yes, I love robins and larks and blackbirds...and sparrows are cheeky little things...I love to hear a thrush too. Their song is so, so..." My voice trailed off as I realised I was beginning to babble.

Mrs Brent turned her head towards Enid, "Miss Morris, what may I ask, is she talking about?" Before the younger woman could reply she continued, "Who is she? What is she doing here?"

Enid Morris patted my hand as if to reassure me but she looked at the grey haired figure, not me. "Now, don't you worry, Mrs Brent." She smiled, "Jane has popped in to see us, and our lovely house, here at Fair Oaks."

"What is she, a servant?"

Pink cheeked and flustered Miss Morris said, "A servant?" Turning to me she shook her head and said, "Mrs Brent does love to have a joke."

I looked at the grim expression on the woman's face and tried to smile, I thought, this one wouldn't see a joke if she lived to be a hundred fifty nine.

I shivered but I began, "No, I am not a serv..." I stopped speaking.

Elizabeth Brent stared at me then asked, "Do you like birds?"

"Yes. I do like birds." I looked around to see where the nearest door was for a quick exit.

The old lady shifted her stiff body in her seat. She opened her mouth to speak, seemed to think better of it and pointed to the smaller cage.

“Do you know what we kept in there?” For a moment I thought I caught a glimmer of a smile.

I was tempted to make light of her question and perhaps tease her a little. Her face had become a mask, caked in makeup. No way, I thought. She has had a humour bypass.

I wondered if her hair colour was dyed; light brown, a better name might be ginger, with pale streaks. Her face was covered in white powder, accentuated by a dab of rouge on each cheek. Thinly applied pink lipstick applied over the lines of her thin lips made her more grotesque. Suddenly she yawned and before she could put her hand in front of her mouth I saw her teeth. False, slightly yellow, ill fitting and grubby, the sight made me shudder. She saw me watching her and repeated her earlier question, “Do you know what we kept in there?”

I glanced at Enid for help but she was smoothing down the lace runner on the table, her slender fingers fashioning a pattern on the soft material. Surprisingly her nails were short and stubby in comparison to the length of her fingers.

“No, Mrs Brent, I don’t know. What did you keep in there?”

Elizabeth Brent’s voice brought me up with a start. “Birds.”

A soft sound came from the woman’s throat. She stared at me without expression.

Enid Morris seemed to come back to the present from her day dreaming. “I am so sorry, Mrs Brent. And Jane. I haven’t offered you a cup of tea.

The older woman was about to speak when the younger woman stopped her and said, “Yes, I know Mrs Brent.”

Turning to me she added, "I know Mrs Brent's likes and dislikes. She doesn't drink tea. Sometimes she likes a weak coffee before bed." She smiled and whispered, "At this time of day she likes a glass of milk," she lowered her voice further and said,

"With a tiny drop of something in it."

"Miss Morris, what are you whispering about? Do you not think I can hear you?"

With an uncharacteristic wink to me, Enid said, "I'll leave you to your," she paused before adding, "Birds."

Time to get out of this mad house, I thought.

"Sit down." The woman ordered. I sat as far away as possible from her.

"Where do you live? She licked her lips.

I answered her unwillingly, "London"

"London, awful place." Without pause she carried on, "Are you married? Or cohabiting as they call it nowadays?"

Why am I talking to this unpleasant woman? I thought. She had a strange magnetism which drew me to her.

As I tried to shake off the feeling I replied, "I live with my mother t the moment." Surreptitiously I looked for another exit from the room, and caught sight again of the large cage on the floor. I shivered.

Enid made a welcome interruption, bringing a tray of tea, milk and plate of daintily laid out biscuits.

I had to make a move, but how could I, a well brought up young woman, just walk out?

I ate a biscuit and sipped the tea which was weak but palatable, I drained the cup and for a moment I thought Mrs Brent would offer to read my tea leaves. Stifling a giggle, I pulled my bag from the floor, and started to rise to my feet.

“Oh good Jane, you’ve finished. Now you can come and see the back garden, it is a bit different from what you are probably expecting.” Enid stood beside me with a firm hand on my arm. Looking at the old woman in the chair she said, “She’ll enjoy it won’t she, Mrs Brent? Be back soon.”

