

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

New Year Party

Saturday, 26 January 2013

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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CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Chairman's Chat
- 5 Annual Literary Luncheon Report *Ethel Corduff*
- 6 New Year Party 2013
- 6 SCPSW Annual Competitions 2013
- 7 Gordon Gompers Competition 2012 Results
- 8 Literary Quiz *Terry Rickson, Paul Williams*
- 9 Market Profile *Ethel Corduff*
- 10 Members' Successes
- 10 Poetry Workshop *Mike Boland*
- 13 Poetry Pages *Edited by Terry James*
- 18 Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition Runners-Up
- 21 A Dramatic Revival *Stephen Bibby*
- 26 The Fairy *AE Hobbs*
- 27 Researching a Victorian Politician *Ruth Sear*
- 30 A Christmas Journey *Terry Rickson*
- 31 A Dog's Tale *Brian Lockett*
- 34 In the Days of King Herod *Bill Torrie Douglas*
- 37 Noise *Chester Guttridge*

Editorial

Paul Williams

A Merry Christmas and a happy, productive New Year to all members.

You will notice that the Vincent Brennan Travel Article Competition is no more, though those who want to try their hand at travel writing can still enter the Gordon Gompers Competition, which is open to all non-fiction articles. The decision to combine the two was taken because of the low number of entries to each.

On the subject of competitions, after some debate it has been decided to drop the double spacing rule for entries, though that's not to say clear presentation is not still a requirement! Those who wish to continue to double-space their entries are, of course, welcome to do so. This decision was made to help keep postal costs down, as it may be possible to avoid having to use large envelopes if fewer pages are required. The double spacing requirement dates to the time of typewriters, when any late changes to a manuscript had to be inserted by hand. With word processors a crisp, clear, finished manuscript is possible. The bugbear with word processors is more likely to be the size of the font used.

Although competitions have been used as a means of attracting new members, it's time to remind everyone that another good way of seeing your work in print is to send it to the magazine! It seems odd that one of the inducements for entering competitions is publication in *The Author*, yet many people who enter competitions have never submitted anything to the magazine. Although I receive more submissions than I can use, the chances of seeing your work in print are fairly good if it's at least half-decent. Inevitably, some stories and articles appear more competently written than others, but I try to encourage everyone, even those whose work, in my very subjective opinion, seems borderline at first sight. Certainly, I don't think anyone who has submitted three or more stories has not seen at least one of them published here, albeit with a little discussion and tweaking in some cases. To that extent this magazine offers something others do not.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

I enjoyed reading the article written by Brian Jones about Charles Kingsley. It might be of interest to members that Eversley in Hampshire, where Kingsley was rector from 1844 until his death in 1875, is something of a place for a literary pilgrimage.

The church dedication is to 'The Church of Blessed Mary the Virgin at Eversley'. It would appear to have been built on an ancient pre-Christian site, although the present building dates mainly from the 18th Century. The churchyard contains the white marble tomb where Kingsley and his wife Fanny are buried. Inside the church there is a memorial brass on the east wall carrying an inscription in Latin. Also of interest is a brass, located on the north wall, commemorating Kingsley's niece, Mary Kingsley, a redoubtable Victorian Lady Explorer who travelled in West Africa. She died of a fever contracted whilst nursing soldiers in the South African War (1899-1902). The brass is inscribed with a verse from the Kiran. Eversley lies on the A237, off the A30, in the direction of Reading.

I dare say many of you have visited places with literary connections, whether houses or museums in cities or quiet country places such as Beatrix Potter's farm in the Lake District or Thomas Hardy's birthplace in Dorset; they make a good day out.

Christmas and the New Year still seem somewhat afar off but will soon be here and, when they are, what better time to settle down with a good book – or perhaps one of M.R. James's shivery ghost stories!

My best wishes for Christmas and the New Year and another year of writing for enjoyment.

Subscriptions

Time for the annual reminder that subscriptions are due at the beginning of January. A renewal form is enclosed with this edition of *The Author* for those who are not paying by standing order. The cost of membership has remained the same for fifteen years.

Farewell to Shafi

Ethel Corduff

It is with great sadness that we bid farewell to our longstanding and loyal member Shafi Ahmed, who passed away on 20 September after a fairly short illness bravely borne. Shafi was a regular at all our meetings and functions and a frequent participant in our local poetry workshops. He was a first prize winner of the Peterloo Poetry competition. Shafi had many qualifications. He was a scientist specialising in astrophysics, a first class marine engineer and a retired Principal Surveyor and an IMO advisor to the Bangladesh Government. He was also an author and researcher. He and his wife ran a small publishing company specialising in books on poetry, mathematics, philosophy and theoretical thinking. In retirement he spent many months each year in his native sunny Bangladesh. He will be sadly missed by all who knew him in the society

Annual Literary Luncheon, Civil Service Club, 20 October 2012

Ethel Corduff

This year we missed our Chairman, Terry Rickson, who was not well enough to attend. We wish him a speedy recovery. Members came from Rutland, Suffolk, Kent, Lincolnshire, Dorset, Middlesex, Surrey, The Wirral, Hampshire and London. Guests included two members from Croydon Writers and Fleur Hogarth, our President Alan Watts' daughter.

We were entertained by our guest speaker David Tickner, editor of *Avanti*, the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship magazine which has a circulation of over 85,000. We heard about his journalistic journey and his role as editor and listened to his advice. The only subject he avoids in *Avanti* is politics. David welcomes submissions so why not get in touch with him?

The Writer of the Year Award was not awarded this year as we did not have a member who had published a substantial work and who not previously been a Writer of the Year.

New Year Party, Civil Service Club, 26 January 2013

The New Year Party will take place at the Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, Whitehall, on Saturday, 26 January 2013. The event starts with a buffet at 1pm, after which the first prize winner of the Children's Short Story Competition, if present, will be asked to read out the winning story. All members attending are also invited to bring along a short story or poem to read out, theme: 'Turning Point'. Short stories should be a maximum of 1,000 words and poems a maximum of 40 lines. Book prizes will be awarded to the winners.

Tickets are £16, which includes the buffet and wine. The form, which should be returned to Ethel Corduff, is enclosed.

SCPSW Annual Competitions 2013

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

Maximum length 3,000 words, clearly typed on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by S.A.E. Entry Fee £4.00 per story. Prizes as follows: 1st prize £75, 2nd prize £25. Closing date 28 February 2013.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the Vee Bradley Prize.) Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2 per entry. 1st prize £50, 2nd prize £25. Closing date 28 February 2013.

Several further competitions will be held during the course of the year and details will be published in future editions of *The Author*. Please note that the Vincent Brennan Travel Article Competition has been discontinued due to the very low response. Those who would have entered are welcome to submit travel articles to the Gordon Gompers Competition later in the year, which covers all non-fiction subjects including travel.

Notes for Entrants to All Competitions:

Unless entrants state from the outset that they do not wish their entry to be published, all first prize winners will appear in *The Author*. If space permits some second and third placed entries may also be

published in later editions. The entrants' real names will be used when announcing winners, unless they have advised at the time of submission that they would prefer to be known by their pen name. Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of the submission. Entries exceeding the specified length will be disqualified.

All entries should bear only a pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting the pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. All entries should be sent to the Competition Secretary, Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, SM2 6RT.

Gordon Gompers Competition 2012 Results

The Gordon Gompers Competition is open to any non-fiction article. The Judge, Joan Lewis, reported that of the seven entries received, three had to be disqualified as they had been published before. Although there is no minimum number of words, Joan felt that one entry of 438 words was too short to hope to compete with ones of 2,000 words, as it gave no chance to develop the theme.

