

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

Annual Literary Lunch
20 October 2012

DATA PROTECTION ACT

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

DISCLAIMER

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

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Editorial

Paul Williams

Readers will no doubt be recovering from the excitement of the Olympics by the time they receive this, though as I write the games are in full swing. While I have to concede that there have probably been few competitors from the ranks of the Society, it is probably more realistic to hope that the event has given us some literary inspiration. There must be many a short story lurking there somewhere, or perhaps a factual essay of some sort. Certainly, in the run-up to the games there were few people who seemed short of an opinion about them! As always, other contributions are also welcome. Christmas, always a source of inspiration, is also coming.

Some people have asked about deadlines for the quarterly editions, so here is a rough guide. The magazine comes out at the beginning of December (winter edition), the beginning of March (spring) the beginning of June (summer) and the beginning of September (autumn). I am supposed to have my version ready for the designer/printer about 3-4 weeks ahead of that date, and I also require a couple of weeks to put the magazine together. Thus contributions that must be in the winter edition (information about coming events, for example) should be with me by about 20 October, with a corresponding timeframe for the other editions. Although I can be a little flexible about my part of the process, this is not possible when it comes to printing. Of course, it is not always possible for stories and articles to appear in the next edition after receipt.

I do hope as many members as possible are able to attend the Literary Luncheon on 20 October, as these events are important for a geographically diverse society such as ours. For those from outside London, book your advance saver tickets now if you have not already done so!

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

Up and down the country there are many places offering writing courses, many of them prestigious. I am aware that a number of our members attend such events and, perhaps, help to run or organise them, which is all to the good. Well run courses are of great benefit

and explore many aspects of writing, stimulate the mind (we all need that at times!) and ‘get us on the road again,’ if we’ve experienced something of an arid patch.

On a more modest scale, several members of the poetry workshop met in the delightful surroundings of Launde Abbey in Rutland for a weekend of writing, discussion, poetry techniques and short talks by members examining poems by Robert Browning, Wilfred Owen and two Irish poets, Katherine Tynan Hinkson and Michael Longley. There were plenty of light moments and a quiz, which always evokes plenty of laughter and banter.

I’d like to invite any member who has attended a writing school or similar, to write a short piece for the magazine; I’m sure it would be of interest.

To end on a light note, the Queen is not the only one with a ‘Diamond Jubilee’. Sixty years ago I was undertaking National Service with the RAF; never went up in a plane but did learn some rather rude songs!

Annual Literary Luncheon, Civil Service Club, 20 October 2012

This year’s literary luncheon will take place at the Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, on Saturday 20 October at 1pm, though many of those attending usually meet in the bar for an aperitif and/or a chat from around 12.30. Price is £26 for three courses and coffee. The guest speaker is to be confirmed. A flyer is enclosed which those attending should return, with payment, to Ethel Corduff. Please remember to tick your menu choices.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Paul,

The content of the summer edition was pretty good, without anything except my own article moving me particularly (did someone say something about self-praise?). However, I was fairly staggered by *Mummy is a Fighter Pilot*. Is it true? If it is, then Bernie is a remarkable person, as is anyone who can fly a modern fighter...much more than anything I have ever achieved. I am, though, amazed that a

woman can go off to sea in a highly dangerous role, leaving a six-month old daughter in the care of the husband. Sorry Bernie, maybe it is not my place to comment, but not typical of any of the mothers I have known.

Sloppy proof-reading has also been criticised in the past, and I don't think the author has any excuse if it is his fault. I should know, having been guilty on occasion. The summer issue was pretty good in this respect, but, on page 21, line 4, of *Not in the Brochure*, the wife Ethel's name suddenly becomes Edith. My temperature rose a little on reading my own *Ill-Health and Danger in the Workplace* when I spotted how on page 37, three lines from the bottom, "no repair was effected" had changed to "no repair was affected." I checked, and "effected" was in the manuscript I forwarded to *Author*. Had someone done a bit of tweaking, or was it some cursed auto-corrector?

Douglas Fulthorpe

Hello Paul,

When submitting manuscripts for publication, publishers, editors and agents require double spacing to assist editing of the contents. Competition judges have no such need. It has been said that double spacing makes reading easier, which suggests that competition judges do not read books or newspapers which are always single spaced. Clearly this is not justification for double spacing of our competition entries.

We discussed this at the New Year Party, and I thought all present shared my opinion. As I see double spacing is a requirement for the Gordon Gompers Article Competition, this has yet to be implemented. I recommend to the committee that all competition entries in future be submitted in single space, which should reduce our ever-increasing postal costs.

Adrian Danson

(I will take this up with the Committee as I agree that clarity is more important than a strict rule about double spacing, which probably dates to the era of rickety typewriters when entrants often had to make late corrections by hand. For now the existing rules have to apply, especially as information about coming competitions has already been circulated. *Ed.*)

Minutes of AGM, Saturday 19 May 2012

Ethel Corduff

1. Seven Members present. Apologies from 8 members

2. Minutes of last AGM were read and agreed.

3. Matters arising from minutes of 2011 AGM. Item 8, Change threading to treading.

4. Membership Secretary's Report

Joan was not able to be present. She is retiring today as Membership Secretary after a long and faithful service of 25 years, for which we are most grateful. Michael Smith, the new Membership Secretary, was welcomed.

5. Meeting Secretary's report

Fewer people are attending meetings, with only seven at this one. Not sure what the answer is. Ethel will continue with the Annual Lunch and New Year party but would not add any other social events. She would welcome comments or suggestions.

6. Treasurer's Report Unfortunately the report Beryl has sent by post did not arrive in time for the meeting. It was agreed that when it arrives Ethel will copy it and forward it to those at this meeting. Postage rise discussed. In March there were 36 non renewals and seven new members, making a total of 154 members.

7. Publicity Officer's Report (sent by Jenny) In early January 2012 I sent reminder notices about the Annual Competitions to the Editors of web-based staff newsletters at twelve Government departments, as well as to the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship, Editor David Tickner and the Forces Pension Society, and I hope this helped to build up the number of entries to the competitions. Those mentioned in internet staff bulletins always include references to the SCPSW website, which is today out of date, as it is still showing the entry requirements for the annual competitions which closed on 28 February 2012. As it may be too early to publish the results, I suggest this information might be replaced by advertising the Vee Bradley and Gordon Gompers competitions, and if somebody could let me have the details, I will contact the webmaster.

I do not know how membership figures stand at the moment, but I still feel that new members may join the Society to enter a competition, fail to win a prize, become disheartened and then not renew their subscriptions. I think they might be more encouraged to stay if competition judges included more ‘Highly Commended’ entries, which, along with prize winners, might then be published in *The SCPSW Author*. I wonder if some members might like the idea of meeting for dinner in a restaurant other than the Civil Service Club, from time to time, but I can see that this would add to the burdens of our already overworked Meetings Secretary.

8. Editor’s Report

A steady though not enormous stream of contributions is being submitted. The number of competition winners that have to be published means there is often not much room for many members’ contributions. Soon we may have to start considering the possibility of the magazine going online. This would allow for more instant feedback and provide more space as well as making the society more widely known.

9. Poetry Workshop Report

The PW continues to maintain a steady and loyal membership who contribute in a variety of ways through the postal folios, competitions, attendance at the annual ‘Weekend;’ submitting poems to both ‘Wavelengths’ and the ‘Author’ as well as articles on poetry matters or just being’ that is , taking an interest and supporting the PW; this is all to the good.

The PW continues to be well served by its quarterly magazine ‘Wavelengths’ under the editorship of Mike Boland, to whom we are indebted. Fact recognised and recorded at the PW AGM. Thanks too must be accorded to Terry James who continues to act as Poetry Editor for the ‘Author’.

