

IMPUGNED BY A PEASANT & OTHER STORIES

FRANK KEY

Impugned By A Peasant & Other Stories

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Foreword

THIS IS ANOTHER fat collection of stories, all of which have been read aloud on “Hooting Yard On The Air”, my weekly radio show on Resonance104.4FM. Most of these pieces were written in the latter part of 2008 and 2009, and this volume acts as a companion to the earlier anthologies *Gravitas*, *Punctilio*, *Rectitude & Pippy Bags* and (the much thinner) *Befuddled By Cormorants*.

Thanks as ever to the staff and sound engineers at Resonance, and to those readers and listeners who have supported me, not least financially through their contributions to the Hooting Yard Fund For Distressed Out Of Print Pamphleteers.

The cover design is by Pansy Cradledew, without whom my life would be a puny and curdled thing.

He has already been thanked in my previous books for his unflagging and inestimable devotion to the cause of Hooting Yard’s global dominion, but it is long overdue that I dedicate a book to Salim Fadhley. This one is for him.

Frank Key
London 2010

Disfigured Nuncio

IT IS LIKELY that most, if not all, of the nuncios you have ever come across have been Papal nuncios. Certainly that was the case with me, until a few weeks ago. I am not a practising Catholic, you understand, but my business activities put me in contact with many envoys from the Vatican, for reasons I may go into later.

So when, on that blistering Thursday at the dog-end of August, my factotae announced that a nuncio had come to see me, I naturally assumed him to be of the Papal sort. Before I go on, I ought to explain why it took more than one factotum to make the announcement. By nature I am, and have always been, a highly suspicious man. I trust nobody, not even those who seem to all outward appearance the most saintly. Modern psychotwaddle would ascribe this to some traumatic incident in my infancy, but apart from the time my Pa emptied my post office savings account and fled to Uruguay with his floozie, and the other time when my Ma sold me to a travelling brute, mine was a blissful childhood. No, my lack of trust in humanity - and, I should add, in the animal kingdom - is simply a character trait, like having a sweet tooth, or a penchant for fighting bears. That being so, I employ three factotae, the first to make an announcement, the second to corroborate it, and the third to deploy the *coup de grace*, which, in the present case, was to usher the nuncio into my presence, to make the provisional visible. It is a happy arrangement, and I make it happier still by rotating the duties of the three factotae, Ned, Ned, and Ned, so none has the opportunity to relax into his role and thus have the opportunity for maleficent scheming against me.

Dismissing the Neds with my usual lordly, if somewhat effeminate, wave of the hand, I cast an eye over my visitor. He was horribly disfigured. Indeed, for

a moment I thought he must have come into my chamber straight from one of Mr Lovecraft's purpler passages. But then I recalled that Lovecraft's works are fictions, and that his characters have no reality independent of the page. I dabbed at my lips with a napkin and asked the nuncio to state his business.

Such was his disfigurement that he was unable to speak coherently. His mouth was all twisted and scrunched, and, though I could tell he was a man of high breeding and delicate sensibilities, the noises he made were incomprehensible. They were also deafeningly loud, and I had to tear my napkin in two and stuff each half into my ears. The sudden contact of recently-deposited spittle, fabric, and earwax set off a chemical reaction, and the resulting compound seeped into the inside of my head, wormed its way towards my brain, and was eventually to fell me on the spot. But it would take some time to do so, and I was oblivious of my fate, so I continued my interrogation of the nuncio. I explained to him that I could not understand a word he was saying, or rather grunting. My own voice is a mellifluous instrument, by the way, and one which often has the ladies swooning. It surprised me that it had the same effect on the nuncio, who suddenly crumpled to the floor and lay, seemingly lifeless, upon the linoleum.

I tinkled a bell, and my factotae appeared within seconds. No doubt they had been lurking behind the door and listening out for every word, eager to hear something they might later use to undermine me. My first instinct was to punish their imminent treachery by sending them to the brute for a bashing up. But then it occurred to me, if I had been unable to make head nor tail of the nuncio's strangulated grunts, was it likely that Ned or Ned or Ned would have been able to decipher them, from behind the door panel? Like my cravats, my hearing is exquisite, whereas at least one factotum was as deaf as a post, and the other two were brain-sick. I decided to withhold the threat of the brute for the time being, and instead I commanded one of the Neds to rifle through the nuncio's pockets. At this stage, I was still under the impression that he was an emissary from the Vatican, and I wanted to know which cardinal had sent him. That would give me some idea how to proceed, for I could split the cardinals into two distinct camps. There were those of whom I was petrified, and there were those who supplied me with the bones of long dead saints. Sometimes the latter group would offer me other, non-osseous, relics, but these were of no interest to me. I'm a bones man through and through.

As soon as the factotum was done rummaging, it became clear that the nuncio had no connection with either set of cardinals. In fact it was doubtful if he was even a Roman Catholic. What came out of his pockets was a heteroclite, and rather sordid, jumble of bittybobs: buttons, string, a snapped elastic band, one or two dead beetles, cake crumbs, unidentifiable muck, a charabanc ticket, a butcher's pencil, dust, filth, tiny rubber shreds, a semi-sucked cough drop, blotting paper, a hairball, instant gravy granules, a bent safety pin, and several pips. There was no trace of identification whatsoever, nor was there any money, nor a set of keys, nor a *carte de visite*. This nuncio was either an enigma or a vagabond, perhaps both. So I told the factotae to give him a good kicking.

A nuncio is, of course, a messenger, from the Latin *nuntius*. It was possible he had been trying to deliver his message verbally before he swooned, but it seemed unlikely. Etiquette would suggest he had been greeting me, using all my honorific titles. There was nothing in his pockets resembling a written communiqué, unless I was meant to interpret the blots on the blotting paper. Then I remembered that long ago, was it in Ancient Rome?, a slave would have his head shaved, an important message tattooed upon his scalp and then, once his hair had grown back, he would be sent scampering in his toga across the hills and plains, appearing to naïve guards and sentries as just another hiking slave, until he reached his destination, whereupon his head would again be shaved and his top secret message successfully delivered. But I am not naïve. I am suspicious. I told one of the Neds to go and fetch the garden shears.

Halfway through his haircut, the nuncio awoke from his swoon and his kicking, and with inhuman strength he flung my factotum across the chamber. The shears went clattering across the linoleum. I thought the new lopsided arrangement of his bouffant rather suited his other disfigurements, and was about to say so, but I did not want him swooning on me again. The patches of his head which were now bared had not, after all, been tattooed. Where, I wondered, was my message?

As well as being suspicious, I am impatient. Before the nuncio had even scabbled to his feet, I was throwing a fit of petulance. The factotae cowered behind an arras, for they knew just how dangerous this could be. Kingdoms have crumbled, armadas have sunk, birds have fallen dead out of the sky when I have one of my tantrums. Oddly, the nuncio didn't bat an eyelid, although given his disfigurement, it was difficult to tell if those unbatting flaps of blotchy

withered flesh were actually his eyelids. Instead, he minced towards me and snapped his fingers in front of my face.

Throughout my gorgeous pampered life, I had always been resistant to hypnotists. Christ knows they tried, marshalling a panoply of techniques to send me under, but I merely thumbed my nose at them, just as I have thumbed my nose at death itself on many an occasion. But where so many charlatans had failed, the nuncio seemed to know what he was doing, because as soon as I heard that fingersnap I was away with the cuckoos. I mean that literally. I was hunched - or at least, I *thought* I was hunched - on a high tree branch, a poplar tree, leaning against a nest in which a mother cuckoo was regurgitating grubs and beetles into the quivering upturned gullets of its young. The palace, the fantastic draperies of my chamber, my divan, my factotae, the nuncio himself - all had vanished, *pfft!* I quickly ran a hand over my face to check that I had not grown a beak. But no, I was still recognisably human, though shrunk, it seemed, to the size of a bird. I took a careful look at the cuckoos.

That was when I heard another snap, and I was back in my chamber, sprawled on the divan, and mercifully much bigger than a bird. Everything was back to normal, more or less. The nuncio was now leaning against the mantelpiece, I noticed, tapping at some sort of hand-held bakelite gubbins with a little pointy-prong. His brow was furrowed in concentration, unless I was misinterpreting his disfigurement. My factotae, however, were behaving rather curiously, even for them. They had bunched up together in a corner, having surrounded themselves with twigs and other tree-loppings, and all three of them had craned their necks so they were staring at the ceiling, and their mouths were open, and they were quivering. They looked, unnervingly, like the baby cuckoos in my hallucination, though bigger and grubbier.

Just then, the nuncio stopped tapping and his contraption spat out a small cardboard rectangle, which he handed to me. A surprising amount of text had been printed upon what I took to be some kind of invoice. But an invoice for what? The nuncio was standing there expectantly, clearly waiting for me to read it, so I did.

INVOICE, it said, For services provided to Prince Fulgencio. One mesmeric intervention to supply a ladder out of a moral quagmire. Payment in full is now due. Groats and florins accepted. You have been served today by Lembit.

There followed the price, which was ridiculous.

Allied to my suspicious nature and my impatience is a tendency to bluster. Boy, did I bluster. There was nothing on the invoice to say for whom Lembit the disfigured nuncio was working, so I jumped to the immediate conclusion that he was merely a chancer who had fetched up at the palace and thought he could pull a fast one. No doubt he had heard the countryside rumours about how I treated my factotae with wilful cruelty and contempt, and thought, by his hypnotic flummery, he could turn me into a wishy-washy do-gooder, a mother cuckoo nurturing its chicks. Well, he, and Ned and Ned and Ned, would soon learn I was grimmer, fiercer and more vengeful than they supposed.

That was pretty much the gist of what I shouted at the nuncio in my blustery way. I may have added something about being perfectly happy wallowing in a moral quagmire, if that was indeed where I was, because it looked like a bloody fantastic quagmire to me, what with its crenellations and draperies and my divan and my many and various palatial accoutrements, mister! Anyway, my loud bluster seemed to do the trick, for the nuncio detached himself from the mantelpiece, where he was again leaning insolently, and minced away out of the door. Before he vanished entirely, however, he flailed his arms in a haphazard yet strangely significant manner, and I found myself gazing over at the factotae, their gullets still upturned, and lawks-a-mercy! a tear came to my eye.