Stepping through the back door and saw the garden. Small trees vied for space around the unkempt lawn. Bird cages of varying sizes stood with open doors. I stared incomprehensively, what little grass there was, was covered with bird feathers.

I moved my feet on the path and my right foot scrunched onto something. I looked down and saw bones, and the remains of small birds.

Not believing, I looked at Enid Morris. “What?” I started the question, my tears started, “What have you done?”

“Done?” Her smile belied the evil in her eyes. “We have only been looking after our friend.”

As I ran through the house I saw Mrs Brent throw off the cage cover. “Good boy, Tom,” she said.

A striped, tabby cat stretched, watched me with narrow eyes and rubbed against the old woman’s legs.

I didn’t stop the car for three miles, when I took out my mobile and dialled.

“Mum, Mum.” Breathlessly I said, “I don’t think you will be going to Light Oaks. I went to look around. It is not suitable.”

“Calm down Jane, it can’t be that bad.”

My voice was rising. “I can still hear that woman. She was purring, Mum. Honest to God, she was purring.”

## **Fete Accomplished**

Fred Jeffery

**Y**ou asked me, my Lord Bishop, how I had been coping with the challenges of a new parish. Recalling your admonition regarding my verbosity, I will endeavour to be brief.

Apart from the Annual Fete, four funerals and a wedding, very little of consequence has happened since my induction at Lower Nutwell.

By way of a public relations exercise, the Fete, is worthy of mention, if only by way of a confession.

As I write this in my study, the scene comes back to me of the brass band playing, the children shouting and the more extrovert helpers calling out for custom. All added to the atmosphere and to my smug satisfaction as I strolled around the field that Saturday. It was to be the first event for which I would be responsible, so I was determined to make it a success. How little I knew of the disasters waiting to happen.

There had been difficulties from the start. Chief of these came from the Voice of the Church Council, Roger Cartwright. A churchwarden of considerable experience, he had been more than blunt in expressing the view that I was fighting tradition though, as I saw it, I was merely introducing fresh ideas.

Conflict seemed inevitable.

But were those fresh ideas so radical? To begin with, in order to avoid clashing with the County Cricket Championship, I had put the date back one week. And, because the band had a morning engagement, I had agreed to delay the opening a full hour. My other proposals, a Punch and Judy show, a fortune teller and a kiddies' roundabout, were passed with some reluctance, though I have no doubt that Roger thought the new vicar should be allowed to make a fool of himself this once, and thus be brought to heel.

'It's a lovely day today,' I remember singing to the music as I tried my hand at yet another game. And losing. What did it matter, all my plans were coming to fruition. Weren't they? Almost.

The opener, a local pop star, had been another of my inspired ideas. Well, the village had probably had enough of posh dignitaries - and

fetes are as much for kids as their parents. However, before I could offer our celebrity the hospitality of the vicarage, his manager had ushered him away to open a supermarket, leaving me to judge the children's fancy dress parade by myself.

Those who didn't win took it well. Their mothers, though, proved disgruntled losers.

I was happily singing, 'Then there's nothing more to say...' when -

'You heard the national weather forecast, vicar?' My heart sank as the Voice of Doom continued, 'Heavy rain for the North this afternoon. Mind you, last Saturday it was fine all day.'

'And it will be fine today, Roger. You'll see.' To emphasise my prediction, I added, 'I've even got the sprinkler going on the vicarage lawn.'

'I admire your faith,' he returned, with a hundredweight of scepticism. 'Yon séance woman seems to be a success with her forecasting, too.'

'Séance? Oh, the fortune teller, Gypsy Claire Voyant. Yes, he has had quite a lot of customers, hasn't he?'

'He?'

Sooner or later I would have to explain to the people's churchwarden that Claire Voyant was actually a male member of the Drama Group, though, knowing Roger's views on men in drag, 'later' would be preferable.

'Let me know how we're doing, Roger. See you.'

Once out of his sight I again whistled my happy tune. People were mixing, chatting, laughing and buying. The village was once more a community and life was good, until...

'Gerroff!'

I turned to see a struggling cherub being restrained by a stern-faced lady.