This year’s PW weekend was held, again at the Hills Court Conference Centre near Birmingham. The members attending enjoyed a full and interesting programme of activities with particular mention for four excellent talks given by Angus Livingstone on Robert Frost’s poem ‘Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening’. Jane Arthur on the poems of U.A. Fanthorpe, Val Tigwell on the Cumbrian Poet, Norman Nicholson, and Bill Douglas on the South American poets, Neruda, Borges and Benedetti. Other events that enlivened the weekend

included, a poetry slam and the ever popular quiz, organised on this occasion by Val Tigwell and won dare I say it, by a men's team!

The PW AGM invited Jane Arthur to succeed Barbara Stewart as Chairman as and when the former was free to take up the duties. Steve Pilley is to continue as Co-ordinator for a further year. Terry Rickson re-elected as PW treasurer and Val Tigwell to undertake editorship for **'Waves 2012'**

Arrangements are in hand for the 2012 PW weekend between 20th and 22nd July to be held at a new location, Launde Abbey, Leicestershire. 60 Members of the Society subscribed to the PW the annual subscription to the PW remains at £5.00 for a further year

10. Competition Secretary's Report

Discussion about competitions: Lewis Wright and Herbert Spencer mentioned in Feb issue of Author, Vee Bradley humorous poem and Gordon Gompers article together in summer issue. Questions were asked whether non-members can enter. The answer is no, as it would not be fair to members. Nina asked if we could give a judge a time limit, pointing out the issue of Author in which we hope to publish the result. Nina said 'Flair for Words' are very good judges and we should continue with them. Ethel agreed. Children's short story competition (formerly Froud) with 2 prizes to be held, closing date end October. Vincent Brennan competition could be merged with the Gordon Gompers competition, the terms of which can include travel articles.

11. Annual Lunch; Arranged for 20th October at Civil Service Club.

12. Writer of the Year. No decision made yet.

13. Election of President and Vice President

President Alan Watts re-elected: proposed by Ethel Corduff and seconded by Nina Matter. Vice Presidents Richard Adams and John Le Carré re-elected: proposed by Joanna Crawford, seconded by Michael Smith.

14. Election of Committee

Joan Lewis is stepping down as Membership Secretary; Michael Smith elected as membership secretary, proposed by Nina Matter and seconded by Brian Scott. Remainder of committee re-elected, proposed by Brian Scott and seconded by Joanna Crawford.

15. Any other Business. None.

Children's Short Story Competition (formerly Froud) 2012

Short story of up to 2,000 words for children. Please state on front page of story the age range for which the story is intended (although there are not separate categories as such, this helps the judge decide how well the story has been written for its target audience).

The competition is open to all. The first prize is £75, the second £40. The winning entries will be published in *The Author*.

The entry fee is £5 (£3 for members of SCPSW and refund of £2 for entrants who join now).

Results will be posted on website: www.scpsw.co.uk

Closing date: 31 October 2012. No entry form required. Please enclose SAE for return of entry.

Entries in type, double spaced, on one side of A4 only. Only pen name, word count and page numbers should be written on the manuscript.

Name, address and pen name should be attached on a separate sheet and sent to the Competition Secretary, Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton SM2 6RT.

Vee Bradley Humorous Poetry Competition Winners 2012

This year's Vee Bradley winner was Alan Jones with *The Song of the Parking Meters*. The judge commented as follows:

‘This works as a poem, is well constructed and leads to a satisfying conclusion. It made me laugh out loud at several points. The incantatory verse, with its slightly menacing and risqué overtones, gives a heightened edge to the humour. I for one will never look at parking meters in the same way again – who would have thought it?’

Highly commended was *Crumpet Voluntary* by Tony Oswick, which the judge describes as ‘funny and clever, but failed ultimately to challenge for the winning spot because of a few over-long lines which jarred on the ear.’

Grapevine by Pat Little was commended. ‘An amusing glimpse into the world of line-dancing. In the end, although well done, it wasn't as laugh out loud funny as the winning poem.’

The Song of the Parking Meters

Alan Jones

Parking meters, parking meters,
Coin in slot congestion beaters,
Stood in street and shop parade
Shamelessly we tout for trade,
Black or grey or green or white,
Metal ladies of the night.
Pay the fee that's on our sign,
We'll show you a real good time.

Parking meters, parking meters,
We're such saucy señoritas.
Every Renault, Ford or Audi's
Greeted with a welcome 'howdy!'
Stop a while and when you pay
We'll pamper you inside our bay.
Pass us by and we will bellow
'You'll get caught on double yellow!'

Parking meters, parking meters,
We're such self-sufficient creatures,
Standing there in all our glory
Much more fun than multi-storey.
Eating money till we're dead,
When the bag goes on our head.
Our epitaph reads nothing broader
Simply stating 'out of order'.

Crumpet Voluntary

Tony Oswick

You are the sweetest, ancient crumpled cake,
such perforated joy of flour and yeast.
A comedy concoction that let's me take,
between my lips, the beauty and the feast.
A tasty, toasted tit-bit of renown –
cordon bleu, the height of haute cuisine –

you bless my breakfast table with your round
flat, spongy flesh, seductive and serene.
Eschew foul gossip and rude muttering
that you may be the thinking man's Bakewell tart!
For, laced with jam, dripping and buttering,
your tender taste and flavour warms my heart.
Fair maiden of the plate. Don't lump it.
Rise up, acclaim, my darling humble crumpet.

Grapevine

Pat Little

It's lucky that you've caught me for I've just arrived you see.
Not long got back from dancing, now I need a cup of tea.
Today was my first lesson; nothing posh, no pas de deux.
Though I'm really rather nimble and my waltz can cause a stir.

But we didn't need a partner, or so I understood.
At just two pounds a session, well, it sounded rather good.
They all appeared quite casual not dressed up to the nines.
The room a haze of denim blue, I watched them dance in lines.

OK I thought, I'll have a go and I'll tag on to a row.
I'll pretend that I'm an expert; I can follow where they go.
My thumbs tucked into trousers, I tried to seem real cool
The teacher shouted 'grapevine'. That's when I looked a fool.

'Left rock forward, shuffle, turn' – I turned but found them gone.
For they'd all danced off one way and me – I'd carried on.
I pulled myself together, no one's looking, no one cares;
I hoped they hadn't noticed I was in amongst the chairs.

I quickly re-assembled, shuffled in and joined the throng
I started off OK again, but soon was going wrong.
The lady that I'd followed made a turn and changed her place.
One moment I was doing well then we were face to face.

Another flipping 'grapevine' now, they do it in reverse.
I thought I was improving but instead I'm getting worse.
As I make a swift departure I hear 'grapevine' one more time
And their sequined denim shimmers as they heel toe in a line.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2012 Winners

The Winning entry was *New Spring* by Eileen Stockwell. The judge, Bill Torrie Douglas, commented:

‘This is one that I appreciated more and more on subsequent readings. Some unusual phrasing deterred me in the beginning but further readings revealed the depth of the poem. I am still finding nuances in its words. It reminds me of Gerard Manley Hopkins.’

Others on the shortlist were *Health Report* by Angus Livingstone, *Meditation* by Cynthia Blaker, *Mute Swans* by Jocelyn-Anne Harvey, and *Suleiman’s Mosque* by Andrew Millican.

New Spring is reproduced here. The runners-up will appear in the next edition of *The Author*.