Without knowing quite what I was doing, I went off to the biggest and most well-stocked of my many, many pantries, and returned with a hamper full of toothsome snacks. As if I were a large ungainly mother cuckoo clad in raiment fine, I dropped toffees and buns and bite-size chocoflakes and anchovies and gobstoppers and marinated tofu chunks and processed cheese triangles and custard balls and all sorts of other treats down the quivering throats of my factotae. When they were sated, I cracked open a bottle of aerated lettuce-water and poured them each a beakerful. I sobbed as I saw smiles break out on their pock-marked faces. Then I took them out on a charabanc excursion. We visited the Mysterious Piles Of Scum near Sawdust Bridge, the bottomless viper-pit at Shoeburyness, the Old Tower of Löbenicht, and the yeast deposits near Pepinstow. We paused for a picnic in a field splattered with buttercups, in which cows roamed, stupid yet elegant. I took them to see a performance of Binder's *Sonata For Clarinet And Tangerine Pips*, and then we hiked o'er some mountains until we reached the eerie barn at Scroonhoonpooze Farmyard. Dusk

was falling, so we called in to a kiosk, and I bought Ned and Ned cardigans and a duffel coat for Ned, and a magnetotorch each so they could light their way home. I mussed each of them on their filthy locks and promised them stylish haircuts at a new modern barber's. When we got back to the palace, tired but happy, I presented them with brand new mattresses and eiderdowns, and even pillows, and before kissing them goodnight I read them a story about a bad evil princeling who wallowed in a moral quagmire but who saw the error of his ways and clambered out of the quagmire on a ladder, and how he handed the keys to his palace to his factotae and spent the rest of his life atoning for his sins by tending the sick and the indigent and the frankly unspeakable.

Before I settled down for the night on the cold stone floor of the smallest and most cramped of my many, many pantries, I went to count the groats and florins in my casket. I opened the lid, and found it empty, save for a small cardboard rectangle. It was a receipt, and it was signed by Lembit the disfigured nuncio, and there was a diagram on it of his arms being flailed in a haphazard yet strangely significant manner. But before I could scream with fury, the admixture of spittle and fabric and earwax went fizz! inside my head, and my brain exploded

Bungled Heists

AT THE LAST count, Blodgett is thought to have been involved in no fewer than six bungled heists. By comparing the circumstances of each heist, we may learn not only about their bunglement, but something, too, about Blodgett the man.

First heist. The plan was to steal a consignment of birdseed being delivered to a crow sanctuary. Prices in the millet market had rocketed, and a tidy sum could be expected when the “hot” birdseed was offloaded to a fence. The gang spent weeks hidden behind a hedge observing the routine. At exactly 11 o’ clock each morning, a truck arrived at a gate in the perimeter fence and, after a cursory check of paperwork, it was waved through and driven at snail’s pace to the silo, whereupon a sanctuary worker hauled the vacuum-packed bags of millet off the truck and put them on a hoist which was winched up to the top of the silo. There, on a platform, a second worker slit each bag open with a birdseed-bag-cutter and dumped the contents into the silo. The empty bags were chucked back to the ground and replaced on the back of the truck, which then drove off, through the gate. The entire operation took about fifteen minutes. Blodgett’s role was to thump the truck driver and the gatekeeper, disabling them for sufficient time to allow the gang to steal the birdseed before the truck entered the crow sanctuary. At this time, Blodgett carried quite a thump, and he practised it on life-size cardboard cut-out persons, which toppled over at the first thump. This was the key to the embunglement of the heist. Both the truck driver and the gatekeeper were great thick-set brutes, much less flimsy than Blodgett’s practice figures. When thumped, neither of them toppled over. Instead, they thumped back, the two of them, with alarming violence, until

Blodgett was sprawled on the ground battered and bloodied and unconscious, at which point they summoned Detective Captain Cargpan by walkie-talkie.

Second heist. Blodgett joined a different gang for his next heist. This was a smaller-scale affair, the aim being to pinch a packet of arrowroot biscuits from a half-blind doddery octogenarian crone as she creaked along a secluded lane. Technically, it can be argued that such a venture falls outwith the strict definition of a heist, but quite frankly I am not prepared to countenance such a cavil, as it would threaten the basic integrity of my narrative thrust. The idea was that the gang would hide behind a clump of aspens, and, at the approach of the crone, Blodgett would leap out into her path and thump her. Taking advantage of her surprise, alarm, and possibly fatal injury, another member of the gang would snatch the packet of arrowroot biscuits from her pippy bag, and the gang would make off with all due speed, cackling. In this case, the bunglement consisted of failure to realise that the crone in question was Mrs Gubbins, herself a criminal mastermind, and one who could deploy her knitting needles to lethal effect. When set upon by Blodgett, she poked him in the solar plexus with a sharpened 4.25, jabbed his head with it as he crumpled to the ground, and then coolly tucked it back in her bag before calling Detective Captain Cargpan on her klaxon.

Third heist. Blodgett had rejoined his original gang, but made it clear he wished to have no part in any thumping on the next job. He was thus engaged as a look-out man. Blodgett did not pay attention, however, to a particularly riveting Dan Corbett weather forecast, and was ill-prepared when a dense and freezing and engulfing mist descended upon him as he sat in his perch overlooking the big cash-register warehouse. He was peering hopelessly into the murk when he felt the begloved hand of Detective Captain Cargpan nabbing him on the shoulder.

Fourth heist. This heist was, at least in its conception, the most ingenious. Inspired by the classic art-house film *Snakes On A Plane*, had it been fictionalised for the cinema it could have been called *Otters In A Laundry Basket*. Unfortunately, the otters escaped from the laundry basket and ran away to a riverside before they could be deployed. This was Blodgett's fault, as he had been enrolled into the gang specifically to train and control the otters. He was in bad odour after this, and considered becoming an informer for Detective

Captain Cargpan, but instead holed himself up in a chalet in Jaywick for some years, lying low.

Fifth heist. Tempted out of his Jaywick hidey-hole by the prospect of a share in the proceeds from a daring smash 'n' grabby-type heist, Blodgett returned to the criminal fray as part of yet another gang. A plate glass window was to be smashed, and a display of ornate cornflake packets dripping with jewels was to be snatched. The packets were the work of a bumptious and bespectacled artist of great, if unfathomable, repute. Everything went according to plan, except that the gang left Blodgett to guard the art in a lock-up under the arches of Sawdust Bridge while they tracked down their expert fence, who was hobnobbing with hedge fund managers. Peckish Blodgett opened up the packets and ate all the cornflakes, dry, without milk, thus destroying their value as art. Left with nothing but a bunch of jewels, albeit valuable ones, the gang fell foul of a pasteman in the trade, who tricked them as a pasteman will, and turned them over to Detective Captain Cargpan, who was waiting outside with his ruffians.

Sixth heist. One can gain some idea of the duration of Blodgett's criminal career when one considers that the sixth heist took place more than fifty years after the first. By now, Blodgett was old and wheezy, and as creaky as Mrs Gubbins had been (see second heist). It was his creakiness which led to the bungling of his last heist to date. The vaults of the big important bank into which the gang broke their way with the aid of industrial slicing and cutting and burrowing equipment were, of course, heavily alarmed. Multiple sensors would pick up the tiniest sound or movement. One by one, each sensor was disabled by the gang's sensor disablement man, using his pliers or pincers or, in one case, a soaking wet dishcloth. Things were set fair for a successful heist. But Blodgett creaked as he crept towards the cash-cage, alerting a tiny rodent, which scurried in fear towards the big important bank's basement wainscoting, and in so doing dislodged some wiring, causing a short circuit which knocked out all the electrics. Plunged into Stygian blackness, Blodgett and the gang were helpless, and could do nothing but await the arrival of the janitor in the morning. This janitor was an old mucker of Detective Captain Cargpan, who was himself on the scene within seconds, blackjack and manacles at the ready.

According to a story in a recent issue of the *Weekly Heist Intelligencer*, Blodgett is a member of a gang plotting a forthcoming heist at an amusement

arcade in a seaside resort. Letters have since appeared in the correspondence columns pleading with the gang to drop Blodgett from their plans. The inherent sentimentality of the criminal demimonde suggests this is unlikely to happen. It is thought Detective Captain Cargpan has already splashed out on a railway ticket to the seaside resort.

From Wivenhoe To Cuxhaven By Way Of Ponders End

I WENT FROM Wivenhoe to Cuxhaven by way of Ponders End. For the journey, I wore upon my head a hat woven from the hair of gorgeous hairy beasts, and a pair of goggles. Otherwise, I was dressed in the sort of suit you might see Edward G Robinson wearing in a film noir, with accompanying spats. It was suggested to me that I might take in Nunhead and Snodland along the way, but I had no time, I had no time.

Other than the sea crossing, for which I commandeered a skiff and its skiffer, I walked the entire route. Whenever I became exhausted, I slept upon the ground, under the bowl of night. I would like to say that I grew familiar with the stars, but I did not. Unless it was cloudy, as it often was, I could see countless stars twinkling above me, but they appeared randomly scattered, and I was never able to discern any patterns. I always woke up with strands of hay in my hair, wherever I had slept. I used my gorgeous woven hat of hair as a pillow.

Though I was walking, rather than cycling, I carried with me a bicycle pump. Often I pumped it, pointing it ahead of me, as an exercise drill, and also as a means of dispersing gangs of gnats or midges hovering in the air. Sometimes I fancied I could hear their faint insect shrieks as they were whooshed out of my path. I refreshed myself with water from duckponds.