Vicar!' The imperious tone was not unlike that of my old sergeant-major.



‘Ah, Mrs Trumplightly-Jones. This one of yours?’

‘Mine!’

How was I to know? She let the urchin fall in a pile at my feet. ‘Tell his reverence who you are, boy.’

‘Dane - Dane Slater. That’s Damien Slater in full.’

‘And what have you been doing?’

I don’t know how Damien was feeling, but thoughts of the Gestapo, the CIA and big women give me nightmares.

‘Er - nothing, sir. I was just helping the man with the roundabout. There was this can of oil on the ground - and I thought it would go faster with some lubrication.’

‘And lubricated my little girl’s dress, too, you - you hooligan!’ the woman roared. ‘Have you any idea, vicar, how much a new one will cost?’

‘I saw one exactly like that on the Bring and Buy stall,’ Damien started to say, before a cuff on the ear cut him short.

‘I’m sure it was an accident and...’

‘Somebody will have to pay, vicar. And I hope your insurance cover is up-to-date because it seems there may be other incidents to take into consideration.’

Suddenly I felt sick.

‘Tell him about the Punch and Judy, boy.’

‘That was old Fred Smith’s fault. He tried to frighten me with the crocodile, so I taped-up its jaws when he weren’t looking. You wouldn’t believe how easy it is to swap over the heads on his daft puppets.’

‘And ... ?’

‘That? Huh, that were nothing. I’d only gone into that gypsy’s tent to hear what she was telling them girls and... Here, she hasn’t half got hairy legs.’

‘And ... ?’

‘I just happened to snag a rope as I was wriggling out - and the tent fell on top of them. Fortune-telling’s daft, anyway: nobody can ever tell what’s going to happen.’

‘Not with you around,’ I growled. ‘Where else have you been?’

‘Nowhere. Only to the White Elephant stall - but they’d sold out. All they had left was a load of old junk - what my mam calls bricks-and-bracks.’

‘Up to your tricks again, Slater?’

Roger’s timely interruption offered a way out.

‘So, what do we do about young Damien?’ I asked.

‘Did you pay to come in, lad? I thought not. Now off you go and don’t let me see you here again.’ As the lad vanished Roger told the lady, ‘If you come and see me after everybody’s gone, I’ll try and sort something out. Now vicar...’

My relief at being rescued faded.

‘You have a problem, Roger?’

I followed his glance upwards.

‘I think you have, vicar. See them clouds? Not very friendly. In ten minutes it will be teeming down. Folks’ll be drenched and be wanting their monies back. That goes for the band and the others you brought along, too.’

I thought of the funds. Had I stuck to tradition, the target would have been reached. Terminating the fete now would not only eliminate any profit, it would also prove that the judgement of the new incumbent was not as strong as his stubbornness.

‘Look, vicar, if we call it a day now the takings will be down, but...’

His voice faded as a few drops of water splattered his balance sheet and dampened my hopes.

I closed my eyes. The squeaking of the roundabout and the gabble of voices could still be heard above the band’s rendition of “Singing in

the Rain”. A good many people could be soaked if I didn’t close the show. Now.

A moral dilemma: should I ask the Lord to pander to my ego and suspend the downpour - or should I cease my delaying tactics and give the word to Abandon ship?

More spots.

‘I’ll let you know in five minutes.’

‘Wish I had your faith, vicar.’

‘Gerroff!’ The cry was familiar.

As Mrs Trumplightly-Jones dumped Damien once more at my feet, my spirits sank into my shoes.

‘He only got hold of your lawn -sprinkler,’ she raged. ‘Completely drenched myself and Mrs Pearson. Water everywhere!’

‘A lawn-sprinkler? It wasn’t rain?’

She pointed to the sky where the sun had the greatest, widest grin I had ever seen.

‘Does it look as though it’s going to rain, vicar?’

Everything and everyone was moving out when the churchwarden came to deliver his verdict.

‘Not too bad a forecast, vicar. You must have been talking to that Fortune Teller chap. He tells me his brother works in the Met Office at the local RAF base. Overall a good day. Same net takings as last year, only much more fun.’