*New Spring, fresh green, leaves shining,
bringing, hinting a dawn-dew drenched with an expectant air.
In this stillness, ‘being’ is now...
the clock has no second hand as the working hour turns away...*

*from hospital bed... terminal eyes mock each second’s urgency.
Budding cherry tapping window high turn towards the sun’s watery
gaze;
knowing eyes in marbled faces distant, they will never see the fruit.*

*From within, where inner darkness draws on pain filled thoughts,
shafted light beams golden through high sombre instituted frames
in reproach of death’s shadowy figures moving in habitual reverence.*

*A clock ‘clicks’ quietly on the wall; invalid eyes level with its
sound in gratitude. Nails rap in distant unawareness, then hesitant,
as the quiet return of echoes around white clinical walls.*

*Her head lifts... he’s here, furrowed silver brow smooth as time becomes
insurmountable, in one moment... end or beginning...
‘being’ lifts her into eternal peace...
a scented blossom breeze wafts into the vacant air as the slow nell...
of the tap tap tapping buds on the window
drift away...*

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

Short Story Markets

The short story is still alive and has a future. This was the message we gleaned from writer Della Garton at the Winchester Writers weekend in June. This despite the fact that some of the women's magazines now take little or no fiction, *The Lady* has stopped taking fiction and *Good Housekeeping* only takes novelists through an agent.

On the positive side the following take short stories; *My Weekly, Yours*, which takes general stories, *Peoples Friend* takes 4-5 stories weekly, *The Weekly News*, which is also a newspaper takes one, *Take a break*, the best payer a love story with a twist, can pay £400. *Women's Weekly Fiction* is one of the best, as the magazine is all fiction. *Woman* also does a short story magazine. *Womans Weekly* wants manuscripts and they are carrying out writers workshops in Manchester to obtain them.

Not all stories are about romance but your story needs to be different with warm sympathetic characters. Not predictable and show-not-tell. If you can write humour you are on a winner!

Countryside Tales look for stories with a county side theme. Email: enquiries@parkpublications.co.uk

A good payer is the *Ulster Tatler* at £150 a story. As it would be difficult to buy a copy here, look at their website: www.ulstertatler.com

Alternative markets that pay

The internet is providing more opportunities for short stories. An American site www.drabblecast.org look for 100 word stories and longer in science fiction, horror and fantasy, and they pay. Another American site is www.podcastle.org who want fantasy or science fiction stories and pay 100 dollars for 2,000 - 6000 words or 20 dollars for flash fiction up to 1,000 words. Amazingly, they prefer reprints as they feel that if a story has been published already then it must be good!

Apologies to Susan Row

Lost and Found, which came third in the 2011 Lewis Wright competition, was inadvertently published in the summer 2012 edition under Susan Row's competition pen name, Elizabeth Fawcett.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Bill Barnes Competition 2012

The closing date for this annual poetry competition, which is for PW members only, is **30 September**. Rules of Entry appeared in the summer issue of “wavelengths” and will be repeated in the new autumn issue. PW members entering should remember that this year the competition is for **rhyming poetry** only.

Poetry Workshop Weekend

The PW held its annual Weekend at Launde Abbey, Leicester on 20-22 July.

A report on the Weekend’s activities will appear in a future issue of “wavelengths”. It is hoped that the autumn issue and subsequent numbers will include the text of talks given during the course of the Weekend.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop was held during the Birmingham Weekend. The Minutes will appear in a future edition of “wavelengths”.

Waves 2012

The Poetry Workshop’s annual anthology of members’ work has now been published.

This, the 42nd edition of “Waves”, consists of 32 pages and contains 47 poems by 19 poets. It has a stunning cover and, as usual, the contents are of a very high standard. Congratulations to this year’s editor, Val Tigwell. Copies of Waves 2012 are available at a price of £3 (inc p&p) from Terry Rickson (address above).

Wavelengths #32

The autumn issue of the Poetry Workshop’s own magazine, free to all its members, is due out in September. Hopefully, it will include the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham; poems from members; a report of the Weekend; minutes of the AGM; the Rules of the Bill

Barnes Competition; and the PW Newsletter. There are four issues of “wavelengths” a year, each issue containing at least twenty pages. If you are not a member of the Poetry Workshop, you will not receive this lively magazine, so why not join the PW now?

Poems

The Poetry Workshop provides its members with several outlets for their work. There is “The Author” of course, and the Poetry Pages edited by Terry James, which everyone is encouraged to support. Then there is “wavelengths” - poems to Mike Boland (a guide for contributors is given in each issue of the magazine), and “Waves”, our annual anthology. Rules for submitting poems to Waves 2013 will appear in the winter issue of “wavelengths”.

Membership

If you are interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. He will be pleased to provide you with further details.

The cost of membership is £5* for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. Cheques or postal orders are acceptable, but **please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

*Cost of membership correct at time of submission, but may be subject to changes agreed at the AGM - watch this page and “wavelengths” for confirmation.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

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

Dates to Remember

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| September 2012 | publication of wavelengths # 32 |
| 30 September 2012 | closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition |
| 1 November 2012 | deadline for wavelengths # 33 |
| December 2012 | publication of wavelengths # 33 |
| 1 January 2013 | PW subscriptions due |

Until next time, best wishes.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

St Mary's – Perivale

Steve Glason

Near the busy Western 40
Ribbonded semis – stretching miles
Playing fields for people sporty
In amongst the “altered” styles.

Was it once of wooded spaces
With the larks ascending high
All those secret meadow places
Where the poplars gently sigh.

Surrounded by a peaceful churchyard
Is St Mary's – Perivale
Looking like a picture postcard
Weatherboarded – creamy pale.

Preserved with loving care – devotion
At a standstill – passing hours
Banished – London's heaving motion
Inner Sanctum from the showers.
I take my leave so tinged with sadness
To Suburban Central Line
Rude awakening – traffic madness
Rus and Urbe intertwined.

Auntie Teeny

Helen Fletcher

She wore his cap-pin where he kissed her
The night she stained her legs with tea
She sang her fast party piece.
He picked her up and spun her round
Her skirt swung out like a church bell.

But the war called him up away from Possilpark,
Where she stayed in the house with her mother.
She made the Christmas cake with carrots
When there wasn't enough fruit,
And prayed for him hard every bedtime.

He died at 19. She made his pin into a brooch,
Enclosing it in clasps of Sterling silver,
And for 70 separate years
She wore it on her breast,
A nanny brooch with hidden needles.

A Strange and Tragic Thing

Mike Boland

Time is a strange and tragic thing;
Humans see its beauty, and despair.
We're born, drift with its tide, then die;
Mere flotsam bobbing on a Cosmic stream.
We dance our moment in the sun,
Ephemerae, spawned to live and mate,
Then fade away within one twenty-four span
Spent flickering over a summer pool.
We watch each moment slip away,
Like trees upon the river shore.
We cannot call them back, or run
The race of Time again. And yet,
If Time was not a stream,
A sequence of events that step
Each on the step of the one before,
Like soldiers marching on parade,
But was instead an open-sided thing,
What then?

Each moment would exist with every other,
Past, present, future; each the same!
Would time flicker in kaleidoscopic motion,
A chaotic cloud of unconnected flux?
Or be like flies entombed in amber
A honeycomb of interlocking “nows”?
And could we pass between those cells,
Adrift on strange, continuum winds
To see as one, all-compassing dream
Time in its stretched entire!

For think, if everything is interwoven,
If “All is One, and One is All”
Then Time itself must surely share that fusion,
And nothing dies, is ever past recall.

Or do we hear in Time’s set beat,
The deep and vital pulse of God?

Dreams

Ivy Hudson

Dreams to pass the hours of night,
then rejoicing in the light of day, as the sun
thankfully rises, shedding shadows.

I catch thoughts that stray to day,
rein in the unpredictable, wayward glimpses
seen from under the moon.