I tried to keep a steady pace. There were times when I felt the bile rising in my throat. Whenever this happened, I stopped walking, sat on the ground, took my journal from the pocket of my film noir suit, and wrote a memorandum. Here is an example:

I am no longer in Wivenhoe. Ten minutes ago, walking along a bosky lane lined by what I think are plane trees, I pumped the pump at a cloud of midges, scattering them. Shortly afterwards, I felt the bile rising in my throat. Above me the sky is wonderfully blue and dotted with linnets, swooping. Tonight it will be dotted with stars. The stars do not swoop, they stay where they are, far away in the cold universe, so far away that the linnets can never reach them, and nor can I. But I can reach Cuxhaven, by way of Ponders End, and must do so quickly, while there is still time.

The act of writing in my journal always made the bile subside, and I was able to press on. When it was humid, my goggles steamed up. I carried on walking, as if in a mist. When I came to a stream or a rill I would take off the goggles and dip them briefly in the water, and wipe them dry on one of my film noir sleeves. Sometimes a true, engulfing mist would descend. Then I would get down on my knees, even if where I was was muddy, and take from my pocket my little wooden god, and prop it against a stone, and beseech it. Here is an example of such beseeching:

O little wooden god propped up against a stone, I beseech you to sweep away this engulfing mist and to make visible my path, so that I may walk on fearlessly towards Cuxhaven by way of Ponders End. Ooba gooba himmelfarb farbagooba!

The last four words were my incantation, designed to assuage my little wooden god and have it do my bidding. My bidding was always done, for the air would clear, sooner or later, and if the land was flat I could see for miles. One day I was able to see Ponders End far in the distance, and on another day I saw the sea, and once I was on the sea, being skiffed across it by an energetic skiffer in his skiff, I saw Cuxhaven, just in time.

I paid the skiffer to skiff me across the sea. He refused to skiff me otherwise. I had no cash, no chequebook, no debit nor credit card, not even shells or beads or trinkets, but I had honey. Along my journey from Wivenhoe to the coast by way of Ponders End, I had paused whenever I passed an apiary and snaffled honey from beehives. I collected it in pouches strung around my waist attached to a cord, hidden under my film noir suit. Some of the honey I ate to keep myself from fainting, but I was careful to keep some aside, for I did not expect to be skiffed across the sea for nothing. My offer to pay the skiffer in honey was met with great civility, even glee.

I knew that, if ever I made the return journey from Cuxhaven to Wivenhoe by way of Ponders End, perhaps able to take in Nunhead and Snodland given

that I would no longer be pressed for time, I would be accosted by several irate beekeepers demanding recompense for their stolen honey. I had time enough, in Cuxhaven, to work out a way to repay them. If time passed and my head remained empty of ideas, I could prop my little wooden god against a Cuxhaven stone and beseech it for a brainwave. If all else failed, I could stay in Cuxhaven, and never go back to Wivenhoe through all the days of my life.

Yet conscience told me this was wrong. It was one thing to be holed up in Cuxhaven, quite another to be holed up in Cuxhaven tormented by guilt that good honest beekeepers had been robbed by my own honey-snaffling hands. Yes, it was true that I bore the bee-stings, but I had sucked the venom and spat it out and rubbed my hands with dock leaves. I still had dock in my pocket, should the bees of Cuxhaven have at me with their stings. I hoped they would not, for I resolved not to take their honey. In Cuxhaven, I had sausages.

Gravediggers' Glade

THERE IS A glade in the woods where, once, gravediggers gathered of an evening when their day's digging was done, and so it is known as Gravediggers' Glade. They came directly from their graveyards, and brought their spades with them, leaning the spades against the larches and laburnums and sycamores that dotted the glade. Some came from graveyards far away, too far to trudge on foot, and those gravediggers came on their donkeys, with their spades tied to panniers. There can be something Christlike about a gravedigger riding a donkey along a country lane, particularly if he has a beard and a soulful look in his eyes and is dressed in a white shift. But no competent gravedigger wears white, for gravedigging is filthy work, particularly during rainfall, it is work that throws up clods of earth and muck with which the gravedigger's clothing is splattered, and so he will wear black or brown or beige, and rather than a shift he will wear overalls or dungarees, of tough cloth, if he knows what he is about. Even a gravedigger so clad, if he has a beard and a soulful look and is wending his way astride a donkey towards the glade as the sun sets can resemble Christ, however, if not quite so perfectly.

What must a spectator make, then, of a continual stream of Christs, one after another, in the evening, on the lane, as they head for their gathering in the glade? Some are on their donkeys and some are on foot, but even the latter can look like Christ, during His Passion, carrying their spades as Christ carried His cross. What a sight, indeed, and one you would have seen if, all those years ago, you had been a peasant tilling his patch beside the lane, or lolling in a haystack knocking back a flagon of cider, or engaged in some other rustic evening pursuit. Thomas Hardy wrote about such things, but as far as I know

he never witnessed the parade of gravediggers on their way to Gravediggers' Glade in the woods. These are not Wessex woods.

There was little that was Christ-like about their gatherings. They leaned their spades against the larches and laburnums and sycamores, and those who had come far tied their donkeys to the same trees with donkey-tying string, so the donkeys would not stray, although they let their spades remain empannied rather than removing them to lean against the trees alongside the spades of their fellows. No, they no longer looked Christ-like as they gathered, all in black and brown and beige and matted in muck, muck which was splattered in their beards and their hair as well as upon their tough gravediggers' clothing.

And, gathered together, they began to grunt. They grunted softly, and loudly, and kept on grunting until they had coaxed the Grunty Man, that monster from the bedtime stories of their childhoods, from his lair up in the hills. The Grunty Man came bounding down to Gravediggers' Glade at inhuman speed, hairy and slobbering and grunting, and as soon as he was among them, the gravediggers fell silent. They stooped to pick pebbles from the ground, and they chucked the pebbles at the Grunty Man, many, many pebbles, but not with great force, for they wished to tease him rather than to harm him. And when they had exhausted the pebbles, the gravediggers began to sing. They all had sheet music tucked into the pockets of their black and brown and beige overalls or dungarees, and they lined up as a choir would line up, and they belted out in their gruff gravedigger voices selections from Charles Ives' self-published collection of *114 Songs* (1922). They sang *At Sea* and *Charlie Rutlage* and *Like A Sick Eagle*. They sang *Luck And Work* and *Grantchester* and *Ich Grolle Nicht*. They sang *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and *The Housatonic At Stockbridge*. They sang *Marie* and *Rosamunde* and *Mists* and *Watchman* and *Those Evening Bells*. And they sang *Tom Sails Away*, as a sort of farewell to the Grunty Man, for by now he had sailed, or scampered, away, for he was frightened of singing, and the gravediggers' songs always made him flee back up to the hills where he cowered in his lair until lured back to the glade by the grunting of the gravediggers when next they gathered there of an evening.

Fear stalks the countryside, especially fear of the Grunty Man, and that is how the gravediggers held their fear at bay. They could have sung songs by other composers, of course, by Schubert or Schumann or Peter Warlock or Peter Blegvad or Yoko Ono, but each of them was fond of Ives and they had

splurged their wages on the sheet music for the *114 Songs*, trooping into Dennis Pigstraw's sheet music shop in the village of Cack posing as a choir. All singing terrified the Grunty Man. Teasingly pelted with pebbles and sung at, he never learned that he should ignore the grunting with which he was coaxed from his lair, for his brain was tiny and hot and pitiable, and every single evening he fell for the same trick. Had it happened in Wessex, Thomas Hardy would have written about it, I am sure. But there is much that happens elsewhere in the countryside that no one speaks of or writes of, and that is as much a pity as the weakness of the Grunty Man's tiny hot brain.

Woodcutter

THERE WAS ONCE a woodcutter who had a burning sense of injustice. He dwelt in a cottage deep in the forest, where there was plenty of wood for him to cut. A day's walk to the west was the cottage of a charcoal burner, and a day's walk to the east was the hovel of a drink-soaked ex-Trotskyist popinjay. These were the woodcutter's neighbours, and they worried about his burning sense of injustice and sought what they could do to alleviate it, but the woodcutter was a very taciturn woodcutter and he never answered either the charcoal burner or the popinjay when they asked him to explain, as they did on Thursdays when their separate forestry routines took them both past the woodcutter's cottage where they dropped in in the hope of being offered a mug of piping hot cocoa. Sometimes they dropped in at the same time, so it could be a cosy threesome huddled in the unrelenting gloom of the woodcutter's cottage.

On one such Thursday, the woodcutter was as reluctant to speak as ever, but he happily poured out cocoa for his neighbours. The charcoal burner had brought some charcoal to burn to keep him occupied, and the popinjay was reminiscing about his Trotskyist days when he spent much of his time standing at the entrances to railway stations handing out pamphlets to passers-by. The woodcutter neither watched the charcoal being burned nor listened to the slurred anecdotage of the popinjay. He sat in his chair glowering at the embers in the fireplace, nurturing his burning sense of injustice.

Now, the charcoal burner and the popinjay had hatched what they thought was a very clever plan to get the woodcutter to spill the beans. They reasoned that if they each claimed to have a burning sense of something, and babbled on about it in confessional mode to the woodcutter, he might well tell them of the injustice gnawing at his soul. So the charcoal burner pretended to have

a burning sense of righteousness, and the popinjay assumed a burning sense of indigestion. They were waiting in the gloom for an opportune moment to launch into an account of their counterfeit burning woes.

This clever plan was not the only thing that was hatched on that Thursday. In the cellar of the woodcutter's cottage, in a crate packed with straw, there nestled a clutch of eggs that, as the charcoal burner burned charcoal and the popinjay wittered, began to crack. The beings inside the eggs were grown too large to be confined any longer. They were ready to be born. And what beings they were! Startling forest creatures, crinkly and crumpled and covered in hoar-frost. Tiny now, when full grown they would be as tall as the trees and as broad as a barn. Their fur was matted, and the feathers that sprouted from their foreheads were of colours beyond the known spectrum. Their many bulbous eyes, unlidded, stared from quivering stalks with a look of tragic reproach, the tears that dripped from them sulphurous and boiling hot. They had collapsible lungs and sharp fangs and great thumping hooves and a milky pallor and beaks and ears and elbows and pot bellies. When they crawled upon the earth, they turned the soil to muck teeming with maggots, and when they reared up on their hind legs and roared, they blotted out the sun. They had enormous brains, and enormous shovel-like paws, and enormous ill-will. They fed on everything, living and dead, and vomited most of it up again, making disgusting, deafening noises. Their antennae picked up signals from outer space, their inability to understand which caused them such fury that they ripped and tore and savaged whatever was in front of them with their long pointy claws. When they were not roaring they made a tremendous buzzing sound, and when neither roaring nor buzzing they howled and whimpered. A continuous stream of steam and smoke poured out of each of their numberless orifices, poisoning the air around them. They were hunchbacked. They moved with inhuman speed. They left a trail of filth and pus in their wake. They stank of beer and gin and sweat and death. Nobody, not even the weird mad people who dwelt in the weirdest, deepest parts of the forest, kept them as pets, or wove pretty wicker baskets for them to doze in, or cosseted them, or loved them.