The Winner was Stephen Bibby with *A Dramatic Revival*, which Joan describes as 'well written and in good style. No spelling and grammatical errors. The writer's experience might help other pensioners to decide to try amateur dramatics.' The article can be found in this edition of *The Author*.

Angus Livingstone was highly praised for *The Legacy of Sumer*, 'a thought provoking piece with some difficult concepts: the Sumerian story in contrast to 'strange' beliefs in the Bible. And the possibility that the world ends in December 2012! After Christmas, I hope!'

The Judge explained that, while both winner and runner up were well-written and worthy of publication in an appropriate journal, *A Dramatic Revival* seemed more accessible to the average reader. Also commended was Maureen Mills for *Let Them Eat Cake*, 'an excellent piece on the new fashion for Afternoon Tea.'

Literary Quiz

Compiled by Terry Rickson and Paul Williams. Answers in next edition.

- 1 An old Christmas/New Year custom Hardy featured in his novel, *The Return of the Native*.
- 2 An ancient city site that inspired an ode from a writer who was to become a renowned war poet.
- 3 What is a cinquain and how is it constructed?
- 4 Who was the commander of *The Beagle* in which Darwin sailed to South America?
- 5 Of whom was it said he could ‘... make a good thick soup and bake a tasty pie’?
- 6 Who had ‘A cold coming we had of it’?
- 7 What event is the subject of the poem *The Convergence of the Twain*?
- 8 In what receptacle did Mrs Cratchit cook her Christmas pudding?
- 9 Who was the author of *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*?
- 10 A poem by Christina Rossetti now familiar as a Christmas hymn.
- 11 Witty 1932 novel by Stella Gibbons parodying the rural idyll.
- 12 She won the Booker Prize in 1984 with *Hotel du Lac*.
- 13 Dickens’s Christmas story in which John Peerybingle appears.
- 14 Wordsworth described this tragic young poet as ‘that marvellous boy... that perished in his pride’.
- 15 British playwright born in Czechoslovakia whose works include *Travesties* and *Jumpers*.
- 16 Author of *Love on the Dole*.
- 17 19th Century American writer who went to school in Stoke Newington, now in North London.
- 18 Name of Sebastian Flyte’s teddy bear.
- 19 Narnian castle housing the four thrones.
- 20 The town Thomas Hardy called Casterbridge.

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

Among the magazines I received at the Over 50's show at Olympia was one called *The Oldie*, a title that made me cringe, but when I reluctantly looked through it months later I was amazed at how interesting it was. Also there are many openings for writers of non-fiction and poems which encourage readers and non-professionals to write for it. There is a regular column called *Memory Lane; What were you doing 40, 50, 60 years ago?* £50 is paid for the best one each month.

If you know of a prominent dump you can write about it. One of the world's alleged worst dumps is unbelievably Mount Everest!

Readers' contributions of travel tips or stories 300 words maximum are wanted for *Out and About and* £50 paid for all that are printed.

Contributors are welcome to send news and views to *The Old Un's Diary* but payment is not mentioned. *The Oldie* competition number 151 was to write a poem on any aspect of neighbours. Four were printed, each received £25 and one received a bonus prize of a biographical dictionary. A quarterly literary supplement with many book reviews was with my copy. A free sample copy of *The Oldie* can be obtained by ringing 0845 367 3613. Email editorial@theoldie.co.uk website www.theoldie.co.uk.

My Weekly magazine has a new image, catering for ladies aged thirty upwards, and is a good outlet for fiction. The July 2012 issue has a short story by a well-known chick lit author and a 'twist in the tale' short story, *Olympic Fever*. It has a 1950's serial called *Fairground Attraction*. There is a celebrity article on Amanda Holden and another on David Domoney, a gardening presenter, and a real life article *I had to walk again for Olivia*. There is also a short travel article on Morocco and a piece about campaigner Esther Rantzen on needing a minister for older people. You can submit photos that make you laugh, cry or cringe, £25 for each original one published and £50 for the star choice. Send a short description with the photo to 'All About You', *My Weekly*, PO Box 305, London, NW1 1TX.

Two Stories on Kindle by John G Acton

Society member John G Acton has published two books on Kindle aimed at the teenage market. These are *Martin Ashworth Fourteen* and the sequel, *Martin Ashworth Fourteen Plus*, which cost 77p each. The first story has many musical slants, John having been a piano teacher for around thirty years, and both stories have a mild Christian theme. John explained that he wanted to offer an alternative to ‘the depressing dependence on wizards, vampires, instant magic, other worlds and deadly aliens for creating a thrilling storyline for children and young people.’

I am sure we all wish John the best of luck. Several members have now published works online and I look forward to receiving a piece soon about the Amazon publishing experience! It would be extremely useful to other members who may be considering this route.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Review of the Year

I’m pleased to be able to report that the Poetry Workshop continues in a healthy and vibrant condition, with membership currently standing at 66. Once again, all our activities have proved well supported and popular. A report on the PW’s main activities follows:

PW Weekend

The 2012 Poetry Workshop Weekend took place in July at a new venue, Launde Abbey in Leicestershire. PW members attending enjoyed a varied programme of poetry-based activities.

Next year’s PW Weekend will also be held at Launde Abbey on **26-28 July 2013**. The cost per person will be £160, which includes full board and conference facilities.

Full details and a Booking Form will be included in the winter issue of **wavelengths**.

Bill Barnes Competition 2012

I'm writing these Poetry Workshop Pages shortly after the closing date of this year's competition, and therefore judging has yet to take place. Hopefully the results will be available in time for inclusion in the winter issue of **wavelengths**. The winning entries and the Judge's Report will be published in the spring issue of **wavelengths**.

Waves 2012

The 42nd issue of the Poetry Workshop's annual anthology of members' work was published this summer. '**Waves 2012**' consists of 32 pages and contains 47 poems by 19 poets. Edited this year by Val Tigwell, it has a stunning cover and, as usual, the contents are of a very high standard. Copies of Waves 2012 are available at a price of £3 (inc p&p) from Val Tigwell at **155 Rectory Road, Farnborough, Hants GU14 7HS**.

The winter issue of **wavelengths** will contain details of how to submit work for consideration for the 2013 anthology, but PW members should note that the closing date for submissions is 31 March 2013.

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 of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. If you are interested, contact me, Mike Boland, at the address above or by e-mail to gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

e-folio

The PW also runs an efolio for members who have access to the internet. Anyone interested in joining the e-folio should contact Sylvia Neumann. Her email address is: sylvia.neumann@btinternet.com

wavelengths

This is the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine, issued free to all its members and averaging twenty pages in length. The winter issue will contain the text of two of the talks given at this year's Weekend, the Minutes of the PW's AGM, poems by members, plus the regular Newsletter section providing news of the Poetry Workshop's upcoming 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 membership fee for 2013 has been increased to £7 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 £7, 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

1 January 2013	PW subscriptions due
1 February 2013	Deadline for wavelengths number 34
1 March 2013	wavelengths number 34 published
31 March 2013	Closing date for Waves 2013
26-28 July 2013	PW Weekend

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

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Tortoise Valentine

Norman Bissett

O, my beautiful, ironclad love,
my *testudo elephantopus*,
my gentle juggernaut,
my ponderous, sweet, sagacious giantess,
preceding me slowly across Galapagos
on square-cut mahogany feet,
you set my heart a-flutter
as coyly you crane your leather neck
for succulent titbits of cactus.