Memories surface. Tentacles entwine,
as I think of those who, confused,
sort, ever sort
near-truths peopling their reality.

Happy Hour

Helen Fletcher

Peter unlocked the gate of Paradise Court
Left his bike in the triangular yard
And went for an Italian.

Rendezvous

Norman Bissett

I have
an appointment
in Samarra sometime
tomorrow, or perhaps sooner,
elsewhere.

The Office Drone

Steve Glason

Early morning on the train
Stifles yet another yawn
Feeling Monday morning strain
Having risen – crack of dawn.

Where does he work – Commuter Man
(Boardroom Life is not for him)
Modern Office – spic and span
Luncheon – jogging in a gym.

Maybe a Servant of the Crown
From the lanes of Aldershot
Reading briefing with a frown
Vital wording he forgot.

Rings his Susan every day
Cacti plants so close at hand
Tea Club on battered coffee tray
Ash Vale/Woking – has to stand.

Retirement early – no desire
In later years he will take stock
Admitting that it was so dire
Travelling daily round the clock!

A Surprise for Brenda

Tony Oswick

(This story came second in the 2012 Lewis Wright Competition)

I opened the drawer and inside I found a knife caked in blood. I'd only arrived twenty minutes before. It was a small country hotel, three miles outside town. Our Creative Writing Course was due to start that Monday afternoon and I'd decided to get there early. The young receptionist said the owner had been called away on urgent business before breakfast, but she'd been very helpful and welcoming. Initially, the hotel had seemed an idyllic retreat. Now it had transformed into Bates' Motel.

A knife with blood on it? In the drawer of my hotel room? What was it doing there? And what should I do? I picked it up. It was a kitchen knife about ten inches long. The handle was black and the blade shiny silver. Instinctively I put a finger to the blood. It was sticky. My stomach turned three times over. The murder had taken place just a short while ago.

Murder? Wait a minute, I thought to myself. Just because you've discovered a blood-drenched knife doesn't mean there's been a murder. Pull yourself together, man. Think logically. There must be a rational explanation.

I placed the knife back in the drawer. Everything else seemed normal. There was hotel writing paper on the desk, a Bible in the bedside cabinet and the wardrobe had its usual array of hangers with spare blankets on the shelf above.

I was about to close the wardrobe when I glimpsed something at the back of the shelf, half-concealed by the blankets. It was a black plastic sack. Gingerly, I took it down and emptied its contents on the bed. It was a man's jacket but above the breast pocket there was a jagged tear about six inches long and, around the tear, it was stained with thick red blood.

My hands were trembling. It was definitely murder now. I wanted to stay calm but then remembered I'd handled the knife and the jacket. My fingerprints were all over the evidence. Would the police suspect me? No, of course not. That would be silly. Wouldn't it?

My mind was racing. Perhaps a husband and wife had taken a weekend away. The husband had been having an affair. They hoped they could patch things up but the weekend had been a disaster. There'd been a

searing argument. The husband had threatened the wife. She'd grabbed the knife and, in self-defence, plunged it into her husband's heart before making her getaway in the family car. Yes, that was it. She should be easy to find - all the police had to do was check the hotel register. But what if they'd registered under false names? And if this was a crime of passion rather than premeditated, where had the wife got the knife? And why did she leave the knife - and the jacket - in the room?

Perhaps there was another explanation. Perhaps the man had been staying by himself. He'd phoned for an evening snack. The hotel waitress had brought the meal to his room. He'd made advances towards her. She'd rejected him. He'd persisted. So she grabbed the first thing at hand, the kitchen knife, and buried it in the man's chest. The waitress would have easy access to the knife if she worked in the kitchens. But why would she have brought it with the meal? And why leave the murder weapon in the room?

So if it was not the aggrieved wife or the molested waitress, who was the murderer? Could it be the hotel owner? What if the victim had been a hotel inspector and the owner had discovered he'd intended to give his hotel a bad rating? The owner had pleaded with him to submit a good report and, when the inspector refused, the owner had let himself into the room with a master key and stabbed him. It was a murder to save the owner's livelihood. And hadn't the receptionist told me the owner had been called away urgently before breakfast? A likely story.

It was all starting to make sense. I hurried downstairs to the receptionist's desk.

"Please, you must telephone the police at once," I blurted out. "Someone has been stabbed and I think your boss is the murderer."

The receptionist stared at me with puzzled eyes. Then she started to snigger, then giggle - until eventually she was laughing hysterically. I didn't know what to do. I grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook her. "Pull yourself together woman," I screamed. "This is serious. There's a knife covered with blood in my room."

She held up her hands to indicate she wanted to speak.

"It must have been Brenda."

"Brenda? Who's Brenda?"

“Brenda, our maid”. The receptionist was trying to keep a straight face.

“What? Your maid’s the murderer?” This wasn’t making sense.

“I do apologise, sir,” she smirked. “I’m not laughing at you, please believe me. There hasn’t been a murder, well not really.”

I stared at her. “Not a murder. Not really. You’re talking nonsense, woman.” But then the thought occurred to me. If there had been a murder, where was the body?

“No, there hasn’t been a murder. It was Brenda. She hadn’t finished cleaning your room.” The receptionist was coherent now. “In the winter we organise themed events and, on Saturday and Sunday, we held a Murder Mystery Weekend. Your room was the scene of the murder. You arrived early and Brenda must’ve been so busy she hadn’t got around to cleaning your room properly”.

The penny dropped. No murder. Just a Murder Mystery Weekend. For the second time in half an hour, I sat down in a state of shock. What a fool I’d been. And then I felt disgusted and deceived. I would be the butt of everyone’s joke, a laughing stock. I rushed out of the hotel and stomped around the grounds. But after a while, I started to think more clearly. I might look foolish but at least I wasn’t involved in a real-life murder.

When I spoke to my colleagues on the course that afternoon, everyone said my imagination must have been working overtime and the tutor was particularly impressed with my creative ideas. In fact, they were all very impressed. I have to admit, it was the talk of the course and I dined out on it for the rest of the week - and for several weeks afterwards when I got home.

Of course, the hotel owner spoke to me after he returned from his urgent business - which turned out to be nothing more than a visit to an elderly relative whose suspected heart attack was merely a serious bout of indigestion. He apologised profusely for the embarrassment and, as recompense, offered me an expenses-free weekend at the hotel for two.

I’m looking forward to my free weekend away. It will make a pleasant break. But when I go, I think I’ll take a special item of luggage with me. Perhaps a length of lead piping? Or a spanner? Or a candlestick? Which I will liberally smear with tomato ketchup. And which I’ll leave in the drawer as a special surprise for Brenda.

Charles Kingsley

Brian Jones

Devon is one of the most beautiful of English counties. Sandwiched between the jagged coasts - the red cliffs in the south and the grey cliffs in the north - is a widely contrasting landscape, ranging from heartlands and wooded valleys to buzzard-haunted combs, from sophisticated resorts like Torbay to quaint villages hidden within steep sunken lanes. No major writer has been so deeply influenced by Devon, mentally and physically, as Charles Kingsley, the Victorian author of *Westward Ho!* and *The Water Babies*.

Kingsley's main biographer in recent years has been Susan Chitty in *The Beast and the Monk* and *Charles Kingsley's Landscape*. Of the young Kingsley, as a schoolboy in the West Country, she wrote:

'Kingsley's interest in nature was not merely physical; it verged on the metaphysical. In a letter written in his youth he described the strange excitement, often culminating in tears, that was aroused in him by the "beautiful inanimate - sun and stars, wood and wave". He practised a kind of pantheism, peopling favourite moorland springs with attendant nymphs and writing poems about them. The love of the western landscape had penetrated in to the boy's soul. He had in fact constructed for himself a kind of religion of the hills, the cliffs and the sea.'