In his pamphlet on the forest beings, which is out of print, Dobson described them differently. But he had never seen one, and he was working from unreliable sources. Indeed, he did not know they were hatched from eggs,

believing instead the mediaeval superstition that they were formed from the breath of seagulls blown upon the excrement of ladybirds. Where such a fancy originated is unknown.

The sound of the eggs cracking open was loud enough to be heard in the room above the cellar, and both the charcoal burner and the drink-soaked ex-Trotskyist popinjay cocked their ears and gave quizzical looks, first at each other and then at the woodcutter. The woodcutter remained as taciturn as ever, slumped in his chair, taking great gulps from his mug of cocoa. He had sprayed himself, that morning, with half a canister's worth of Hengist, 'the scent for men of the forest', and there was an aura of indestructibility about him, as well as a burning sense of injustice.

It was that sense of injustice which had led the woodcutter to steal the eggs from the nest of a forest being matriarch. His mind had gone loopy long ago, and he thought that he would be able to train newborn forest beings, put them on leashes, and have them do his bidding. First he would whet their appetites by letting them rend and slash and gobble up the charcoal burner and the popinjay, and then he would set out with them on a long, long journey, tracking down Benny and Bjorn and Agnetha and Anna-Frid, one by one, and wreak vengeance upon them for having, so many years ago, sacked him from their pop group on the day they signed their first recording contract.

He had reckoned without the matriarch, of course. She, too, heard the cracking of her eggs, and now she loomed huge and hideous over the woodcutter's cottage, deep in the forest, where no one with any sense would ever dwell, for it is a weird and eerie place and it is teeming with monsters.

Potter's Arch Or Potter's Crank?

POTTER'S ARCH OR potter's crank? It's a choice you have to make, when tobogganing, in a split second. Pick the wrong manoeuvre and bones might be broken, or at the very least sprained, and you would almost certainly end up with a mouth full of snow. If your movements were impaired, as well they might be by dint of bone damage, and a fresh fall of snow occurred, from those expansive bleak grey skies, with little wind, you could be buried, all trace of you erased, for in the morning a passing hiker or cadet would see a smooth untrodden white blanket, stretching from here all the way across to where the woods begin at the foot of the mighty mountain. Your toboggan would be buried alongside you, some yards away, at the point where you were tossed from it into the snow, like an Eskimo rag doll.

Make the right choice, in that instant, between arch and crank, and no such calamity will befall you. You will continue zooming downward, whatever the gradient, with bumps and buffets to be sure, but joyously, until, as the slope evens out at the end of the course, you will slow gradually, and come to a halt at the scoring station. It is just a little hut, the station, where officials in woolly hats await you, and mark your time and elegance in their records.

They are passionless men, these officials. If you choose wrongly, between potter's arch and potter's crank, and are helpless in the snow with broken bones somewhere up on the slope, they send no search parties. They wait and wait, sipping Schnapps from their flasks, pointing to pines, scanning the sky, until the sun begins to set and they wend their way along the Hopfskag to the village, to homely hearths and warm beds. They will not even think of you, alone on the mountain slopes as snow falls from the sparkling night sky, burying you and your bashed-up dented toboggan.

You should not believe what you have heard about big dogs coming to snuffle you out, with brandy-barrels fastened about their necks. There are no such hounds in the Hopfskag. It is said they are frightened away by the mountain spirits, the groaning wraiths that prey upon the souls of crashed tobogganists.

That is why, in that split second you have to choose your manoeuvre, to make that decisive potter's arch or potter's crank, you should trust to neither skill nor instinct, but to the mountain spirits. Offer yourself to them, brain and bone and body and soul, frame and core, in a howl of subjugation to their power, and make your move. They will tell you whether to arch or to crank. But be warned. They are mischievous and fickle. The dogs learned that long ago. Tobogganists have not, yet.

How To De-Fang Your Venomous Serpent

SOONER OR LATER, most owners of venomous serpents will wish to de-fang their cold-blooded pets. Neighbourhood Watch gauleiters and local busybodies often make life difficult for the venomous serpent owner, particularly when the paths and lanes in the vicinity are littered with the bodies of poisoned innocents with tell-tale puncture marks and faces frozen in a rictus of twisted horror. You have to weigh up the pleasure of having a happy serpent giving full vent to its instinctual drive to sink its fangs into the flesh of a passing greengrocer, and the opprobrium which is an almost inevitable result. Social death, and a want of invitations to elegant drawing-room soirées, are regrettably the lot of the venomous serpent owner, as if somehow it is the keeper rather than the pet who has been slithering about, dropping unexpectedly from the branches of trees, and injecting lethal toxins into everybody from the postmistress to the community hub outreach worker.

It should be noted that I am referring to singularly aggressive venomous serpents, those which attack without provocation, due to their being agents of Beelzebub.

Comes the time, eventually, when one tires of black looks from one's fellows in the bus queue and of always being served last in the butcher's shop. It is at this point that the venomous serpent owner concedes that the only solution is to de-fang their pet. Doing so is not without its risks, especially if the venomous serpent gets an inkling of what is afoot and decides to strike first. The obituary columns of the village newspaper are chocker with the names of rash wannabe de-fangers whose venomous serpents turned on them.

Particularly quick-thinking venomous serpents have been known to plunge their fangs into the neck of their owner as a pre-emptive measure, before the owner has even resolved to go down the de-fanging route.

The only guaranteed method of de-fanging your singularly aggressive agent of Beelzebub is to mesmerise it. Once it has been placed in a trance, it is a simple matter to extract its fangs with a pair of pliers, and then to dab on to its gums some sort of dual-action antiseptic anaesthetic jelly. There are plenty of proprietary brands to choose from at your local chemist, if of course you have not been barred from there following the agonising death of the pharmacist, struck down by your venomous serpent on an otherwise unremarkable village afternoon. If that is the case, which it probably is, you will have to go further afield, to a different village, and in such circumstances it is best to place your venomous serpent in a creche facility while you are away. Taking the venomous serpent along for the ride has its pitfalls, such as the novelty of a fresh set of victims unlikely to be on their guard against its sudden, lethal attacks. You will not want to be a social pariah in two separate villages, as this will only compound your problems.

When you snap your de-fanged venomous serpent out of its trance, it will become fractious. Deprived of the ability to cause almost instant death by biting, it will seek new ways to express its inherent malevolence. And remember that Beelzebub will be taking an interest in its welfare. Unjust as it may be, you will quite possibly find yourself held responsible for a plague of stranglings and crushings in the village, depending upon the size of your ex-venomous serpent. Just as you were looking forward to a mantelpiece crammed with invitations to sophisticated dinner parties and potato show prize-givings, your hopes may be dashed, and you may have to mesmerise your serpent again. It is never easy the second time.

Hoofprint Advice

UPON WAKING, THE sight of hoofprints on the ceiling, hoofprints that were not there when you fell asleep, can be worrisome. The regime has now issued a helpful step-by-step guide setting out precisely what to do in the circumstances.

- i Remain lying in bed, quite still, staring at the ceiling. Try to recall any dreams you may have had while you were asleep. Did any hooved beasts, such as goats or horses, feature in these dreams? If so, they were probably not dreams at all, and thus you have a preliminary explanation for the hoofprints on your ceiling. Report this immediately to your local nocturnal hoofprint investigating officer.
- ii If you did not dream of hooved beasts, or cannot recall doing so, you are left without a satisfactory explanation for the hoofprints. This will not do. Get out of bed, plunge your head into a pail of icy water, thrice, and look again at the ceiling. If the hoofprints are no longer visible, bury the memory of ever having seen them.
- iii If, on the other hand, the hoofprints are still there, clamber on to a step ladder and try to obliterate them with a rag and a proprietary cleansing spray such as Hoofbegone!. If you are able to eradicate the hoofprints entirely, fold up your step ladder, return the spray to your cupboard, and wash the rag in warm soapy water.
- iv It may be that the hoofprints on your ceiling are impossible to remove. Do not even think about painting over them with whitewash. Instead, get dressed in something fetching and pay a visit to the local nocturnal hoof-

print investigation office. Make an appointment to see a ceiling hoofprint specialist.

- v At the subsequent interview, before you are tied to a chair in the cellar, provide the specialist with any snapshots you have taken of your ceiling. When asked to describe the hoofprints, and any other phenomena that may be pertinent, give full and frank answers before the hood is pulled over your head.
- vi When you recover consciousness in a ditch in a remote part of the country, dressed in a paper suit, make your way to the border. Report to the guards, and on no account say a word about the hoofprints. Submit willingly when one of the guards points a sort of magnetic ray gun at your brain.
- vii As a sleeper agent in the neighbouring statelet, obtain a menial job and await further instructions. Note that the suckers on your hands and newly-behooved feet should be kept free of dust and grime. Avoid podiatrists, even in social settings such as cocktail parties and pétanque tournaments.

With My Fife And My Drum

WITH MY FIFE and my drum I wandered in the hills. I tooted my fife and I banged my drum. This was why I was wandering in the hills, for I had been banished from town. My tooting and banging unnerved the good burghers, and the bad burghers too, and I was escorted to the town perimeter and shoved across the line. It was an actual line, painted in whitewash, and regularly repainted wherever it lost integrity through scuffing by bootsoles and the like. I was told plainly, by way of an edict, that I could never again toot my fife or bang my drum within the town, due to the unnervement I caused. I accepted this, and wandered up into the hills.