Ah, but your neck is comely,
like swamp-coloured parchment.
In your glittering eye
lurks the wisdom of the ages.
That you appear impregnable
challenges me, mightily.
Come, let me shelter and shade you
beneath my millennium dome.
Let us grow geriatric together.

Byron Bay

Helen Fletcher

The sea has a borderline personality disorder;
It can't stop licking sugar coasts
And feeding them whipped cream,
As though it never eats its lovers.
It owes us poets.
It slaps its visitors.
Always salty, never puny.
If it wants to it could kill me,
Swimming in the Yellow Sea.

Newsdesk
Steve Glason

Commuter meets his fellow Man
With weekend news of home and wife
In the garden – when she can
Oh suburban Hampshire Life!

Commuter's Friend is NOT awake
He stifles yet another yawn
Wondering how long it'll take
To mow his rather lengthy lawn.

“About the kids” – he thus relates
(Commuter's Friend begins to groan)
“Our Malcolm now is in the States”
“We financed trip from banking loan.”

“We can't afford a hol this year”
“No more the crowded beaches – Spain”
“Alternative is what I fear”
“Soggy Farnborough in the rain.”

And coming home the train is late
Commuter – drained and very tired
He has a lot on busy plate
Like having house in Cove rewired.

Commuter's Friend went on to Hook
(Or Basingstoke – when overslept)
Rich pickings for a future book
All these stories he has kept.

Taking Off

Norman Bissett

Before matins
in the Cathedral
of Burgos
I heard
the mouse-like
pittering of nuns
crossing the Plaza
in the half-light.
I rose to watch them
From the hotel window.

Their cornettes
were like white sails
of Spanish galleons,
the wings of doves,
preparing to soar.
Heading for Madrid
and the New World,
I, too, was ready
to take off, on the brink
of something new.

A Visit to a Rural Church

A Hobbs

Walking on the hallowed ground
Where pilgrims walked before,
My mind was full of questions
And a pervading sense of awe.

People have come here for ages,
Travelling from near and far.
Walking is now superseded
By a modern motor car.

From the marble columns to the polished pew,
Many prayers have been uttered here,
That eased the mind and spirit
And allayed any fear.

On leaving, my feelings are,
Put into just one sentence,
I have been a witness
To a serene and calming presence.

Kameiros
Andy Millican

Two millennia on I meander
through main square where tourists congregate
as ancients once did to hear Lysander

engage in philosophical debate
with sculptor and poet Agesander.
Today's multinational crowd stand and wait

wilting in the heat while the tour guide rep
gathers his flagging gaggle together.
I ignore his scripted tour. Every step

I take through doorways of the past whether
two or ten feet high instantly projects
images of Rhodian life ever

captured in the minutiae of that time.
All the usual stuff – birth blood death love.
Ghosts go about their busy lives. Some climb

to the acropolis that stands above
this city. There among the gnarled broken pines
Athena's statue surrounded by doves

gazes over a distant turquoise sea,
her queendom, fertile valleys, and a blind
white bearded beggar sat beneath a tree.

Ladybird

Norman Bissett

Call her Carmen.
She is Sevillana,
an Andaluz dancer

swathed in cochineal
scarlet gown peppered
with full stops.

Everyone adores her
until, wings splitting,
she suddenly skedaddles.

Greek Farce

Andy Millican

Fat man on a moped
splutters down the street,
Hellenistic Rider
the Devil wouldn't greet.

His monstrous black moustache
so Josef Stalinesque
as stiff as a yard brush
for insects to infest.

His sweaty bulbous frame
is instantly alike
a gross Oliver Hardy
or Buddha on a bike.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition Runners-Up

(The winner was published in the autumn edition.)

Meditation

Cynthia Blaker

It is indeed a tragedy to learn
That your 'natural' curls are really a good perm
While your eyes, my lovely Sara
Owe their beauty to mascara.
On your lips the hue of lipstick I discern.

It is on matters such as these I meditate
When, as usual, I am punctual; you are late.
And though occasionally I ponder
'Absence makes the heart grow fonder'
Mine grows distinctly colder as I wait.

Thus, parted, do I scorn your woman's guile
Together, you bewitch me with your smile,
You apologise with kisses
'Til my one idea of bliss is
To walk with you beside me down the aisle.

Health Report

Angus Livingstone

I've got a neurological dysfunction
that affects memory.
See names. See words.
There, I've said it. Got it out of the way.
Plain words without rhyme or rhythm.

So, what's going on noddle-wise?
My memory cells are popping their cloglets
with a funal wave at the living.
Except that, with the numbers involved,
there's a continual Mexican wave of them.

A thought has bounced into my head –
could the wave be the source of my tinnitus?
But instead of shouting, they hiss.
The White Noise Glory Boys
Except death's too good for them.

Someone was saying they don't know
where memory resides in the brain.
What's all that about?
I asked my psychologist
who specializes in memory problems,
but I don't remember what he said,
only that his answer was vague.
And that's it, apart from the hernia and the angina.
At least it was until a few months ago
when I read about the Field,
the all-pervading quantum zero point field.
I've gone and bought into their story –
our brains act as quantum devices
retrieving our memories which reside in the Field.

So where does that leave me?
Scared shitless aboard a train to Palookaville
on the quantum line, that's where.

So how are you keeping yourself?
I don't know, do I?
Sorry pal. Thanks for listening. Good luck.
What?
Oh yes, it's all true.

Mute Swans

Jocelyn-Anne Harvey

Sitting on a bench by a lake,
I've been feeding the ducks bits of bread,
which they've greedily gulped
and argued over. The Cob and Pen

didn't protest though, instead they lingered,
their smooth necks plunging into the depths
for tastier morsels of molluscs. Bodies balanced
like two floating island meringues,

and in their own time they glided through
the squabbling pack to claim their legal rights.
The kids dashing about in the park suspended
into slow motion, and my hands kept tearing

at the stale loaf. Glistening white wings
arched in the autumn sunshine. I was
enfolded in softness, and for a moment we
were able to soar together over the houses.

I'd like to think our tail feathers shook with
thankfulness when the last crumb hit the water.

Sulieman's Mosque

Andrew Millican

Tucked deep in Rhodes Old Town – Sulieman's mosque.
Entry is free, even for infidels,
Jews, apostates and atheists. It costs
the respectful removal of footwear.

I take off my Jesus sandals. Step on
the lush cushy feeling Persian carpet
covering every inch of the single room
where silence descends. I feel strangely blessed

by the crowded calm. Yest a distant yell
from the mania of tourism markets
breaches the walls. Minimalism
dominates after Greek Orthodox

iconoclasm. Just two odd things from
the room. A kind of pulpit and a box
shaped large enough to sit in. Is this where
the Imams led prayer? But a sense of gloom

sticks to the whitewashed walls. A sudden flash
fills my face as I turn and a frisson
of fear rises. I duck quick expecting
the swish of a Byzantine scimitar

only to hear, then size up, the Russian
woman built like a buffalo pushing
past with no regard for where we all are
as she shouts down her i-phone. The rest of
us file out the quiet culled. The usual clash
of old, new and disregard for respect.

A Dramatic Revival

Stephen Bibby

(This article was the winner of the Gordon Gompers Competition 2012)

Contrary to the well-known aphorism, for many people life certainly does not begin at forty. Pressures at work, the demands of a growing family and the start of a physical slow down usually culminate in a termination of pursuits rather than a beginning. The fifth decade may often offer only valedictory reflection on more youthful achievements.

It certainly did for me. My voice was muted, my texts untouched. But the memories lingered, preserved in scrapbooks and photograph albums.