Charles Kingsley was born in 1819 at Holne rectory, Dartmoor. The old house, with its fine moorland views, still stands. He was educated mainly at Helston Grammar School. Although the family subsequently moved to other parts of England, Devon was always his first love. His favourite part of the coast was Clovelly, that incredibly steep North Devon fishing village whose main street consisted of flights of cobbled steps, up and down which all cargoes had to be carried by pack-donkeys. His father was curate of Clovelly for four years.

Charles was a tall, thin, gaunt youth, nervous and highly strung, very conscientious in his lessons and his daily life. He was often in poor health. It was always assumed by his parents that he would follow his father by entering the church. In 1835 the Kingsleys moved to Chelsea, London, but Charles found London ugly and dirty. He described the young ladies who helped his mother with charitable works as 'nothing

but ugly splay-footed beings, three-fourths of whom can't sing, and the other quarter sing miles out of tune, with voices like love sick parrots.'

Charles studied mathematics at Cambridge and fell in love with Fanny Grenfell, from a large and wealthy Cornish family. In 1841 he became curate of the remote village of Eversley, near Aldershot, all the time writing impassioned love letters to Fanny. Two years later he was the rector of Eversley and was now allowed to marry Fanny.

Charles tended to take his duties too conscientiously. He was slaving away at his parochial work, tending to the poor and sick of a very neglected parish, was editing the journal of the new Christian Socialist movement and was also grinding out a serious novel called *Yeast* about rural poverty. The physical and mental strain of all this caused a grave nervous breakdown.

In January 1849 the whole family moved to Ilfracombe, Devon, and then to the picturesque village of Lynmouth. Charles's most loved haven in Devon was neither Ilfracombe nor Lynmouth, in spite of their many attractions, but his childhood home of Clovelly. He returned there alone and was given a hero's welcome by the cottage people. Charles took lodgings with a fisherman's family and gradually his physical and mental wellbeing returned. He visited the famous Deer Park on the cliff tops. A lengthy account of his holiday, 'North Devon' was published in *Fraser's Magazine* that year. Charles ended his holiday in Devon by walking across the county from north to south.

His second novel *Alton Locke* did for the London working class what *Yeast* had done for farm labourers. Both novels, because of their radical content, met with disapproval from critics. His third novel *Hypatia*, set in ancient Greece, encountered a mixed reception.

Kingsley now set about expressing his deep love for Devon in the form of an historical novel. *Westward Ho!* was started in fashionable Torquay. This resort was not much to his taste. In the summer of 1854 the family moved to the less touristy and much wilder north coast of Devon. They settled in Northdown Hall, near Bideford. Charles discovered his boyhood passion for collecting sea shells and examining marine life. His two small children, Rose and Maurice, aided him enthusiastically. His interest in sea shores and marine life would be later embodied in the autobiographical *Glaucus* and in fairy tale form in his children's' classic *The Water Babies*.

In December *Westward Ho!* was published. This huge novel, about a quarter of a million words, had been written in an amazingly short period of time. It immediately became a massive bestseller and by 1897 had been reprinted thirty-eight times. It is an ingenious mixture of historical fact and fiction, featuring Elizabethan Clovelly and Bideford. It contains real historical characters, the sailors and explorers whose achievements added such glory to Queen Elizabeth's remarkable reign. One of these is Sir Richard Grenville, who was responsible for transforming the sleepy fishing port of Bideford into one of the most thriving ports in the West Country. He was a man of almost insane pride and vanity and Kingsley does not shy from depicting the vitriolic aspect to his character. The other real life Elizabethans in the novel are Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the navigator from Dartmouth, and Sir Francis Drake, whose role in the destruction of the Spanish Armada is vividly evoked. The main fictional hero is Amyas Leigh of Bideford. As a schoolboy, Amyas hears from a sailor's own lips the story of an adventurous voyage to Central America and learns of the gold buried there. He is determined to seek for this gold. The abduction of the lovely Rose of Torridge by a noble Spanish prisoner of war causes Amyas and his brother Frank to set off on a perilous journey over the ocean. They return, not with gold or Rose, but with a passionate child of nature, Ayacanora. The climax of the novel is the coming of the great Spanish Armada and the part played in its defeat by the men of Devon.

Westward Ho! evoked a great deal of local controversy. Many people in Barnstaple insisted that it was their town, not Bideford as stated by Kingsley, that manned and fitted out the ships that defeated the Spanish fleet. To this day, Barnstaple and Bideford, who share the same large bay, are engaged in intense rivalry. Some controversy, though much milder, also arose out of Kingsley's depiction of local witchcraft and superstitions.

Of Bideford Kingsley wrote, 'Pleasantly the old town stands beneath its soft Italian sky, fanned day and night by the fresh ocean breeze, which forbids alike the keen winter frosts, and the fierce thunder heats of the midland; and pleasantly it has stood there for now, perhaps, eight hundred years, since the first Grenville, cousin of the Conqueror, returned from the conquest of South Wales.'

Westward Ho! has always been the most popular of Kingsley's novels. This robust and glowing romance gave full scope for his vitality, his love of Devon and his hatred of the Roman Catholic Church, as personified by the Spain of Philip II.

Psychologists could make much of Kingsley's 'water obsession'. This had first manifested itself with his early novel *Alton Locke* dealing the deplorable lack of sanitation in the East End of London; also in *Glaucus: or the Wonders of the Shore* with its descriptions of aquatic life; *The Water Babies*, almost entirely set underwater, and, of course, the sea faring *Westwood Ho!*

Charles Kingsley was a man of many contradictions: a socialist who supported much of the ruling order, a reformer yet a strong supporter of blood sports and the monarchy, paradoxes that make him one of the most interesting and original of Victorian novelists.

The Trespasser

Chav Lad

Tom woke up with a start as the light was switched on. The man he saw standing over him, though fairly tall, was not powerfully built and had to be at least sixty. After a few seconds more Tom realised that the man was alone and should therefore have been just as scared as he was, more so in fact. Tom was not of a violent disposition but there was no way the man could have known that.

'Who are you?' the man asked. 'What are you doing here?'

Both of these questions were reasonable enough. Tom tried to work out how annoyed the guy looked. If he was lucky he might just chuck him out without calling the police.

'Sorry mate,' Tom said, 'I was just kipping down for the night.'

'How did you get in here?' the man asked as Tom began rolling up his sleeping bag. Tom was relieved that he seemed more curious than angry.

'I've got a key,' Tom said, delving into his trouser pocket and producing the proof that he had not made a forcible entry.

'Where did you get it?'

‘Sorry, it was a long time ago, during the war. I was sixteen then and had to sleep where I could. My parents had been killed in an air raid. That was in the South. I came to this town and did a few odd jobs but didn’t make enough to be able to get a room of my own. I got chatting to a bloke in a bar who gave me that key. He said this house was used as an office and was empty at night. I just had to make sure I was up and away before the office workers came in.’

‘And where did he get the key? Who was he?’

‘Can’t remember his name, it was ten years ago. He said he’d worked here and hadn’t given the key back. He gave it to me one night in return for me buying his drinks. He’d do anything for a few beers.’

‘And have you been using this place all this time?’ the man asked incredulously.

‘Oh, no,’ Tom laughed. ‘I used it a few times back in forty-four, that’s all. I’ve been in London since the war. I had a few days off work and decided to come back here for old time’s sake. I couldn’t really afford a hotel so I took the key with me just in case this place was still here. I couldn’t believe it when the key still worked.’

Tom had been putting his sleeping bag into his rucksack as he spoke. He was now ready to go, though he was still unsure if the guy would let him go quietly.