Toot toot toot! Bang bang bang! Toot toot bang bang toot! Bang! I was as happy as a sandboy, although I am not entirely sure what a sandboy is, unless it be a remarkably happy boy made out of wet impacted sand by some beach-bound Geppetto.

I was happy in the hills until I was attacked by a flock of *putti*. No one had ever thought to tell me that the sky above the hills was infested by chubby curly-locked cherubs from the Italian Renaissance, some armed with bows and arrows, and all blessed with the power of flight. Whenever I had seen pictures of them, during my lessons, I understood them to be harmless. Mischievous, yes, but in a playful way. It came as a shock to me to discover that they were demented and malevolent, never a good combination. They also seemed to object to my tooting on my fife and my banging on my drum. I took shelter in a recently-vacated bivouac.

You should always take care, in the hills, when occupying a vacant bivouac, to find out if it has been wholly abandoned or if the person who built it is due back shortly. That person might be large and menacing with hairy fists

and wild eyes. Many hill dwellers fit that description. I saw dying embers from a fire, and some spat-out gristle from a sausage, neither of which told me whether or not I could expect company. The *putti* continued to swoop in the sky above, ready to renew their attack if they got the chance. I judged that, if a large hairy hill-person were to return to claim his bivouac, I could frighten him off with tooting and banging. Such ogres are usually averse to a din. But unless the *putti* flew away, I was trapped. I could only hope their attentions might be distracted by a passing goat or peasant. I wanted to wander, yet here I was stuck in a bivouac. To pass the time, I tooted my fife and banged my drum.

About an hour later, the maker of the bivouac returned. It was not, as I had surmised, a large and ungainly hill-person, but grumpy German film director Horst Gack. The *putti* swooped upon him as he approached, the armed ones firing golden arrows at him, but he simply shouted at them and waved his fist, as hairy as a hill-person's fist, and they dispersed, with babyish squeaks. I wondered why I had not thought to use Gack's simple tactics. But then, the presiding genius of the Cinema of Belligerence had a guttural shout and an aggressive fist-brandishment beyond compare.

He was unconcerned that I was occupying his bivouac. Indeed, as soon as he saw my fife and my drum he questioned me closely about them. He was a very intense man, as you might expect. As he fried sausages over the rekindled fire, he told me that a fife and drum soundtrack would suit the film he was working on, here in this bivouac, a seven-hour black-and-white documentary about hillside goats and ogres. He explained that he had just been out and about shooting raw footage of a goat-versus-ogre wrestling bout. I did some tooting and banging for him, and he seemed pleased, though it was difficult to tell given his grim demeanour. He gave me one of his sausages.

Little did I know, as darkness fell upon the hills, that six months later I would stand on stage accepting an award as runner-up in the Most Belligerent Soundtrack award at a film festival in Ülm. Curiously, the trophy itself was a statuette of a *putto*, curly-locked and chubby and armed with a bow and arrow. I took it home, to my new home, just outside the town perimeter, and I put it on my mantelpiece, and every now and then, as the fancy took me, I smashed it to smithereens with a hammer, and then glued it back together. Now, when I wander in the hills tooting my fife and banging my drum, the *putti* leave me be.

Advice Regarding Vinegar

THE BEST THING to do, in certain circumstances, is to lie on your side, upon the grass, in a meadow, and have an acolyte pour vinegar into your ear through a funnel. When you stand up, in the middle of the meadow, and tilt your head, shaking it a little, the vinegar will be expelled from your ear and you will feel the benefits.

It is important that you have an acolyte who can properly adjudge the amount of vinegar to pour into your ear. Too little, and the whole exercise is pointless. Too much, and you will be tilting your head and shaking it until the cows come home, and you will find it very difficult to expel all the vinegar.

When the cows come home they may be disconcerted to find you in their meadow, with your tilted head, and some of them may become fractious. Fractious cows can be dangerous, so it will help if you have your acolyte armed with some sort of cow-protection device. This might be made of corrugated cardboard, or alternatively of tin foil. Best to consult a catalogue of cow-protection devices beforehand, with your acolyte at your side.

Choosing an acolyte to whom you are prepared to entrust the pouring, and the cow-protection, is a fraught business, believe you me. It is a process during which you can expect much heightened emotion, many tears, a certain amount of wailing, and, now and then, fencing contests, with flashing épées. It has even been known for rival acolytes to bash each other about with spades, so it is advisable not to give them access to the keys to the potting shed.

You will probably have at least one set of duplicate potting shed keys, hanging from a hook in the pantry, so make sure you keep the pantry out of bounds to your acolytes, save for those who need to enter it to fetch tins of tinned plums and tinned radishes and other tinned goods. It is a simple

matter to give but one acolyte the responsibility for the fetching of tins, and that acolyte can be disqualified from even the possibility of pouring vinegar into your ears in the middle of the cow meadow, while you lie on your side, by having him blinded or having his legs broken and confining him to the house.

Another thing to bear in mind when choosing the appropriate acolyte is that they must be able to get you from the house to the middle of the meadow with the minimum of fuss. Fuss is corrosive of the soul and has been known to result in horrible bodily eruptions such as sores and boils and suppurating patches of pus in such tender places as the groin and the armpits. You will want a level-headed and charming acolyte, one who, confronted by menacing geese on the way from the house to the meadow, will soothe them by singing something by Kevin Coyne in a deeply lovely voice. Geese are usually placated in this way, even the most ferocious ones. I would recommend something from his album *Marjory Razorblade*, perhaps "Pig Latin" or "Eastbourne Ladies", the latter a favourite of John Lydon as long ago as his punk days when he was known as Johnny Rotten.

You will probably want to be carried from the house to the meadow on a palanquin, given your preening self-regard. You will thus require additional acolytes to do the carrying, one of whom can also be the vinegar-pouring acolyte, if you so wish. It is therefore a very good idea to have some distractions at hand to entertain those who, once their carrying is done, have nought to do until you command them to carry you back to the house when you have flushed the vinegar out of your ear.

Most acolytes can be happy by board games. Poopy, The Kronstadt Rebellion, and Waiting Around In A Meadow While Vinegar Is Poured Into The Ear Of Your Hero are splendid and complicated games using dice, counters, and the feathers of placated geese, but of course there are many other games, board-based and otherwise, which you may consider packing in your pippy bag when making preparations to be carried from the house to the meadow. If you have acolytes who are resistant to the allure of exciting board games, it is probably best to dismiss them, with their tails between their legs, as the saying goes.

The dismissal of acolytes can be problematic, particularly if they are clingy. Clinging acolytes are known to use gum to affix themselves to fixtures and fittings, such as the doors of pantries and the railings bordering manses. Be on

your guard against them. Rifle fire tends to deter all but the clingiest, who may have to be detached from their gummy emplacements with gum-dissolving fluids in spray canisters. When making a purchase of these canisters, you may be asked to fill out a form declaring that they will not be used to dissolve the gum affixing an acolyte to the railings of your manse. In these circumstances, just lie. You will go to hell, but would you not rather be in hell than be subject to the fawning of a gummed acolyte?

Character Flaw of Mediaeval Peasant

HELLO. MY NAME is Cleothgard and I am a mediaeval peasant. I am calling to you across the centuries because I want to tell you about my character flaw. It is not, I am afraid to say, a character flaw that would elevate me into the realm of the tragic. That would be a splendid flaw to have, but I am a mere peasant, and as I look about me in this vale of tears it has not escaped my attention that tragic, and indeed heroic, character flaws tend to be displayed by princelings and such. Mine is more what you might call a mundane flaw. One of the reasons I decided to bellow so hectically that time itself is bedizened and shrunk is that I know with a fair degree of certainty that no poet nor playwright is ever likely to consider my character flaw a fit subject for their pen, or I should say quill, or scratchy stick. I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be. I don't even know who Prince Hamlet is, or was, or will be, and I was always meant to be a peasant. 'Twas writ upon the stars.

My character flaw is a tendency to overdo the grovelling when confronted by a baron. When I see one approach, upon his horse, in all his finery, glittering and clanking, accompanied by his retinue, I immediately start to snivel and slobber and I pitch myself forward face down into the muck. Mediaeval muck is much, much filthier than your modern muck. It oozes and stinks and harbours all sorts of minuscule disgusting life-forms, things you have eradicated through science and hygiene. While thus prostrate, I begin to groan incoherently. What I am actually trying to express is the sense that I am but a worm unfit to exist on the same planet as the baron, who is brighter than the sun and completely

fantastic, but my abasement is such that I cannot form the proper words with my mouth, which in any case is by now packed with mud.

Bear in mind that at this stage, the baron and his retinue have only just hove into view on the horizon. This is partly what I mean by overdoing the grovelling. My fellow mediaeval peasants are all still going about their business, tilling the fields or scratching at their buboes or, in the throes of the *chorea imaginativa aestimative*, dancing in a frenzy. When the baron gets closer, a goodly number of them will tug their forelocks and dribble with happiness at the sight of him, but I feel this urge to outdo them. That is my character flaw.

And it is made all the more pathetic by the fact that the baron will not even notice my existence. I am pretty certain this is the case, for over the years, not a single baron passing through our bailiwick has ever acknowledged me. They might command their retinue to smash up the mediaeval farming tools and hack at those tilling the fields with their big sharp swords, or they might burn down our huts, or, very very occasionally, they might turn out to be a so-called 'good baron' and distribute alms and largesse. But because of my ludicrous grovelment, flat on my belly in the muck, groaning away, I seem to escape their attention. There is, I suppose, an advantage to this in that I have never had one of my limbs sliced off or smashed to pieces. Thereagain, nor have I been presented with a groat by a good baron's alms-giving dwarf.