They took me back to when I was eleven years old and Mr Dale, a master at my Birmingham grammar school, directed *Electra* by Sophocles and sought first-formers with voices not yet broken to be the female chorus. Intrigued, I auditioned and was selected as chorus leader to speak the ancient verse in a rhythmic mournful chant. I still remembered lines such as the portentous, ‘See they are coming and the bloodstained hand drips sacrifice of death.’

I was totally captivated. I knew a little about the Trojan War but was now drawn into its labyrinthine ramifications, into a world of sundered relationships and brutal revenge. My eyes were opened to the traditions of Greek tragedy and the ancient origins of the dramatic arts.

This was my introduction to a pastime which gave me years of rich experience. It yielded rewarding stimulation, taking me on journeys through history, comedy and tragedy, encountering on the way all the

complexity of human ingenuity. It provided enormous pleasure and sublime moments of innocent fun.

In my mid-teens we moved to Hereford. The small city boasted no theatre but it did have an excellent amateur dramatic society. My class was encouraged to see the group's production of

Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons*, a set book for O-level. I recall being spellbound at the climax when an enormous axe came thudding down into an instantaneous blackout from which the Common Man roared, 'Behold the head of a traitor!'

Shortly afterwards the young Henry VIII appeared at my school. He was judging the annual poetry reading competition and awarded me the coveted Windebank cup for my recitation of

Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush*. Thereafter I found myself recruited to the youth wing of the drama group, welcomed by Sir Thomas More himself. Soon I was a dashing Roman soldier in a one act play *The Widow of Ephesus*. Next came an introduction to the works of George Bernard Shaw. I remember bursting onto the stage through a flimsy plywood window as Bluntschli, the chocolate cream soldier, in *Arms and the Man*, our entry for the county drama festival.

This was my first experience of these amateur competitions. It was fascinating to see how various groups managed to bring their plays to an unfamiliar stage, striving to achieve an accomplished performance in less than ideal conditions. At the end of each evening the audience listened to an adjudication perceptively pinpointing the skilful elements aiding verisimilitude or gently outlining the faults diminishing credibility. I recall one pithy comment about costumes. Referring to Sir Robert Morton, the formidable barrister in Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy* the adjudicator concluded with a degree of exasperation, 'But he would not have worn purple socks!'

Youth group members were sometimes co-opted into senior productions. I played a young man accompanying his elderly mother in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, which we took to the 1966 Felixstowe Amateur Play Festival where it won second prize. I remain grateful both for that experience and for the knowledge I acquired about Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble. I still remember Paul Dessau's wonderful original music and even ordered an LP from Germany on which the harsh lyrics are sung by the famous German actress Therese Gieshe.

Mother Courage put me at an enormous advantage when I went to

university. The student dramatic society produced *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and, while other undergraduates gave a nonchalant impression of total familiarity with Brecht, I was inwardly confident that I knew his background and political mission far more intimately.

My extracurricular knowledge expanded enormously through treading the student boards. In my second year, to attract larger audiences, we performed one act plays over lunchtimes. I was greyed on top to play the father in Chekhov's *The Proposal* then sat through an afternoon's history tutorial looking more elderly than my professor. Perhaps inevitably as students in the subversive sixties we were drawn to Alfred Jarry. In the outrageous *Ubu Roi*, a precursor of the Theatre of the Absurd, I played the sea captain. Unfortunately the contents of the properties cupboard were limited and I stood on stage not with a parrot on my shoulder but with a stuffed curlew! It was amusing to be stopped next day by an unknown student who, having recognised me from the performance, effusively praised this novel portrayal.

After graduating I became a VSO teacher in Malawi and found that even 5,000 miles away there was a drama festival. On behalf of my boys' school I entered a play called *The Jewels of the Shrine*. My teenage African pupils thought it hilarious that one of their number should dress up and waddle seductively as the serving woman. But they enjoyed themselves and we won the regional heat, although sadly not the national cup. Nevertheless I am certain that the experience was invaluable to the participants and an indication to the entire school of what could be achieved with a dash of creativity.

Back in England I joined the civil service and for the early period of my career was transferred around the country like a chess piece. Each time we moved I would find a local dramatic society. With a group in Berkshire I played one of the sons in Bill McIlwraith's *The Anniversary*. On the last night the playwright himself was in the audience, but only doing his family duty as a cousin of our producer. For the same society I directed a pantomime. This took me into the world of pyrotechnics as I managed to find a small workshop making puffs and bangs suitable for the amateur stage to help us disguise the translation of a convincingly feline Puss in Boots into to an undoubtedly human Marquis of Carrabas.

Sent to run an office in South Wales I joined the Newport Playgoers Society. To be accepted as an acting member I had to audition. I learnt the wonderful speech by Hotspur in *Henry IV Part 1*, 'My liege I did deny no prisoners...' and evidently impressed the committee who approved my admittance to the company. Although in my mid-30s I was

cast as the young Laurie Lee in *Cider with Rosie*. Clad in short trousers I was relieved when the director changed her mind and decided that as I was sufficiently convincing my hairy legs need not be shaved!

In the mid-1980s my career took me to Lesotho in southern Africa for what proved to be a difficult and stressful posting. An active expatriate drama society helped to maintain my sanity. In one pantomime the stage crew installed an ingenious functioning village pump from which Dick Whittington could take a drink. I do not know to this day if the principal boy had been tipped off about the last night change of liquid, but I do remember her turning to the audience with great aplomb and saying, 'Now here is something rather queer, tonight this pump is giving beer!'

My greatest overseas achievement was playing Milo in Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*. In this drama the set is devastated at the end of Act 1 as Andrew Wyke simulates a burglary before taking shots at Milo and engaging in a mock execution. We required numerous cheap ornaments which could be destroyed nightly in rehearsal and performance. This posed a problem as such artefacts were not readily available in a small African country. Fortunately we were only about 20 miles away from the small town of Ladybrand across the border in South Africa. On its short main street was a rather shabby gift shop selling a variety of merchandise including some hideous china figurines. We bought the entire stock. I still wonder whether the proprietress, imagining she was catering for strange expatriate tastes, replaced them only to find they have sat for 30 years gathering dust.

Returning to the UK, within 3 years I was promoted. With seniority came nearly 20 years of commuting, 14 of them into central London. This left little time for leisure pursuits and reluctantly I concluded that my acting days were gone forever.

I was in the same position as many friends. Those who played rugby had retired from the game by their early 30s, their skulls no longer able to tolerate the crunch of the scrum. Footballers took consolation in coaching children or in refereeing. Squash playing colleagues started worrying about their hearts. I ruefully concluded that I was exactly like such sportsmen with all triumphs past and no ambitions other than to recall previous glories.

But I was wrong.

Aged 60, I retired. A few weeks later I happened to be in a local primary school assisting with a talk to a class of leavers. The teacher took me to one side afterwards. 'Would you be interested in a part in the

play I'm producing next spring?' he asked, recognising that I could speak clearly and probably had the time to attend rehearsals.

Thus it was that unexpectedly I was recruited once more to a local amateur dramatic society. With a sudden reawakening I have discovered that my old skills have not diminished: they have simply been dormant for 20 years.

Initially, worried about learning lines and adapting to varifocal spectacles, I was relieved that the offered part was small. But once again, just as when I was a teenager, I found myself beguiled, my curiosity stimulated. I played the part of Barry the bookmaker in Amanda Whittington's *Ladies' Day*. Suddenly a different world in the North of England was interesting me and I enjoyed the play's enigma, for was Barry real or was he a ghost?