‘I haven’t stolen anything if that’s what you think,’ he said again. ‘I didn’t when I slept here before either.’

‘No,’ said the man, looking at him thoughtfully, ‘I can believe that. How often did you sleep here ten years ago? And why did you choose this tatty little storeroom? The downstairs office is far nicer.’

‘This is where I always used to come. I thought people might see me through the windows downstairs and I somehow felt safer in this little room at the top of the stairs, it reminded me of my bedroom when I was a kid. I stopped coming here because I got it into my head the place was haunted. You know how daft youngsters can be.’

The man smiled, no doubt amused that someone who was still only twenty-six could talk about youngsters in that way. He was actually a genial sort of bloke, more genial, Tom knew, than he had a right to expect.

‘Do you mind if I ask you something?’ Tom said. ‘Have you ever heard about this place being haunted? I take it you work here.’

‘I don’t work here now but I used to run my business from this building. I’ve retired to Switzerland and I came back to sort a few things out and take a last look at this place. I kept my old key too, you see, though at least they know I’m here. And no, there are no ghosts, at least none you need worry about. Perhaps in a sense there are for me, but that’s another story. But why did you think the place was haunted?’

Tom felt a little ashamed of himself. No doubt the guy would think he was nuts but he continued anyway.

‘It’s just that, when I came here before, I used to think I heard people talking even though I knew I was the only one in the place. I think it was probably the drink, though. I used to drink more than was good for me in those days.’

‘You heard people talking?’ The man was clearly startled.

‘Yes. Sometimes men’s voices, sometimes women’s, sometimes girls giggling. I couldn’t really understand what they were saying, it was too low. I suppose it could have been from the house next door but it didn’t seem like it. But,’ said Tom, realising that it was the middle of the night, ‘what brings you here at this time?’

‘I was going to come in the morning but decided to come now. I suppose I couldn’t wait. It’s a special anniversary for me, you see. It was ten years ago that something happened here. Don’t worry, nobody died here if that’s what you think. Not here. You say you lost your parents in the war? I’m so sorry. It’s strange that we should meet here. I lost my children in the war too, and my wife. I came here tonight to drink a toast to them, alone and in peace. I’m supposed to be meeting some friends here tomorrow, but I just wanted to be alone tonight.’

‘I understand,’ said Tom, picking up his rucksack. ‘I’m sorry I trespassed here. It was a stupid idea. I think it was a kind of nostalgia more than anything.’

‘An orphan has a right to be nostalgic, I mean one who remembers his family. How old were you when they were killed?’

‘Twelve,’ Tom said. He didn’t talk about it much.

‘Would you join me for a drink?’ the man asked. ‘I brought a bottle with me, you see.’

The man led him through a door in the corner of the room that Tom couldn’t recall seeing during the first period he had stayed there. He seemed to recall there had once been a bookcase or shelving with

office supplies in that corner. Through the door was a steep flight of stairs leading into what had once been a laboratory of some sort, judging from the long counter along one side with its integral sink. For a few moments they stumbled about in the dark, but then the man turned on the light. 'I was forgetting we don't have to worry about showing a light now,' he laughed. There was a table and some chairs in the room, and the old man took out a bottle of Johnnie Walker from his bag. He also found some glasses in a cupboard which he rinsed out in the sink. Then he poured them both some whisky.

'To our lost ones,' he said.

To his embarrassment Tom felt his eyes moistening. He had rarely had the opportunity to share his loss.

'Was this a laboratory?' he asked, trying to think of something to say until the moment passed.

'It was once,' the man confirmed, 'though for a couple of years it was our home. It hadn't been a laboratory for years by then.'

'I suppose it must have been handy, living above your office.'

'You could say that,' the man smiled. 'But tell me, when you thought you heard ghosts when you slept in the little room downstairs, did you tell anyone else about it?'

'Well yes, I told a couple of people in the bar I went to round the corner, and the guy who sold me the key.'

'The one who would do anything for a few beers?'

Tom sensed the man stiffening and for a moment he looked decidedly less benign. Tom downed the remaining whisky in his glass in case he was about to be chucked out, but the man softened a little as he looked at him and poured him another drink.

'Did you have many children?' Tom asked.

'Two daughters. One of them saw herself as a bit of a writer and had a work published posthumously. It's already been published in several languages.'

'I'm not much into literature,' Tom admitted a little guiltily.

'No,' the man smiled, 'obviously not. And so you soon stopped coming here after you thought you heard those ghosts and blabbed to everyone about them?'

Tom thought that a rather odd way of putting it.

‘Well, I got a job on a farm out of town.’

‘It must have been hard for you, losing your parents like that. And that was near the beginning of the war, you said? Was there no-one to take you in?’

‘Well,’ said Tom, ‘my mum used to be a cleaner for some people, the Rosenbergs, and I went to them and they looked after me for a while. They had a holiday cottage on the coast. I helped them build a boat. It was a secret, of course. They sailed off one night when it was ready. I wanted to go with them but they wouldn’t let me. They said the risk was worth it for them but not for me. They didn’t think it would work but they thought it was worth a try. Besides, they wanted me to stay for a while and cover for them. It turned out they did make it. We got in touch after the war and they invited me to go and live with them in London.’

For some reason the man seemed to find this amusing.

‘I’m sorry,’ he apologised, pouring out some more whisky, ‘it’s just the irony. You were, are, a good lad, I see that now. Surely you must have known how dangerous it was for you, helping them like that?’

‘They’d been good to me,’ Tom said.

‘Do you know,’ the man went on, ‘there are people who’ve suggested that this old house should be turned into a sort of museum? I’m not entirely sure that I like the idea. But on the other hand it might serve a useful purpose.’

This seemed very odd to Tom. Why on earth would anyone want to convert this old house, identical to thousands of others in the city, into a museum?

‘Something to do with history or literature?’ he asked.

‘You could say that,’ the man smiled.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ Tom asked, suddenly realising just how much he needed a cigarette.

‘Not at all.’

‘Would you like one? Er, sorry, we still haven’t told each other our names. I’m Tom.’

‘Otto,’ smiled the man, taking a cigarette.

They talked about their lost families until it was getting light

outside. Tom liked the conversation because it centred on times before the war. The Rosenbergs rarely mentioned that period, as though their lives had only begun when they arrived in Finchley. But then, they had still had each other and their children. Tom and the guy had been left with no-one. They both cheerfully acknowledged that they were blessed with some good friends, but they knew that, although true, there was an element of bravado in their assertion. Nothing, nobody, could ever really compensate for their loss.

‘I suppose I must go now,’ Tom said at last. ‘The first trains have started running.’

‘Yes,’ Otto said, ‘I suppose you must.’

They went down the little flight of stairs, through the door that had once been hidden by a bookcase, down the main stairs. At the door they shook hands and wished each other well.

The truth dawned gradually on Tom. He was browsing through a bookshop a couple of years later when he saw *The Diary of Anne Frank*. He had vaguely heard of it but this edition had photographs of the hiding place, and of the little room with the bookcase in the corner. Had he, however inadvertently, betrayed them? And had Otto Frank, while they drank and chatted together, been aware of this? One thing Tom knew with absolute certainty: Otto would never be able to forget that encounter any more than he could.

It was more than thirty years before he plucked up the courage to return, taking his family to visit both Rotterdam, the town of his birth, and Amsterdam. His youngest son Craig, the History buff, had insisted they visit Anne Frank’s House.

‘Did they ever find out who the bastard who betrayed them was?’ Craig asked.

‘No,’ said Melanie, Tom’s wife. ‘Some say Otto Frank had his suspicions but if he did, he never let on.’