Swings and roundabouts. Fate is meant to decide the lot of a mediaeval peasant like me, but the nature of my character flaw is such that I become a sort of invisible peasant, merged with the muck in which I sprawl, and so Fate passes me by. If I could, just once, stand straight and tall - well, not tall, exactly, because nutritional deficiencies mean I am stunted and shrivelled - but if I could at least stop abasing myself quite so preposterously as soon as I spot a baron half a mile off, then who knows what I might reap?

I dare say in your world o' the future there are still peasants with character flaws, and good barons and bad barons. And I expect the peasants still till and scratch and dance, and the barons are still really terrific and shine so brightly. Fate will arrange things just so, I assume, even though Fate has taken one withering look at me and left me where I am, slobbering in the muck.

Along The Banks Of The Smem

“Many people have a prejudice against goat’s milk, thinking it has a peculiarly goaty flavour. This misapprehension has probably arisen from the experience of tourists in Switzerland and Italy where goat’s milk is in common use, and frequently offered in mugs or glasses which have not been properly cleaned.”

– H S Holmes Pegler, ‘Goat-Keeping’, *The Listener*, Vol I No 16, 1st May 1929.

THE ENGINE GAVE a hoarse shriek; we had arrived at Pinpotting, or Pottingpan. The black coaches of the train waited a minute in the silvery light of the mountain, disgorging a miscellaneous collection of people and swallowing others. Peppery voices could be heard up and down the platform. Then the wheezy engine at the front squeaked again and drew the black chain rattling away into the cavernous tunnel. The broad sweep of country lay pure and peaceful once more, with its sharply etched backcloth scoured bright and clean by the damp wind. It was good to breathe the air. I was one of those who had disembarked from the train, and I stood waiting on the platform until it was empty but for the guard, who soon vanished into his hut.

I had come to this mountain village, with my peg-leg and my religious hysteria, on the advice, even the orders, of the family physician. In his twinkly shouting guttural manner, Dr Gobbo insisted that a six-month stay in the clean mountain air would restore to me the gusto I had lost. For my part, though I did as he suggested, I was unconvinced. My life thus far had been a catalogue of maladies, mishaps, and calamities. I had an ague shortly after I was born, and then, at about three or four years old, I had a grievous ague. I vomited for

twelve hours every fortnight for years. This sickness nipt my strength in the bud. At eight years old I had an issue in the coronal sutor of my head which continued running until I was twenty-one. One October I had a violent fever, it was like to have carried me off, 'twas the most dangerous sickness that ever I had. At fifteen or sixteen I had the measles, but that was nothing, I was hardly sick. I had a dangerous fall from my uncle's horse. The following year I had smallpox. When I was twenty I had a fall and broke one of my ribs, and was afraid it might cause an apostumatation. Much later coming back from abroad I was like to be shipwrecked but no hurt done. The following year I had a terrible fit of the spleen and piles. Then I received laesio in testiculo, which was like to have been fatal. After that my affairs ran kim kam, there were treacheries against me. A couple of years later an impostume broke in my head. Also I was in danger of being run through with a sword, and in danger of being drowned twice. That year I was in great danger of being killed by a drunkard in the street, but one of his companions hindered his thrust. Now, standing on the deserted railway station platform, I mumbled a prayer to several saints, asking them to protect me from further harm. Perhaps Dr Gobbo was correct.

I set off towards my hotel, a mile or two distant on the banks of the Smem. Seldom had I seen a river so teeming with fish. I hoped to find, upon arrival at the hotel, that my room overlooked the river, that I might be able to spear fish from the comfort of my balcony. I had brought no spears with me, but could spend happy hours whittling sticks gathered in the gorgeous woodland. I would need to obtain some string, to attach to my whittled spears in order to be able to haul them back to the balcony, with, I hoped, a bream or gudgeon impaled upon them. I was confident, from my knowledge of Mitteleuropean mountain village hotels gleaned from various encyclopaedias, that string would be the sort of item available in a little shop attached to the hotel, much like a church repository. From my perch upon the balcony of my room, armed with string and sticks whittled into spears, I might well be able to provide myself with enough fish for my dinner each day, and thus be spared the ordeal of mucking in with the other guests in the dining room, whom I feared might snigger at my peg-leg and be dismissive of my religious hysteria. I knew only too well that Satan can lurk even in the bosom of the most innocent-seeming Mitteleuropean mountain village hotel guest.

These thoughts of succulent and private fish dinners made me peckish as I followed the path along the bank of the Smem. There was as yet no sign of the hotel, so as I approached a peasant's hut I decided to stop and ask if I might be given a snack. I had not had the opportunity to change my bank draft into the coinage of this country, assuming that I could do so at the hotel, thus I readied myself to bestow grand and holy benisons upon the peasant through the power of my voice and by swinging a tin censer from my unwithered hand. Pausing by a clump of edelweiss, I lit the censer with my World War One platoon sergeant's pump gaz lighter, then clonked up to the door of the hut and hammered upon it.

The peasant who appeared in answer to my knocking was, I am afraid to say, an irreligious lout who stank of goat. The sacred smoke from my swinging censer had absolutely no effect upon his morals. As I am sure you can appreciate, I was thoroughly perplexed at his immunity, and the consequent knotting of my tongue and clogging of my throat meant that I had much difficulty making myself understood. What ought to have been a simple snack request came out as a strangulated cry of spiritual desolation. To my surprise, however, he gestured for me to follow him into the gloom of his hut.

Within, all was filth and grease and squalor. Until now, I had harboured a hopelessly romantic view of the lives and habitations of Mitteleuropean mountain village peasantry, based to some extent upon my musings upon John Ruskin's magnificent, yet sadly unwritten, study of Swiss towns and villages. I had also watched *The Sound Of Music* on more than one occasion, which explains why, despite being a botanical ignoramus, I was able correctly to identify the clump of edelweiss next to which I had paused just moments earlier.

The peasant was blundering about in the corner of his disgusting parlour, and now he emerged, bearing a beaker of milk. Though he was a sinful man, it was clear he was offering it to me as refreshment. What I wanted was something more substantial, involving pastry and salted fish and black cherries, but I supposed that some solid sweetmeats might follow, so I took the beaker and gulped down the contents in one go, to show my appreciation. Yuck. I was immediately reminded of those childhood days of fortnightly vomiting. The milk had a peculiar goaty flavour, which I ascribed to the fact that the beaker in which it came was, like everything else in the hut, the peasant included,

unwashed. It would have been rude of me to suggest to the peasant that he and his beaker and each of his appurtenances would benefit from sponge and soap, so I held my tongue, now thickly coated with milk residue. I still hoped for food, even though whatever I was offered would, I supposed, be grubby and begrimed. But the peasant snatched back the beaker and flailed his arms as if shoos me away, like one of his goats. I gave the censer a desultory little swing, to waft some sanctity into the midden, gagged on the aftertaste of the goatly milk, and backed out of the door, which was immediately slammed shut. I had not even learned the peasant's name.

I looked up at the mountains. These were the steep snow-covered slopes that fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol had sprinted up and down, for hours at a time, as part of the rigorous training regime devised by his coach Old Halob, in the early years before he won all those medals. Peg-legged, I could never hope to emulate the spindly wastrel, try as I might. I allowed myself to weep. And then I gathered myself, and turned, and headed off towards the hotel, and the worst horror of all.

Judith And Holofernes

'HOW NOW, HOLOFERNES,' said Judith.

Holofernes put down his sack of grubbings on the floor and leaned to kiss the back of Judith's hand.

'Your moustache is very bristly, Holofernes,' said Judith, 'I fear it has raised tiny scratches on my hand.'

'Plunge it into a tub of ointment and it will be as right as rain, woman!' shouted Holofernes. Holofernes always shouted, he was that kind of general.

'Oh, never mind, Holofernes, I am fond of your moustache. It suits you. It is, how shall I say, decisive,' said Judith.

Holofernes picked up his sack of grubbings again. He was blushing slightly.

'I must take this sack of grubbings to my encampment, woman!' he shouted, 'It will not do for me to dilly dally with a widow woman such as yourself.'

'What a pity, Holofernes,' said Judith, 'I have just borrowed some interesting pamphlets by Dobson from the mobile library, and I thought you might like to join me in browsing through them. We could go and sit upon a municipal park bench, and take a picnic with us. I have some radishes and coleslaw and a jug of potato pulp diluted with rainwater.'

Holofernes was a sucker for pamphlets, particularly ones written by Dobson, and he needed little persuading to join Judith in the municipal park. The clouds were louring, however.

'See here, woman!' he shouted, after swallowing a mouthful of coleslaw, 'If it begins to rain these pamphlets will get soaking wet and when you return them to the library on or before the due date there may be ructions!'

'I am sure you know a thing or two about ructions, Holofernes,' said Judith coquettishly, 'But don't worry, I have a tarpaulin here in my pippy bag and in

the event of a downpour I can take it out and unfold it and place the pamphlets underneath it. Here, have another radish.'

Holofernes furrowed his massive forehead, as if deep in thought, but then seemed to relax and, taking the proffered radish, popped it into his mouth and crunched it. Judith caught a glimpse of his teeth.

'Have you had a recent dental checkup, Holofernes?' she asked.

'That, woman, is between me and my dentist! It is unseemly for a widow woman from Bethulia to pry into such matters,' shouted Holofernes.

'Forgive me, Holofernes,' said Judith, 'I was forgetting my manners there for a moment. But I was a little concerned that you may need an appointment with the hygienist, for I clearly saw scraps of raw meat and carrots and cake-crumbs stuck between your teeth. You have not been flossing, have you?'

Holofernes' temper flared. He stood up, picked up his sack of grubbings, and was about to stomp off out of the municipal park when there was a cloudburst and the rain began teeming down.

'Quick, Holofernes, help me to unfold the tarpaulin!' said Judith.

Two minutes later the Dobson pamphlets were safely covered up but both Judith and Holofernes were sopping wet.

'When the rain stops we ought to find a little boatman's hut in which to dry off and get a nice cup of tea,' said Judith, 'Just like Laura and Alec do in *Brief Encounter* after he falls into the boating lake. Come to think of it,' she added, 'You remind me of Alec's friend Dr Stephen Lynn, played by Valentine Dyall, except that Stephen didn't have a decisive moustache and he was a bit of a prig. And you're not a prig, are you, Holofernes?'