After that I became the Bishop of Lax in the classic wartime farce *See How They Run*, acted 'like an exasperated Father Ted' according to the local paper. This play had been written in 1943 when the outcome of the Second World War was still very much in doubt. It is remarkable that even in those dark days the playwright was able to exude such optimism and perceptively mock Nazi militarism and the cult of Hitler.

I have also discovered that a sense of fun is still very much alive in today's younger generation. In the recent pantomime my years made me ideal to be the eponymous heroine's father in *Beauty and the Beast*. On the last night my sweet young stage daughter changed the lines. When I dramatically asked her what she would like as a gift from my travels, before giving the correct answer of, 'All I want is a beautiful rose,' mischievously she demanded a pint of cider!

Now I am rehearsing *The Wyrld Sisters*, an adaptation of a Terry Pratchett book. Once more I am becoming acquainted with an unknown author, my knowledge is expanding and I am looking forward to the thrill of standing on a stage and engaging with an audience.

It is almost literally a lifetime ago when I was recruited by Mr. Dale. But I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for introducing me to something which has been a source of learning and enjoyment for many years. Unlike my more athletic friends, I now find that more opportunities than ever are opening up as there are some wonderful theatrical parts for mature men. Far from sitting idly and looking back with memories I feel privileged to perform and energised by a pastime which continues to be totally absorbing. Indeed, even though a pensioner, I hope that my greatest triumphs are yet to come.

The Fairy

AE Hobbs

Every year she was on top of the tree and now it was becoming a bore to her. No sense of excitement any more and no sense of anticipation. This year was no exception. She looked down from her vantage point, or her perch as she preferred to call it. She was not pleased at what she saw but then, nothing seemed to please her these days.

Directly underneath her was the fairy light which she thought could have been positioned differently as it got rather hot, as well as being the wrong colour for her complexion. Humans should be more thoughtful, she fumed and, to add to her bad temper, a needle from the Christmas tree was tickling her nose and making her want to sneeze.

This was no life, she thought, but how could she opt out? Humans retire but fairies, it seemed, go on for ever. Marriage in the earlier years could have been possible, but now? There had been the rather dishy chocolate soldier but he did not last long; also an interesting clown on the lower branch of the tree in '63. She remembered that a rag doll had made eyes at him and, clowns being clowns, he had fallen for her. He would not last long with her, she sniffed.

Her bad temper continued and she found fault with her dress. Every year they put fresh crepe paper over a now rather battered skirt and painted up the wings, but this did nothing for her spirits.

This Christmas had gone well, not so many children around the tree this year. They were all growing up and whereas she had once been the centre of attention, now she was lucky if she got the odd glance. The festive season was all over now and the decorations were in the process of being taken down and packed away for another year. Gently she was laid into a cradle and she began to feel wanted. Could this be the beginning of her retirement?

Good humour returned, she felt more kindly disposed to the world and a warm glow of happiness filled her being as she nestled back in the cradle and slept.

The next Christmas came and the usual bustle began. Decorations were put up and, of course, the tree. The tree she knew well was decorated and she watched wondering if she would be put in her usual place. During the

summer months she had lived a good life, being the plaything of a child, and she felt no wish to resume her usual role at Christmas.

Then a new glittering fairy was placed on top of the tree and she knew that, at last, she was retired. This she welcomed and settled back once more to enjoy it, thinking to herself that everything comes to those who wait!

Researching a Victorian Politician

Ruth Sear

I was puzzled why a large area of wild woodland, bordering a road near where I live, was named ‘Sherbrooke’ on nineteenth century maps. Several years ago a chance remark by an acquaintance, ‘Robert Lowe lived there,’ intrigued me. Who was Robert Lowe? What was ‘Sherbrooke’?

Robert Lowe (1811-1892) was a Liberal Member of Parliament. He was, at different times, Joint Secretary of the Board of Control, Vice President of the Board of Trade, Paymaster General, Privy Councillor, Vice President of the Committee of Council on Education, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Home Secretary. His oratory was clear, eloquent, logical and sometimes outspoken, especially in his opposition to the passage of the controversial Reform Bill of 1866/67. His home was ‘Sherbrooke’ in Caterham, Surrey.

My research led me to the British Library, the British Library Newspaper Library at Colindale, St. Margaret’s Church Westminster (where there is a fine marble bust of Robert Lowe), the Surrey History Centre in Woking and the National Portrait Gallery. I visited Lowe’s grave, now very neglected and overgrown, at Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey.

I studied the census returns for ‘Sherbrooke’ 1861-1901, mainly for details of Lowe’s servants (butlers, maids, cooks, footmen, pages, grooms, gardeners and laundresses). I read Lowe’s details in *The Dictionary of National Biography* and various modern history books, and read *Life and Letters of The Right Honourable Robert Lowe, Viscount Sherbrooke* published in 1893. I contacted the Veteran Cycle Club via the Science Museum, the House of Lords archives and a genealogist who specialised in the family history of one of Lowe’s wives. She contacted

the family who loaned me photographs and newspaper cuttings of Lowe. My article about Lowe was later published by the local history society.

Lowe was born in Bingham, Nottinghamshire. He was the son of a clergyman who was a friend of Lord Byron of Newstead Abbey. Lowe and his sister Elizabeth were albinos, and their eyesight was affected. Albinism is an inherited disorder where there is decrease or absence of melanin in the skin, hair and eyes. Sufferers usually have fair skin, which burns easily, blonde hair, and poor eyesight. Lowe's eyesight was so poor that he was six years old before he learned the letters of the alphabet. Considering his disability, it is remarkable that he chose to be a MP in later life – it was speculated he could have become Prime Minister. In 1825 he was sent to Winchester College where he experienced overcrowded bedrooms, poor food, lack of exercise and lack of privacy. The day started at 6am; food was rationed and on Sundays it was compulsory to attend religious services for five hours.

On a walking holiday in Wales in 1831, Lowe met Charles Darwin and the pair went for a walk of twenty-two miles! In 1836 Lowe went on a walking tour of Scotland and travelled with William Wordsworth. Lowe's love of poetry culminated in the private publication of a volume of his own in 1884, *Poems of a Life* which was later published by mistake, to his annoyance. Lowe studied law. To finance his studies he became a private tutor and examiner at the University. He spoke several languages: Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Hebrew, German, and Icelandic. In 1836 he married Georgiana Orred of Lancashire, a marriage that lasted forty-eight years. Georgiana was a well-regarded amateur artist and excellent walker. During their two months honeymoon in Europe, the couple walked a total of 700 miles.

In 1842 the Lowes sailed to Australia. The decision to go was reinforced when he was advised that he only had seven years of sight remaining, and that the climate and light of Australia would be beneficial. They settled in Sydney and lived there eight years. Lowe's sight never deteriorated. He was a barrister and later a MP. He became wealthy by investing in property. They had no children but they adopted two orphans, a boy aged ten and a girl aged twelve (their mother had been murdered and Lowe unsuccessfully defended the murderer in court). The Lowes and the children returned to England in 1850. The girl died a year later and the boy was a source of anxiety and trouble. When he was older Lowe found him a good position in New Zealand!

On his return to England Lowe again became a MP. A Reform Act was first introduced in 1832 when the number of men eligible to vote increased. In 1867 Disraeli's Conservative government passed another Reform Act, much to Lowe's anger; he believed only educated men, not working men, should be given the right to vote. Lowe and Disraeli personally disliked each other throughout their lives. The 1867 and 1884 Acts again increased the number of voters. In 1872 the Ballot Act introduced secret voting, and in the next decade the Redistribution Act remapped constituencies. In the next century, women were allowed the vote, and the age for voting was lowered to 18 years in 1969.