They went from the annexe to the part of the house where there were photographs of Anne Frank and her family. Tom tried to avoid looking at Otto’s, as though he could not bring himself to look him in the face. He had long since ceased to believe in ghosts but, as he finally, sheepishly, caught sight of Otto Frank’s photograph, he could have sworn the old man winked at him.

Just Call Me Beckie

Fiona Crinks

(This story came third in the Froud Children's Short Story Competition 2010)

At first it just seemed funny. I laughed too. It was Cassie that started it. She was my best friend then. It was odd really as our class had all been called in to see the school nurse at the same time. Cassie and I had stood side by side in the queue and I knew that she couldn't read the same letters as me. Yet, somehow, I was the one who ended up with glasses.

Mum and I chose them together. There were some really cool frames around but I knew Mum couldn't afford to spend a lot of money on me so chose one of the plainer pairs, after all, I wasn't intending to show them off, just wanted to see better. I hadn't realised how much I was missing out on, how misty my world was around the edges.

I wasn't too bothered when I first went into school wearing my new glasses. I liked them, mainly because everything was clear as crystal again. I could see the white board. I could join in with netball. I thought my glasses were great. No one else in the class had glasses. They made me feel a bit different; a bit special.

So I was taken aback when Cassie immediately called out 'Speccie Beckie!' and everyone giggled. I laughed too. I suppose it did seem funny at first. I didn't know then that the giggling was going to turn into sniggering and that the name was going to stick around for quite a while.

Over the next few weeks, everyone started to call me 'Speccie' instead of Beckie. It only took about ten days before I was fed up with it. I tried asking my so-called friends to stop but they just got carried away with how clever they were being and even tried other names like 'Four Eyes'. No one wanted to listen to me anymore. They were more interested in trying to impress each other and, in amongst all the shrieks of laughter, I didn't seem to matter. My glasses made me different, I was an easy target. Any time someone wanted to make a quick joke you could bet that I would feature in it. The boys weren't so bad, they were just interested in football, but the girls were terrible.

Rainy lunchtimes were the worst; they sat on the tables combing their hair and comparing themselves to me. I always came off the worst.

I lived with it for quite a while. I couldn't do much else. Even Cassie didn't seem to understand how I felt. She just brushed me aside when I tried to tackle her about it.

'Grow up Speccie,' she said, 'Get a life. Worry about something worthwhile for a change, like the state of the planet or your carbon footprint!'

'You're two months younger than me and you're telling me to grow up!' I shouted after her, adding feebly, 'There are things that need sorting out here and now!' It was too late; she had already bustled off to save the whale.

Suddenly she was surrounded by all these other girls who seemed to think that they were her best friends. They all went shopping together at the weekends. Hattie invited her to a sleepover! And she went! Then Cassie had a sleepover herself. I didn't go. I only found out about it the day afterwards, when everyone was talking about how great it had been. Hattie's Mum had sent along some special girly make-up, all pink and glittery, and Hattie had given everyone a makeover. They insisted on talking about it in front of me and I felt totally left out, not even worth being made over. It didn't make me feel any better that they all seemed to look exactly the same now, same eye shadow, same hairstyles, and same clothes. They all looked like clones of each other and I stuck out like a sore thumb.

'Individual,' Mum called it. She refused to buy me the pink glittery stuff when I asked for it. My request was a bit half-hearted though, the make-up was very expensive and I knew that I only wanted it so that I could fit in.

I did not think that I could feel much more miserable but things became even worse when my friends started adding other things to my nickname.

'Bex the Spex' was not too bad but 'Speccie Spotty' and 'Spiffy Spotty' were another matter. I thought that if I could just join in with the laughter then I would show that I was on the same side as the others, someone just like them who knew how to share a joke. Inside I

was crying. I suppose I was a bit sensitive as I had just started to get spots but I wasn't the only one. Quite a lot of other people had them as well, including the ones who were calling me names, but no one else seemed to notice this and when I tried to point it out they looked at me as if I were the crazy one.

When people started teasing me about every little thing, as if I was just there to provide them with a laugh, I stopped wanting to go to school. I felt sick every time I thought about standing by myself in the playground. Nobody wanted to chat to me at lunchtimes anymore and I felt completely isolated. I did not know what to do with myself. Wherever I went I felt like everybody was watching me and laughing at me.

It was much nicer to stay cosily at home and have Mum fussing over me before she went to work. She just couldn't understand what was wrong with me and I couldn't bring myself to tell her. She had enough to worry about what with being a single parent and working all day long. In the end I complained so much about feeling sick that she insisted on taking me to the doctor. I felt so ashamed that I couldn't tell the doctor the real reasons behind why I felt so miserable all the time. Beckie no mates, that was me.

It was only when Mum bumped into Cassie in town and Cassie asked 'How's Speccie?', without even thinking about it, that Mum figured out why I was suddenly having so many headaches and stomach aches.

'Do your friends know how upset you are?' she demanded when she got home. It was hard to work out who she was the maddest with, my so-called friends or me.

I had to confess that I had given up trying to stop them calling me 'Speccie'. They had made me think that somehow I deserved to be treated badly. I guessed that my friends probably had no real idea how unhappy they were making me feel, they were far too busy keeping up with the latest trends. Meanwhile I was trying to cope with living in the sharply defined world they had forced me into, where, if you were not 'in' you were quite definitely 'out'. I was suddenly, painfully, aware of how lonely I was.

‘Why not try telling them again?’ Mum hugged me sympathetically. ‘See if it makes a difference this time? Make them listen to you.’

I wasn’t very keen on this solution. I thought it would just give them another reason to laugh at me and call me a loser, but Mum kept on and on at me.

‘By facing up to them you’ll show them how strong you are. At least then you will have started to deal with it,’ said Mum. ‘If it doesn’t work we’ll try something else.’

Just telling Mum had made me feel a whole lot better. In the end I figured out that maybe, by telling all the bullies exactly how I felt, I might feel better even if it didn’t stop them. I didn’t have a lot to lose. No one talked to me at morning break, no one asked me around to their house after school and no one wanted me at their sleepovers or on their shopping trips. There was no fun left.

Mum booked me an appointment to see if I could get some contact lenses. She suggested that I should speak to Cassie first. She was, after all, supposed to be my best friend. So I asked Cassie round for pizza and a DVD, just like in the old days. She took a bit of persuading, had to fit me into her hectic social calendar, but she eventually agreed to come.

Cassie laughed just like I thought she would when I told her how miserable I felt.

‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ she said, ‘You’re taking it all too seriously. There’s no need to get all heavy about it. Whatever happened to your sense of humour?’

She looked a bit uncomfortable though when I asked her about the sleepovers and the make-up parties. Turns out she hadn’t enjoyed them very much — Hattie had insisted on inviting all her mates and although Cassie had been the star guest at first, in the end she had felt a bit left out!

‘So now you know how I feel all the time!’ I said. I made her promise there and then not to call me ‘Speccie’ or any of the other names ever again. It felt good to be talking properly after weeks of hiding my feelings. In the end Cassie agreed but I could tell she thought I was over exaggerating things.

Gradually, with Cassie's help, the name 'Speccie' began to be phased out. She made a big effort to call me 'Rebecca' at first, as if to remind everyone that I had a proper name. I retaliated with 'Cassandra' and we had a good laugh. Everyone else looked a bit baffled but they soon joined in, 'Harriet' was one of the first. Over the next few weeks 'Speccie' vanished and I became Beckie again. I felt more like my old self. I even started to look forward to going to school.

The contact lenses helped too. They were great and Mum got me some special face wash which dealt with the spots. As a special surprise she also splashed out and bought me some cool designer frames. They were purple with diamonds sparkling in the corners and they made me feel really cool. Even Hattie had to admire them.