'I am a general in Nebuchadnezzar's mighty army, woman!' shouted Holofernes, 'And that is all you need to know!'

'Oh, you're such a grumpy general, Holofernes,' said Judith, 'You know what I think would be good for you? Some aromatherapy. But you strike me as more of a sweat lodge kind of chap.'

'Enough, woman!' shouted Holofernes, 'You may seek out an humble boatman's hut if you wish, but I must return to my encampment with my sack of grubbings. I shall dry off in my tent, which is a tent fit for a general!'

'Well, I shall come with you,' said Judith.

Holofernes grumbled, but he was secretly delighted, for there was something about this widow woman that intrigued him and inflamed his passions. They set off across the plains together.

'Tell me about Babylon, Holofernes, where your king Nebuchadnezzar lives. I have heard it is full of Rastafarians smoking ganja and moaning on and on, rhythmically of course, about their misery,' said Judith.

'As a general in the army, woman, I pay no heed to such countercultural doings,' shouted Holofernes, 'I have enough on my plate keeping my troops on their toes and smiting mine enemies with a big sword.'

'Ooh,' said Judith, 'You'll have to let me see that big sword when we get back to your encampment, Holofernes.'

Later, of course, when they were in Holofernes' tent and he showed Judith his big sword, she used it to slice his head off. Then she went back to Bethulia, carrying the head of Holofernes, and was received in triumph by her people.

Confessions Of A Door To Door Monkey Salesman

GIVEN ITS TITLE, one could be forgiven for thinking that *Confessions Of A Door-To-Door Monkey Salesman* is a 1970s British sex comedy film starring Robin Askwith. In fact, it is a Bildungsroman of fierce intensity. Annoyingly, its author has chosen to remain anonymous. The book begins thus:

I was born in a cornfield. The first sound I heard was the shrieking of crows. My mother put me in a burlap sack and dropped me down a well and went on with her rustic drudgery. At the bottom of the well ran an underground stream. I was carried along for miles until the stream surfaced alongside a dilapidated pig farm. The pig farmer's wife was washing potatoes in the stream as I came by in my sack. Never one to waste a good piece of burlap, she plucked the sack from the stream and found me inside it. I was gurgling.

We might think this far-fetched, were it not that there are many true tales of babies, and hamsters, surviving journeys fraught with much more peril. The note about the crows is intriguing, reminding us of the old saying, I think from Filthshire, 'a child born to the cawing of crows will have too few fingers and too many toes'. And what do we learn on page 26?

I remember quite clearly the night my adoptive pig farming mother read to me, as a bedtime story, passages from a book describing freakish human anomalies. There was a two-headed boy and a girl with eight kidneys, a giant with yellow lips and a woman with upside-down ears. As she closed the book, at the end of a chapter on people with lobster claws, and I was falling into sleep, she whispered 'and you, my cherished tiny one, are a freakish anomaly, with your two thumbs, seven fingers, and eleven toes'. I sprang up, wide awake. Until then, I had not noticed my irregularity. Of course, I

had counted my own fingers and toes many times, as a way of passing the time on rain-soaked pig farm afternoons. But being very short-sighted, I had never looked at other people's hands and feet with any acuity.

Shortly after this realisation, the boy is bought his first pair of spectacles. The prescription is flawed, for the corrective lenses are obtained from an optic rascal, and the world remains blurry and distorted. Our hero can still not see well enough to count the toes and fingers of others unless they shove their hands or feet right in his face, and he is too diffident to ask. But he gains inner strength from his status as an anomaly.

I read and reread my mother's freak book, poring over the details, and fantasising that I had more enigmatic qualities than were outwardly apparent. For example, because I was mad for eating nuts, any nuts I could get my hands on, I became convinced that I had the brain of a squirrel. I spent long hours in the woods near the pig farm talking to squirrels in a language I thought they might understand. I trained myself to quiver and tremble and dart about as if I had the high metabolic rate of a squirrel. This behaviour continued until my thirty-first birthday.

No longer a child, but with little experience of life away from the dilapidated pig farm, the author of the *Confessions* reports abruptly the cataclysmic change that occurred on that birthday.

My adoptive parents perished in the Munich air disaster. They had won a raffle to attend the second leg of the European Cup quarter-final between Manchester United and Red Star Belgrade. It was the first time they had left me in sole charge of the pig farm. When the postie came up the lane with the telegram telling me the terrible news, in my convulsive grief I suddenly realised that I did not have the brain of a squirrel, and never had had, and that life held for me greater prospects than mucking about in the woods babbling gibberish and gnawing nuts. I was now the master of a dilapidated pig farm.

Was he its master? Or did the farm master him, in the shape of the pigs? There were very few pigs left on the farm, no more than half-a-sty's worth, and they were belligerent, cunning, and rancorous. They were, in a way, freakish anomalies themselves, very different from the peaceable intelligent pigs we are so fond of. For years, the deceased pig farmer and his wife had been adding a secret ingredient to their bran mash, on the advice of a plausible pigfeed rascal, a crony of the equally plausible optic rascal who had supplied our hero's defective spectacles. Quite what the pigs had been ingesting for decades is

unclear, but it had wrought psychic pig havoc. They were more than a match for a myopic innocent who was trying to adjust to his new life. Within weeks, charming bucolic dilapidation became utter ruin.

The last straw was a tempest which flattened the barn and the pigsty and sheds and huts and outbuildings and even the farmhouse itself. The local newspaper described it as 'an unusual weather event'. In the teeth of the storm, the pigs ran amok, and vanished up in the hills. I sat on the ottoman surrounded by collapse. Fate decreed that a pig farmer's life was not for me. I had a sudden urge to regress, to return to the woods and commune with squirrels, but I fought it. My spectacles had been smashed during all the chaos, and I determined that, as soon as the wind died down and there was daylight, I would seek out the optic rascal to get a new pair.

Our credulity is strained somewhat when we are told that the only item to survive the devastation of the tempest, apart from the ottoman upon which he is sitting, is the narrator's dead adoptive pig farming parents' hand-compiled *Directory Of Countryside Rascals*, a ring-binder jam-packed with details of hundreds of rustic chancers, including full contact details, mugshots, handwriting samples, maps, and of course their areas of persuasive rascality, whether it be optics or pigfeed, and much else besides. Armed with such exhaustive information, even our short-sighted hero could not fail to track down the rascal he sought. Or could he?

I was two days distant from the rubble that had been my home when, sheltering under a sycamore from a sudden shower, I peered for what felt like the umpteenth time at the sheet I had taken from the ring-binder. My intention was to check that I was following the map accurately, and had remembered to veer left after crossing Sawdust Bridge. Now, holding the page the right way up, I suddenly discovered that I had mistakenly brought with me the information sheet not for the optic rascal, but for quite another rascal entirely. I supposed, back at the obliterated pig farm, I must have been befuddled. I pondered whether I could cope without a new pair of spectacles. Before the interruption of the shower, it had been a sunny day, and I was in high spirits. After all, here I was on the open road, a free agent, no longer tied down by pig farm responsibility. I could do as I pleased. And I was coping well enough blundering about in a blur. I held the paper up close so I could read my dead adoptive mother's scrawl. No doubt about it, I had the wrong sheet. It was headed 'Monkey Rascal', not 'Optic Rascal'. I could not recall a time when a monkey rascal had ever called at the pig farm, but my adoptive parents were resourceful folk, and they gathered details of sundry rascals of

whom they had no immediate need. The monkey rascal was one such, his information sheet compiled with care just in case his services might one day be required. As the rain spattered down around me, I wondered what those services were.

He finds out soon enough. It takes just three more days trudging, faithfully following the map, for our hero to arrive at a monkey compound on the outskirts of a macabre village. Wisely, he avoids going through the village itself, and bypasses it, taking a detour through a long, muddy, puddle-pitted but not disagreeable ditch. The gate of the compound is unlocked. Though he can barely see in front of him, he hears the whistle of a steam kettle and, shortly afterwards, the telltale glug and clatter of cocoa preparation. Heading for the sound, he finds himself in the monkey compound canteen, where the monkey rascal is holding court, sipping cocoa and surrounded by monkeys. He is in for a surprise.

'You must be the pig farmers' adopted son,' he said, as soon as I blundered through the canteen door, 'I've been waiting for you'.

He is given a cup of cocoa, and everything is explained.

'When I heard your parents had been killed in the Munich air disaster I knew it was time for me to fulfil the pledge I made to them on the day you were hoisted out of the stream,' he continued, 'I was there. I was about to sell the pig farmer and his wife a monkey when they found you instead. I must have looked peevish at the loss of a sale, because they came over very guilt-ridden at the thought of sending me away empty-handed. So they said that, so long as I was happy to keep hold of the monkey they had planned to buy, they would rent it instead. They paid me on the dot every month from that day until that tragic day in Munich. And as part of the monkey rental, they made me promise that, should anything ever happen to them, I would take you under my wing and look after you until the day one of us died. That's why, when you were asleep in a hedge a few nights ago, one of my trained monkeys took the optic rascal's details out of your satchel and put mine in there instead. So here you are.'

He sounds like a splendid fellow, but we must remember that he is as rascally a countryside rascal as all the other rascals in the *Directory*. It rapidly becomes apparent that he has concocted a plan. Yes, he will fulfil his pledge to care for our hero, but he expects something in return, and it is no small thing.

'That monkey rental money has kept my head above water these past thirty years,' he went on, pausing now and then to slurp his cocoa, 'I sorely miss it, and these old bones of mine aren't getting any younger. I am mindful, too, that the woods hereabouts

are fairly riddled with squirrels, and I don't want you tempted to go down there and rekindle the squirrel-brain nonsense your adoptive parents told me all about in the long, tear-stained letters they sent me with their monkey rent cheques. So I propose that in return for your cocoa and soup and a mattress in the monkey compound, you are to act as my very own indentured door-to-door monkey salesman, starting at dawn and clocking off after nightfall, every day except St Abodwo's Day, he being the patron saint of monkeys, according to some. I hope you will be pleasantly surprised at the number of householders willing to purchase a monkey there and then from a myopic stranger who bangs on their door out of the blue. Now finish your cocoa and you can get to work.'