Perhaps it was. At least, I had learned, Your Grace, that faith and humility are to be prized more than the scoring of points. Deserved or not, I have survived my initiation and won quite a few friends. It was, as Roger observed when he slapped me on the back, ‘Fete Accomplished.’

Yours in the service of the Lord, who definitely has a sense of humour, Paul.

## Singularly Beautiful!

Oliver Eade

One hour to go before she was to pick up her dress; one week before the wedding, the one day of her life ... with the one man in her life. 'One' was such a special number for Val just then.

Soon she and Allan would be 'one', she'd have one home, one family...one, one, one! 'Life's singularly beautiful,' she thought as she slipped into the caff on the corner for a quick coffee before the bridal shop re-opened after lunch.

Only one other person in the café 'Great!' thought Val ... until she realized that with her that made two ... and until she saw that other person, a girl of no more than fifteen, was crying.

Val, buoyant and eager to play mother-angel, took her coffee over to the same table.

"Hey there!" she said gently to the girl. "I'm getting married next week! Can't have all this sadness just before my wedding."

The girl stared at the diet coke in front of her. The closest she got to acknowledging Val's presence was to stroke the top of her glass with her fingers before nudging it to one side.

"I'm a good listener," persisted Val. I mean, we all have our ups and downs, and at your age I was very down at times. Thought the whole world was against me. Convinced no one cared or even *wanted* to understand. I was sure ..."

The girl wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and nose.

If she only could give me eye contact, Val thought. Such a pretty wee thing ... little more than a child ... and thinks the weight of all the miseries of the world have been heaped upon her young shoulders.

"Boyfriend? My first boyfriend dumped me for my best friend. I thought I'd murder her when I first found out, but a month later I realized he was about the most selfish blighter you could ever imagine."

Val waited for a response. There was none. Still too young for boyfriends? A family dispute, perhaps? Had the girl been threatened

with grounding for some trifling little thing? All girls go through a rebellious phase. How on earth her own mother coped when she used to do theatrical grand huff thing she had no idea! A right little pouting Meryl Streep, she was, at that age. “My family, you know ... I used to think they really gave me a hard time. Particularly my mum.”

The girl remained motionless, like a weeping statue of the Holy Virgin. Much more of this, thought Val, and this café will become a place of pilgrimage! “I felt my mum always wanted me to be someone else,” she continued, as though obliged to finish what she’d started. ‘Not myself! Could never accept me as I was. Sometimes I couldn’t wait to get away. In fact ...”

On the run? Val couldn’t see the tell-tale holdall. Just the girl and her untouched diet coke and her tears.

“*I did* think about running away from home once. Had a cousin down south I thought would put me up. But...”

*You stupid* woman, Val, her inner voice scalded. The girl’s not on the run! Wouldn’t make herself so conspicuous. Think again, Miss-soon-to-be-Mrs Clever Head!

“It’s awful all the bullying that goes on at schools nowadays. Bad enough when I was a girl, but now ... pah! They really should do more about it. It’s often the pretty girls that get targeted, I hear. If they don’t fall in-line with the cat-pack, if they’re at all sensitive, they’re considered the best prey of all by those bitchy pack-leaders. Mostly jealousy, I s’pose. And, you know, those girls don’t have any *real* power. They’re not super-girls. Scrape the surface, and you’ll find a frightened child inside them as well!”

The girl reached out and took hold of the glass. For an awful moment Val thought the glass was going to be flung at her as she saw the girl’s fingers tighten, then relax, on the glass. Suddenly the girl took a quick sip of coke and replaced the glass on the table, immediately putting her hand back on her lap. The tears had stopped, but her gaze was still fixed vacantly down at the table.

I’m not doing at all well here, thought Val, curiously guilty for even feeling sorry for the girl. After all, there were so many people in the

world far more deserving of her pity than a moping teenager. She glanced at her watch. Thank God the bridal shop would soon be open.

Is there *no* one you can talk to?" she asked, forcing a smile.

The girl shook her head. Just detectably, but Val felt pleased with herself. A response at last!

"A teacher ... someone at school who can listen?"

The girl shook her head again.