In 1868 Lowe became Chancellor of the Exchequer. He said, 'The Chancellor of the Exchequer is a man whose duties make him more or less of a taxing machine. He is entrusted with a certain amount of misery which is his duty to distribute as fairly as he can.' He became unpopular when he proposed to put a halfpenny tax on a box of matches but the idea was so unpopular with the public (and the matchmakers) the proposition was withdrawn.

Lowe enjoyed physical exercise and the open air, and in later years he was an ardent cyclist (despite his poor eyesight) often to be seen speeding around the hilly roads of Surrey. Firstly he owned a 'dandy' (hobby) horse, then a 'penny farthing' then a 'Singer Challenge' tricycle, then a safety bicycle. Towards the end of his life he was accompanied by his servant on an 'Olympia Tandem' tricycle. In 1871 a local newspaper reported that Lowe knocked down a man and 'recompensed him for the sudden mishap by making him a present.' The incident was newsworthy because at the time Lowe was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Lowe said, 'I was sorry for the accident, and sent for a surgeon from London to examine the man. The surgeon reported that a rib was broken. I gave the man £10 and several more sums. The man was of very intemperate habits, and from being a gentleman's servant had gradually sunk in the world. He got well of his broken rib, and I heard no more of him.'

A visitor to 'Sherbrooke' wrote he had to submit to being driven at a rattling pace by his host down the steep lanes and through the narrow, crowded streets of Croydon. 'It was miraculous how Lord Sherbrooke contrived to see, but it was mainly a question of courage and perfect nerve'.

Georgiana died in 1884 and a year later Lowe married Caroline Sneyed of Staffordshire, who was twenty-three years his junior. She

looked after him in his declining years and was a popular woman in the local community.

Lowe became Viscount Sherbrooke in 1880. He died on 27th July, 1892. The domestic animals were killed and buried in the woods on the 'Sherbrooke' estate. The practise of destroying domestic animals after an owner's death was not uncommon in those days, and the same fate awaited the animals belonging to Caroline Lowe after her death in 1914. 'Sherbrooke' once entertained rich, famous and important people. After 1914 the house was rented until it was destroyed by fire in 1926. A few specimen trees survive, including giant Sequoia, and there are traces of the buildings; parts of the wall bordering the estate remains, and parts of the large and impressive gateposts can be seen amongst the undergrowth.

How is Lowe remembered today? Probably mainly for his opposition to the Reform Bills. But during my research the character of the man emerged. He overcame his disability of sight and in his own words his disposition was, 'never to sit down and lament over the inevitable ... a dogged resolution which sticks to its purpose in the face of almost insuperable obstacles.'

A Christmas Journey

Terry Rickson

Complaining about railway travel, its slowness, lateness, overcrowding and many other aspects, has been a national pastime for generations but I have the memory of an excellent journey by train. I write, of course, of the glorious days of steam!

I was waiting on the platform at Exeter St David's for a train to Paddington, looking forward to going home on leave from my duties as a National Serviceman; it was Christmas Eve, 1952. I had been watching some interesting railway activity, so I was aware only of a whiff of warm oil and a soft sigh of steam and there was my train on the platform, the London-bound *Torbay Express*. At its head was one of the most Western Region's famous 'Castle' class locomotives. I climbed aboard, delighted at the prospect of arriving at Paddington in style. I was not to be disappointed. The engine made a fine start,

building up power to attack the long gradient beyond Exeter, and once over the summit at Whiteball, sped through Devonshire before the speed restriction on the approach to Taunton. Then she was off like a rocket, racing across the Somerset levels and into Wiltshire and Berkshire, country stations flashing by in the blink of an eye. A short stop at Reading and a fast run to Paddington, arriving there three hours after leaving Exeter.

I was back at my unit by New Year's Eve, one of the handful manning the station whilst it was on 'stand-down' for the holiday period. With all my friends on leave, I took myself off to the Watch Night service held in Exeter Cathedral. Later, when the City bells rang out to greet the New Year, the Southern Region engines at the Central station let off loud blasts on their whistles, answered by those at the Western Region station, neither was prepared to be outdone!

I found a taxi and a helpful driver who was happy to run me back to camp.

A Dog's Tale

Brian Lockett

My name is Dante and I am a dog.

In case you think this is ridiculous because dogs can't write, I'd better come clean now and confess that it's true: I can't write. Which is why I am using a ghost-writer. People use ghost-writers all the time to write articles and books which they're not clever enough to write themselves. Think of the pop stars, "celebrities" and people you see on television. They can't write for toffee, but they know that any book with their name on it will sell like hot cakes, so they use someone else to write for them. Which is what I am doing. I'm not telling you his or her name, because it won't mean anything to you. But if humans can do this, why shouldn't dogs?

Humans have written hundreds, probably thousands, of books about dogs, but this is the first book written by a dog about humans. In fact, I suspect that this will be the only book written by a dog about humans. So you are very privileged to be reading it. Please tell your friends.

Humans believe they are superior to dogs, but the reverse is true. Think of the number of times dog owners pick up their dog's poo, carefully wrap it up and put it in a special bin. No dog I know would demean himself by offering to do the same for a human. This proves my point.

You, as a human, will know that dogs don't talk. That's true but they can communicate - certainly with other dogs - without using words. I've noticed that humans use words excessively and unnecessarily. They say things they don't mean, tell stories that no-one is interested in and, in general, waste an awful lot of time using words to fail to understand each other. Dogs don't do that. When they communicate with other dogs they get an important message across quickly and efficiently: "Go away now, or I'll bite you", "There are some cats round the corner" or (very often) "I like/do not like the smell of your bum".

A lot of money is spent training us dogs, but we don't need training. On the other hand, humans do. They tug on the lead to take us in a particular direction or to a particular park or open space, when we know that that is not where we want to go. Some of them get the message and follow us, but others use human words like "disobedient" or "temperamental", without appreciating that such words should be more properly applied to them. I can't remember my dog mother, because I was taken from her when I was very young. I have a human mother now and we get on fine, because she's clever enough to know who's really in charge. She takes me to the vet from time to time and he charges her a lot of money for pills and ointment and jollop that both he and I know are overpriced and often unnecessary. He winks at me and laughs because we both understand what's going on. I like him, though he is really a cat man, not a dog man. You learn to be tolerant, don't you?

I am a male dog and my mother has refused to have me snipped. This means that I can't help embarrassing her from time to time when I see some attractive little bitch who would, in my view, benefit from my services. Other dog walkers shout at her when this happens, but she gives as good as she gets and I don't have to intervene. In any event I am usually too busy.

When I am in this sort of mood, my eyesight deteriorates and I cannot always guarantee that I'll choose a bitch. My mother apologises when I make this sort of mistake in public and laughs like a drain (behind her hand, for some reason). Very often no-one has her sense of humour and she gets threatened. Fortunately, because I am a big dog, I very rarely get

threatened. For the record, human legs, whether in trousers or tights, are a very poor substitute for the real thing.

I am a Siberian husky. In fact, people who ought to know better panic when they see me and seem to think that I live off a diet of Cairn Terriers, Chihuahuas and chunks of postmen's leg. This is quite untrue. They all taste terrible. Unlike humans, we dogs will have nothing to do with breedism (the canine equivalent of racism), so when I was once called a malamute by some ignorant man, I wasn't in the least offended. After all, in our world a dog is a dog is a dog. My human mother, however, was furious and shouted all sorts of unpleasant words at him. I have also been called a wolf and 'a kind of Alsatian', which demonstrates poor eyesight, I reckon, rather than any kind of prejudice. Believe me, humans could learn a lot from us, if only they'd pay more attention. (By the way, a malamute is about twice my size, if you're interested.)