Life returned to normal. Then came the next visit by the school nurse and her special poster. I stood by Cassie again and yet again she stumbled over the same letters as me. Weird. It was even weirder when Cassie arrived in school a week or so later wearing glasses that were nearly as smart as mine, red frames with studs on the arms. Turns out that she should have had glasses the first time round but the nurse had forgotten to add her name to the form. Cassie grinned at me as she sat down and whispered 'Surprise!'

'Oh look,' said our class clown not wishing to miss an opportunity to crack a joke, 'now we've got Glassie Cassie as well as Speccie Beckie!' Everyone roared with laughter but Cassie looked appalled.

'Shut up, Fattie Hattie!' I shouted, surprising myself and everyone else, 'You're just jealous because you don't look cool like us.'

My words struck home. Hattie went bright red and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like 'Sorry'. Cassie shot me a relieved look.

'Yeah, Hattie!' she said, slipping her arm through mine. 'You just want to be in with the in crowd like me and Beckie!'

It was strange really that it had taken me so long to fight back when I was being bullied, but I'd managed it, in an instant, for Cassie. Funny how your friends can make you see things differently...

Roberts and Regan Incorporated

Leslie Wilkie

Apart from being a paperboy in my teenage years I've never had a steady job. I used to be a specialist kind of night worker and for years I made a living from certain of the skills I learned in the army. One of those skills was abseiling, something I excelled at. I loved climbing and for a time I was part of an army climbing expedition. The trouble was I couldn't cope with the other aspects of army life, the marching and saluting, so I got out as soon as I could.

My army service lasted for five years from the age of eighteen and therefore I was still a young man when I left. When I looked around at my ex school mates, some struggling to cope with mortgages and others deep in debt after leaving university, I decided that there must be easier ways to earn a living. That was when I began to put my climbing skills to use. I became a burglar.

You'd be surprised just how many people believe that being three or four floors up in a building gives them security. People become lax and leave windows on the latch, partly open so that the smell of sweaty bodies or cigarette smoke is dispelled overnight from office suites or work rooms. Those partly open windows were my front door. I abseiled down from rooftops or shinned up drainpipes on a regular basis and made a good living from what I found lying about. It was amazing how many buildings I entered in that fashion without people realising how I'd got in. Staff toilets were my favourite entry point, over half the open windows were in them.

In those early years I used to catch a bus or take a train ride out to a nearby town, book into a boarding house for a couple of days, and wander round the town centre sizing up the buildings. Then for one or two nights I'd work the buildings I'd selected. I only ever took cash and even then I had my principles because I never touched charity boxes. In fact in some places if the pickings had been good I'd drop a couple of pounds into a charity box. I remember one office where I found nearly seven hundred pounds in a tin marked petty cash - I left a tenner in the Oxfam box.

I had a number of narrow squeaks of course, during that time. There was one occasion when I was about to search an office manager's desk when I heard footsteps and giggling outside the door. I ducked into his

bathroom as a security guard and a young woman entered the room. They then spent fifteen minutes enjoying themselves on the manager's shagpile while I hid behind the shower curtain. Afterwards I collected some coins from the carpet that had fallen from the guard's trousers. I remember buying a copy of *The War Cry* with that money from a young Salvation Army girl in the pub down the road about half an hour later.

One other incident that springs to mind was the night I was seen climbing down a drainpipe by a drunk. He was in the shadow propping a wall up and I didn't see him until he tapped me on the shoulder.

"What're doing?" he asked in a slurred voice.

I put my finger to my lips and said, "Shush, her husband might hear you."

"What's she like?"

"A real cracker," I said.

I left him trying to climb the drainpipe.

I usually avoided big international companies on my nightly visits because they tend to have much tighter security than smaller firms. However, one memorable night I took a chance when I saw an open window three floors up. Downstairs in the foyer I could see a security guard sleeping, his head resting on his desk. I had to shin up one floor of the drainpipe to reach the fire escape. The window was open about two inches and all I had to do was slide it up to gain entrance. I found I was in the bathroom adjacent to the finance manager's office. His desk was locked but I soon opened the lock with my skeleton keys. Concealed in the top drawer of his desk was a piece of paper with his computer log-in details and the firm's banking security codes and password. I copied the whole lot, relocked the desk, and got out as quickly as possible.

In the town centre I found one of those all-night Internet cafés and logged on using the information that I'd taken. I couldn't believe it when I got straight into the firm's bank account. I sat in front of that screen amazed at what I had done and wondering what to do next. In the end I logged off and went out into the street to think. I knew I couldn't transfer money into my account because then I'd be found out as soon as an audit took place so I decided to invent a company. That

was when Roberts and Regan Incorporated came into being. I was Mr Roberts.

The railway station had one of those machines where you could make up business cards so I invested in fifty of the deluxe kind. Then I returned to the Internet site and produced a business letter purporting to be from my new company requesting immediate banking facilities to be set up by one of the leading banks. I didn't get much sleep that night because in what remained of it I tossed and turned in bed whilst my mind went over and over all the possibilities.

My first stop the following morning was at a store that catered for weddings. I left there attired in a business suit that I'd hired for the day. After that it was time to test out my newly acquired identity at the bank. It went incredibly well. The assistant manager readily accepted my story of setting up a new business in the city and of the imminent transfer of funds. Within the hour I had a business account, a chequebook and most important of all an Internet identity.

Two doors further down the street was a different bank. There I set up a new account in my own name but a fictitious address. My story that time was that I was relocating to the city and that the proceeds of my house sale would shortly be transferred into my account. Once again within a short time I was handed a cheque book and an Internet identity. I had to have a stiff drink after that. Mind you I only had the one before setting off to the Internet cafe again.

I sat in front of that computer terminal for twenty minutes reading through the bank details that I'd stolen less than twelve hours earlier. Many thousands of pounds were moved in and out of that firm's accounts in that short time. I decided that any round figure that I inserted would look out of place so I transferred fifty-six thousand three hundred and two pounds fifty pence initially. Without leaving my seat I logged off, then logged on again to my new business account and lo and behold there was all my lovely money. Half of that I immediately transferred into my other new account.

For the next two months I regularly transferred money into my two new accounts and regularly removed it in cash. I was always careful though to leave some money in each account. I knew it couldn't last of course, but by the time the company realised what was happening and changed all its security codes I'd salted away quite a fortune.

I moved to Spain then. I had a lovely villa with a swimming pool and regularly held parties for the many friends I made. I didn't have to worry about money because I had five pensions. You see, before all the security codes were changed and the flow of money stopped, I spent a little time working on the company pension scheme. I set up pensions for both Mr Roberts and Mr Regan and three other fictitious characters. It was better than climbing drainpipes for a living.

I lived in comparative luxury then for nearly four years before I made a stupid mistake. One of the pensions didn't arrive one month so I wrote and complained. I signed the letter with my real name without thinking. The police found me two weeks later. Apparently the fraud squad had been on my trail for some time and I gave them the break they needed. Now I've got five years inside to contemplate the errors of my ways.

Mind you they say old habits never die and I've found myself studying the prison buildings. The governor has a habit of leaving his office window open and I reckon I could be over that wall in the exercise yard in a couple of minutes. I might think about it if I don't like the food.... Ta-ta for now.

The Society's Financial Forecast as at 20th April 2012

Balance @31/3/12; £3468.77

Cheques not cleared; £32.00

£3436.77

Payments not credited; £44.00

Less Summer Author ; £600.00

£2880.77

Less Vee Bradley; £110.00

£2770.77

Money Manager@ 27th March 2012; £469.27 (7p interest)

Standing Orders - £550.00 received.

Donations; £184.00

Competition entries; 44 = £237.00

150 members paid/6 written cancellations.