"Grandparent?" Another shake of the head. There had to be *someone* the girl could talk to. After all, it was bound to be something blown out of all proportion. She knew all about teenagers and their so-called problems. "Brother ... sister? My big brother was a great sounding board for me." "Don't have any!" the girl said in a voice so soft that Val could barely make out the words.

"Just one of you? But *one's* wonderful! *Singularly* beautiful, you are! I..."

Val froze. The girl looked up and straight into Val's eyes and the pain in that look seemed bore through to the very centre of her soul. She'd never experienced anything like it before, that look in the girl's tear-swollen eyes. Her voice carried on, disconnected, as though it might protect her from the pain in that look.

"Your GP? There *are* counsellors and people who are trained to ... you know, who can help ... to ..."

But Val knew from what the girl's eyes were trying to tell her that she was totally out of her depth. No words of her own would even get close to what was *really* going on in that young mind. Suddenly, the girl eyes looked beyond Val. Val turned. A man had just entered the café. He seemed to be injured, for he was carrying two crutches.

"Sorry I took so long, Sarah!" he called out.

The girl was staring at him blankly. She said nothing, but the tears began to stream down her cheeks again. The man walked over to the table. He frowned at Val who looked away. Val knew something was

horribly wrong. The man reached across and took hold of the girl's arm.

My God, thought Val. White slavery! Child prostitution! The poor girl. Probably East European. I should have known! The bastard's gonna ...'

"Look, do you mind ...?" she began, angrily, but she got no further with the sentence. The man had handed the girl one of the crutches, and, slowly, she raised herself up, leaning heavily on the table, allowing the man to assist her as she hopped sideways. She was given the other crutch and the man released his hold. The girl swayed slightly for a few moments as she repositioned the crutches. Val tried hard not to look.

"Just out of hospital this morning," Sarah said to her. "Only it didn't work. I didn't take enough flicking tablets. Know anyone who could help me out? Someone who could really understand why my life's not worth living? Do the job properly for me?"

'May, Sarah. That's enough. We must get going.'

He walked slowly towards the door beside his daughter who, balanced on the two crutches, painfully swung her single leg forwards with each step. Halfway to the door he turned.

"Riding accident," he said to Val. "She was the European under sixteen show jumping champion last year. Her one and only international trophy. It's so hard for her."

Val stared, stupefied, as the girl, too, turned her head.

"Only one life, that shrink at the hospital said! With one leg! Yeah, one's great, like you said!"

Her pretty eyes seemed to focus on something on the ground, yet there was nothing there.

'Well ... what if that one life happens to be crap?' she asked. "What then, eh?"

"Sarah, please. It's not *her* fault!"

“He won’t leave me alone with my crutches, now! Not after what I did.”

“Sarah!”

The girl looked away and, step by step, swung her single leg out of the café. Val, too, left. Never before had she felt so stupid. The bridal shop was open and she went in. Like an automaton, she tried on her wedding dress and stood in front of the mirror. A solitary figure stared back at her.

“Excuse me!” she said suddenly to the surprised shop assistant, rushing from the bridal shop in her wedding dress.

You stupid, *stupid* woman! She thought to herself as she ran, holding up her dress which flapped like a shroud. It’s not *one* that’s great, it’s sharing! It’s all about sharing. I’ve *got* to share my wedding with that poor child. She’ll be my chief bridesmaid! The others will understand.

She knew the girl couldn’t have gone far. There was only one car park nearby. She ignored the puzzled looks from passers-by as she ran along the gutter, barefoot in her wedding dress. A car, out of control, was coming straight for her. She recognized the face of the girl in the passenger seat. She saw the girl’s hand trying to grab the steering wheel from her father. The car swerved. There was a loud bang as the vehicle hit a stationary lorry. Silence, a pause between breaths, then screams.

Sarah, whose seatbelt was undone, would have died instantly. The father was unscathed.

Val was a key witness at the inquest. She sat there with Allan. Couldn’t face being on her own. She learned that the girl’s father was a widower, and that the child had meant everything to him. Death by misadventure, they said. There was no mention of the girl grabbing the steering wheel and Val said nothing.

At least I can do *that* for her - stay silent for a change, Val thought, her eyes swollen with tears. If only I’d shut up then and looked under the table.