Like all dogs, I don't know whether I'm beautiful or ugly, because these concepts mean nothing in the dog world. I assume that when people smile and stroke me and make ridiculous kissing noises accompanied by 'aahs' that they are willing to feed me and let me sleep wherever I like indoors. And that's OK by me.

What humans don't realise is that we dogs have a keen sense of smell and that it tells us much more about them than they realise. Yes, it's not used just on other dogs. We know when humans are ill or angry or depressed. In fact, we could save the National Health Service a great deal of money if only humans would invest in making more of an effort to communicate with us. Dogs are much better diagnosticians than humans, and when people come back from a visit to the GP and announce to the family that they've got this or that, we sigh in a weary, dog-like way and mutter, "I could have told you that for nothing". Except that we don't mutter. We just shake our heads sadly, which some idiot humans translate into "Look, he's ready for another walk!"

I have to go now, because mother is tickling me and talking drool, which means I'm to be taken out. Still, if you like these musings get in touch and I'll let you have some more. If you pay my ghost-writer enough, of course.

Your (any everyone's) best friend.

Dante

In the Days of King Herod

Bill Torrie Douglas

I have never believed in having regrets in life. You make your decisions based on what you know at the time and then you stand by them. Nevertheless there have been many times in the intervening years when I have questioned my actions on that cold, mid-winter night in Bethlehem.

I knew there was something special about the family as soon as I saw them. It wasn't just the pregnant woman or the gentle aura of the man but a strange trembling within told me that I had to treat them with a great degree of care.

"Do you have a room we could rent?" In the dim candlelight, his eyes were black hollows set into a bony skull. He added unnecessarily, "my wife is with child."

She sat uncomfortably on the donkey, her hands spread across her swollen belly as if she was already in labour. I hesitated as the man waited patiently.

I stuttered my words, "I'm sorry but I've not got a room." His sigh was audible. "I don't think that you will find anywhere in Bethlehem tonight. It's a busy time." I saw his head bow, "however, you can sleep in our stable if you wish."

His wife slid herself from the donkey and landed heavily on her feet. "It's nearly my time Joseph."

He glanced towards her, then turned to me. "Your stable will be fine. If it's clean and dry..." There was both relief and gratitude in his voice.

My wife helped me to get them settled in. Being a mother herself, she was especially considerate of the young woman and took great care to make her as comfortable as possible. Indeed, she attended the delivery in the early hours of morning and, when she eventually returned to our bed, she could not stop chattering about the perfection of the infant who had just been born in our stable, and of the uncomplaining nature of Mary his mother.

"...And do you know, there's a very bright star in the sky, directly above the inn. Strange isn't it?"

I turned over in an attempt to get some sleep but my endeavours were thwarted by the noise of more visitors arriving. Inexplicably, some

shepherds were asking excitedly about the new-born babe and I had to show them to the stable.

I was just about to jump back into bed when our own little Ezekiel started crying. I nursed him for a while and sang him some lullabies whilst silently cursing the shepherds for making such a racket.

There were more visitors the next day, three suspicious looking bearded characters who brought the babe the most unlikely presents. They hung about the stable all the time and my wife told me that they kept praying and supplicating to the child in its manger. They never came into the inn and they never seemed to eat or drink anything. I remarked on their strange behaviour but the demands of our busy inn did not allow us to reflect too long on these peculiar visitors.

Their presence had a significant effect on Joseph however and, after they had gone, he told me that he was taking his wife and child far away into the land of Egypt, as it would be much safer there for his baby son.

It was two days later that Herod's men arrived. I had heard rumours that they were searching for an infant who had been born King of the Jews but I made no immediate connection to the child who had been born in our stable.

“Do you have any knowledge of a baby boy being born in Bethlehem a couple of nights ago?” The centurion laid a hand on his sword in a threatening manner.

I shook my head although I felt my wife pinch me in the back. It was then that I recalled all those unusual things about the short stay of Mary and Joseph.

“Sorry sir but I have no such knowledge.”

After they had gone my wife chastised me for keeping silent but I berated her in return, “it is better not to get involved with the soldiers, and anyway, it is none of our business.”

I thought no more of the matter and another two weeks passed uneventfully until one morning my brother came to the inn.

“Have you heard the latest? Herod failed to find the King of the Jews so he is arresting every male infant in Bethlehem who is under two years old.”

“He can't! Our Ezekiel!” A panic assailed me. “We'll have to get as far away from Bethlehem as we can.”

We set out as soon as it got dark that evening. I do not think that I have ever seen our land look more beautiful. The moon was bright and full and cast concealing shadows into the wadis and across the dunes. You could have counted for nights on end yet would never have discovered how many stars there were in the black firmament.

“I knew there was something funny about that family. You should never have let them stay.” My wife was wrapped in a couple of blankets, for the night was cold. Our donkeys padded softly on the sand.

“This would have happened anyway. It has nothing to do with them.” I felt Ezekiel warm against my chest and playfully tickled his cheek.

“If you had told that centurion about them fleeing to Egypt they would probably have been caught.”

We rode that night and for most of the next day and almost made it out of Judea. Herod’s men caught us just as we had the River Jordan in sight. Despite the pleadings of my wife and my offers of gold, they dragged young Ezekiel from us. I was greatly outnumbered but I fought with the strength of many men. Eventually I was overpowered. They beat me severely and left me bleeding in the sand.

I am certain that they killed my baby son as that was the fate of all other infant-boys from Bethlehem; whatever happened, we never saw Ezekiel again.

My wounds healed but life was never the same. My wife could never reconcile herself to the loss of Ezekiel and she blamed me. We parted sorrowfully. I went back to run the inn with only occasional travellers and a flagon of red wine to keep me company. Business was not good. Some condemned me for making Mary give birth in a stable, others derided me because I harboured an enemy of the state; I could not win.

As for the King of the Jews, he came to a violent end himself. He was born in my stable and ended life nailed to a cross on Calvary. It was just the other day that the darkness came over all the Earth. It had a weird effect on me. I suddenly began to weep, uncontrollably. I was not sure if it was due to my thinking of Ezekiel or whether my tears were for the crucifixion of the man people say was the Son of God.

Noise

Chester Guttridge

Rodney Raille was a peace-loving man, four years retired, often to be found sitting on his patio watching his chickens and enjoying their contented murmuring and clucking. He kept Brown Leghorns, Buff Orpingtons and Silkies. Sometimes his wife, Barbara, sat guard on the patio, when she had finished making egg custard and it was too soon to make the soufflé. Rodney attributed his good health to fresh eggs. They sold surplus eggs to neighbours, except next door where a disagreeable couple lived with an uncouth child and a pair of snappy terriers, Flush and Faucet.

Every morning at dawn the cockerels crowed to remind their hens that it was time to get up and lay the next generation. Rodney and Barbara slept through the morning call, occasionally stirring to note that all was well in their feathered world. Not so the cantankerous Perts next door, whose bile rose daily with the dawn chorus.

On the Monday morning at half past six, Rodney's front door bell rang. He went down in his dressing gown. Terry Pert, after a jolly evening of wine, perhaps women and song, followed by a short night's rest, was standing on the step, rage at the ready.

'Your bloody cockerels, bloody noisy bastards. Daisy and I have had enough. Ring their bloody necks or I will.'

'It's their way of getting their hens up to lay their eggs,' Rodney explained. 'You like eggs, don't you?'

'Yes, but supermarkets don't crow.'

'I'm sorry Terry,' Rodney said, 'but there's nothing I can do. Cockerels crow, cows moo and terriers yap.' He closed the door before Terry could raise the stakes

Next morning, the Railles woke at 5:30, disturbed by Pert's dogs sent out to "go get 'em". The yapping frightened the hens and dislodged Raille's tabby from her squat on Mr Pert's onion seed bed. But there was worse, Pert's neighbours on the other side, the Stoppers, were also woken. Dick Stopper got up and, through the window, saw Terry Pert's yappers patrolling the garden, barking as only terriers can, each encouraging the other, determined to do their master's bidding, although unsure what it was.

Dick Stopper was a man of action and soon after five o'clock next morning, goaded by his wife, got his motor mower out, warmed up the engine and revved up and down the lawn. Terry Pert was woken and,

looking out of his bedroom window, saw Dick in the gloom, clinging to his lawn mower going full tilt.

Unfortunately, Joseph and Mrs Creek, the Stopper's neighbours on the other side, were also disturbed and Joseph got up to see Dick Stopper transiting his lawn at great speed, behind a mower fitted with an improvised headlight.

'It's that bugger Stopper mowing his bloody lawn. It's only 5 o'clock.'

'The bugger,' echoed Mrs Creek, getting up to peek and visit the bathroom where she drained off some venom.

That evening Mr Pert, the dog lover, went round to the Stopper's, past the close-cut lawn and knocked loudly on the front door to complain about being woken by the noise of Dick's lawn mower. Pert left even angrier than when he arrived, having had the door shut in his face. Hardly had Pert returned home to be consoled by his wife when Dick Stopper, just returned to his sitting room, was summoned to respond to a second hammering on his door, administered by an irate Joseph Creek, who had come to complain about the motor mower. Chicken fancier Raille called that same evening to remonstrate with the recently rebuffed Pert. He was lucky to escape with his trousers intact as Terry threatened to unleash two courageous terriers on Mr Raille's defenceless legs.

Mr Creek was a lover of vintage cars and next morning he got up at 15 minutes to 5 o'clock and drove his old Humber Continental out of its garage. Joseph had been having trouble with the car's twin carburettors and the old limo issued a series of vintage style back firings, loud and unmistakably Humber in pitch and volume. Not only were the Stoppers awakened in good time to get their mower out for its second pre-dawn run, but the Creek's neighbours on the other side, Joseph and Gillian Wiltmann, were woken. Joseph needed his sleep as his joinery work with machine tools demanded alertness. He vowed to set his circular saw whirring early next morning, a plan endorsed by his wife who appreciated the commercial value of Joseph's limbs. Unfortunately the Humber explosions and their reverberations also woke people sleeping in the houses opposite, who looked out to see the Humber emerging from a cloud of exhaust gases.

On the Sunday morning, just before dawn, after a week of escalation, Sergeant Frisk, on loan from an Agatha Christie novel, was walking home, reviewing the night he had just spent exercising his hormones to the benefit of his latest girl friend. He was an enthusiastic policeman, often seen driving his patrol car with the window down, the better to hear the sounds of burglary, wife-beating or other unlawful activity. As he entered Peace Lane that morning, he was woken from his revelry by a cacophony, which,

with concentration, he analysed into several distinct noises - barking dogs, a backfiring car, an engine revving, a whining saw, and from across the road, a trumpet playing, a drummer drumming and a tape of punk music blaring. He noted which houses were responsible. One house alone was quiet, which he later discovered, was occupied by a defrocked deaf bishop, who believed he was in Satan's waiting room.

On the Monday evening Sergeant Frisk set off for Peace Lane with WPC Regina Blood in his police car. Regina, a sensitive lady when out of uniform, claimed descent from Hungarian royalty. That evening her usual sweet nature was qualified by hidden discomfort. She begged Sergeant Frisk to take her home for a couple of minutes to change and apply soothing balm.

'The elastic's cutting into my flesh,' she said, unwisely. 'I'll be specially nice to you.'

Sergeant Frisk had been frustrated by her special niceness before and had no desire to suffer more. 'Duty first, Constable, duty first. Take them off in the back of the car,' he suggested, but she preferred the pain.

Accompanied by Regina, plucking at elastic through her uniform, Sergeant Frisk knocked on Mr Pert's door at No. 3. Terry Pert responded by shouting through the letterbox. 'Piss off, Stopper, piss off.'

'It's the police,' replied Sergeant Frisk, keeping professional cool. 'Open the door Mr Pert, It's the police. We've come about the noise your dogs make early in the morning. We've had a complaint at the station.' Pert opened the door. 'It's an offence under the Nuisance Act, 1973. I should warn you, Mr Pert, that anything you say will be taken down, won't it, Constable?'

'Yes, that's right, taken down.' said the uncomfortable constable.

'I advise you not to let your dogs out so early, Mr Pert, or you'll be getting a visit from the animal squad, who won't be so patient as we are.'

'Would you and the constable like a cup of tea,' Terry said, hoping thereby to lessen the risk of joint counselling with his dogs or worse, their annihilation.

'No, thank you, Mr Pert, we've several more calls to make this evening.'

The police pair then moved next door, just as neighbour Creek was returning home across Stopper's well-kept lawn and rang Dick Stopper's bell.

The letterbox opened. 'If that's you again, Creek, bugger off.'

'It's the police, Mr Stopper, come about your noisy lawn mower in the mornings.'

‘Come in Sergeant, with your friend,’ Mr Stopper replied, in consolatory voice, as he opened the door.

‘This, sir, is Constable Blood, and she will take down anything you say, won’t you Constable.’

‘That’s right, sir, take it down.’ she said, preparing her pad.

Sergeant Frisk warned Mr Stopper that his mower was in terminal danger from the crusher.

Next door, Frisk and Blood passed an ancient Humber on the drive and Sergeant Frisk knocked with official force on Mr Creek’s sturdy front door. This time Regina’s pen was cocked for action, giving the impression of enthusiasm.

‘I’m afraid the old girl can be noisy at times, Sergeant.’

‘Well, I’m sure she can, but don’t provoke her ‘till after breakfast, Mr Creek, or she’ll end up in the crusher.’

After tackling Joseph and Gillian Wiltmann, Frisk and Blood crossed the road to advise the drummer, the trumpeter and the tape machine man of the risks they were taking with their instruments and pockets. Finally, they returned to their patrol car. By then, Frisk’s temper was seeking expletive relief and he was impatient with Regina.

She spoke first. ‘What a pain in ...’

‘Shut up about your bloody elastic and your aristocratic bum,’ he snapped, interrupting her. ‘I don’t want to hear about them again tonight.’

‘I was only going to say, Sergeant, that the inhabitants of Peace Lane are a pain in the arse.’

Frisk relented. ‘I’ll run you home now, Regina,’ he said, patting her thigh a full 20 centimetres above regulation limits. ‘The lads in the nick will have a good giggle when I tell them about this evening. We have to laugh in our business.’

‘Please don’t tell them about my knickers, Sergeant.’

‘No, dear,’ he said, as she got out of the car. ‘Use plenty of ointment. See you in the morning.’

She smiled. He wasn’t such a bad old sod, after all.

Next morning Peace Lane was quiet, except for Raille’s feathered friends getting their hens up for action. Terry Pert, again disturbed, lay in bed discussing new tactics with his wife.