And so begins a period of more than twenty years during which our hero pounds the streets of villages and hamlets and towns and cities, a string of monkeys in tow, banging on the doors of people from all walks of life, high and low, professional and prole, refining his sales patter, which grows in expertise the more surely as his sight fails, until towards the end, it is he who is led by the monkeys, on a length of string, and then one day...

One day it happened there was a mix up, and a kindly retired vicar who had taken a shine to Martin the howler monkey handed his cash to Martin and took me into his vicarage by mistake. I have been here, happily, ever since, fed on cornflakes and brazil nuts, and living in the overheated conservatory among dripping plants with fat bulging leaves. It is here I have written my Confessions. From time to time I think of the monkey rascal, and how distraught he must have been when I did not come home that day. He must feel he has broken the pledge he made to my adoptive pig farming parents more than half a century ago, albeit through no fault of his own. I weep for him sometimes, thinking of him in his canteen, perhaps with Martin at his side, howling. But then I snuffle and dry my eyes, and remember that he is a countryside rascal, and like all rascals he will have other irons in the fire. I wave to the kindly retired vicar through the conservatory window, and I chew another brazil nut and I pour another bowl of cornflakes down my throat.

A Trip From Throm To Bosis

THE TOWN OF Throm is perhaps best known for its gorgeous sewers, with their chandeliers, Rococo ironwork railings, and jewel-encrusted access ladders. In spite of the magnificence of their sewers, the Thrompersons fought hard to win that official designation as a town. It is, after all, the size of a village, with the atmosphere of a hamlet, and the public morals of a cluster of shabby huts. But town it now is, at least on paper, and bursting with civic pride. The mayor's chain of office hangs around his neck, and trails along the ground into the gutter, where it drops through a brightly polished grating down, down, deep down into the most subterranean of the sewers, where it is bolted to an adamantine slab of rock, and bolted fast. It is a long chain, a chain the mayor is proud to wear. At the end of his term, the soldering person will come and unfasten it from around his neck, and it is at this time, his ten-years' duty done, unloosed from his chain, that the ex-mayor might make a trip to Bosis.

Some have mistakenly dubbed Bosis the twin-town of Throm. It is no such thing. It is neither town nor village nor hamlet, nor even a cluster of huts. It certainly has no sewers to rival Throm. It has no sewers at all, for it is the kind of place that, though rained upon incessantly, has always been shunned by drainage engineers. So to the untrained eye Bosis can look like a mere midden of mud and filth and muck, roosted upon by the occasional disoriented scavenger gull or vulture. This unseemly prospect conceals, however, the great attraction of Bosis, which draws Thrompersons to it week in, week out, through the winter months. Bosis is registered as a site of historical significance, for it was here, at the dawn of time, that the Lord appeared, carrying an enormous burlap sack. There are many versions of the story, but the essential details are covered by Abbie Farwell Brown in *The Curious Book Of Birds* (1903):

One day the Lord gathered together all the insects in the world, all the beetles, bugs, bees, mosquitoes, ants, locusts, grasshoppers, and other creatures who fly or hop or crawl, and shut them up in a huge sack well tied at the end. What a queer, squirming, muffled-buzzing bundle it made, to be sure! Then the Lord called the woman to him and said, 'Woman, I would have you take this sack and throw it into the sea!'

This Lord has been erroneously identified as the God of the Christians, but recent scholarship carried out at the Bosis Institute Of Insect History has put a pretty firm kibosh on that idea. It now seems certain that the Lord referred to was actually a native of Throm, or what passed for Throm in those distant days, and may have been the same Lord who dug the very first shaft of what was to become the fantastic sewage system. We know much more about the woman who was entrusted with the sack. She was a Bosisite, of the higher peasantry, in raiment of turquoise, with bells on her fingers and bells on her toes, a maiden of baffles and puffers and woad. Her name, we think, was Clothgard.

Thus is the close link between Throm and Bosis explained, although one puzzling aspect of the tale is that both town and midden are far inland, far, far from the sea. It is possible that the Lord's brain was ravaged by the fumes released when he sunk a shaft into the mud at Throm, and he knew not what he did. We have clues that he performed some other curious deeds, in Throm and Bosis and further afield. Incidentally, given the foul and barely habitable nature of present-day Bosis, the Institute Of Insect History hovers above it, in an airship tethered to a sturdy wooden post.

Should you wish to make the trip from Throm to Bosis, bear in mind that the recommended route is one of much squelching, and watertight boots are advisable. One ex-mayor of Throm did the journey in his socks, for a wager, and they found him in a ditch in the squelchy wasteland between town and midden, shivering and gibbering and beset by flies and gnats and bugs and beetles and other escapees from the Lord's enormous squirming sack.

Binder : The 49 Symphonies

BINDER'S FIRST SYMPHONY is cranky. The second is based on the sound of winches. In the third symphony, Binder drags us through his mental muck. The fourth is of a piece with the first. The fifth, the majestic fifth, owes much to pomposity. The sixth is tart, and the seventh tarter still, while the eighth, the so-called 'sausage-shaped symphony', is radiant. For his ninth symphony, Binder donned a pair of muslin gloves. Dachshunds and mastiffs bark and howl in the tenth, owls hoot in the eleventh. The twelfth is sordid. The thirteenth symphony had its premiere in an abandoned aircraft hangar. 'A pimple burst,' said Chumpot, of number fourteen. He never heard the fifteenth, for Binder had him shot. Gunfire is heard at the beginning of the sixteenth. Symphony Number Seventeen ends with the cracking of a plank. Eighteen is hated, nineteen sounds like a forest in the rain, and by the time he wrote number twenty Binder was taking vitamin pills twice a day. The twenty-first symphony is usually played backwards. The twenty-second has to be heard through a hat with flaps. The twenty-third is obstinate, like a mule, or like the donkeys of Binder's twenty-fourth. Take a stick to the stalls for twenty-five, and a bucket to the circle for twenty-six. The twenty-seventh symphony can look after itself. Number twenty-eight uses a motif of milk. Twenty-nine is tarter even than seven. Thirty is so groovy you might die. When the idea for his thirty-first symphony popped into Binder's brain, he was aboard a great steamship. Its sinking is mourned in the thirty-second. Thirty-three was commissioned by Stalin. The score for Symphony Number Thirty-Four, the 'Symphony of Buttons', calls for several buttons and a hurdy-gurdy. Thirty-five is mostly silent, or at least so quiet one strains one's ears to hear a damned thing. Binder's favourite was his thirty-sixth. The thirty-seventh lacks elegance. Thirty-eight is gaudy. Thirty-nine is

the music of champions. Forty falls flat. Forty-one comes from outer space. The opening bars of Binder's forty-second are used as the theme to a piece of TV tosh. Symphony forty-three has a certain relentless pigginess. Symphony forty-four is birdy, not piggy. Forty-five is just grating. Forty-six, Binder's longest symphony by far, frightens both birds and pigs. Forty-seven is played in a ditch. Forty-eight is all tinkly and twee. Contemplating the pippy splendour of his forty-ninth and final symphony, Binder was heard to remark that it reminded him of the architecture of the burning cities he had skulked in as an orphan child.

Tiny Enid And The Dustbin Of History

ONE MISTY MORNING, Tiny Enid was reading the latest issue of her favourite comic, *The Ipsy Pipsy Woo*, when, in a speech bubble hovering over the head of a character called the Very Reverend Prebendary Septimus Widdecombe, she came upon the words 'the dustbin of history'. Specifically, she learned that every now and then there were people or institutions or events that were consigned to this dustbin. Tiny Enid thought this was a very sad state of affairs, but she was not a mawkish weepy kind of girl, so she did not sob into a napkin.

A helpful footnote in the comic explained that the existence of the dustbin was first revealed by a beardy bespectacled Russian revolutionary who ended up with an ice-pick in his head. Such a gruesome fate did not bother Tiny Enid one iota, for she could herself be ruthless as occasion demanded. She was alarmed, however, to read that the dustbin might not be a dustbin but a mistranslation of ash heap. If that which was consigned to it was incinerated, she reasoned that it would be beyond salvage. For already, you see, being the impetuous infant adventuress she was, Tiny Enid had decided to find the location of the dustbin of history and to rescue its contents. This seemed exactly the kind of mission for a plucky youngster who had been twiddling her thumbs in idleness for an entire fortnight, without a single daring escapade to speak of.

Casting *The Ipsy Pipsy Woo* aside, Tiny Enid took down an atlas from the bookcase. It was such a huge atlas that it probably weighed more than she did, but she managed to slam it down on to her lectern. The lectern was a full size one, donated to Tiny Enid by a grateful vicar whom she had rescued from the jaws of death in the jungle where he had a bit part in a Werner Herzog

film, and she had to saw off part of the base to make it just the right height for her diminutive stature. Deciding not to worry overmuch about whether the dustbin was actually an ash heap, she skimmed hurriedly through the atlas looking for places where a pretty large dustbin or ash heap might be concealed. Although neither the speech bubble nor the footnote in her comic suggested that the dustbin of history was hidden away somewhere, Tiny Enid intuitively felt that must be the case, and she often relied on her intuition, which, as she explained to those who asked her, was not feminine intuition so much as heroic club-footed infant intuition, a different kind of intuition entirely, and far more accurate. It was, after all, her intuition which led the brave tot to track down the vicar on location in the jungle with Werner Herzog rather than, say, elsewhere with a director such as Jean-Luc Godard or Guy Ritchie.

Pinpointing a large, flat, windy and uninhabited area on one of the continents, Tiny Enid packed her pippy bag with supplies and vroomed off in her jalopy towards the aerodrome, terrifying geese and ducks and roadside mendicants as she drove pell-mell along the winding country lanes. Hopping into her bi-plane, she roared away, out of the mist and up into the immense blue firmament, begoggled and begloved and chewing on a radish. She thought it would be a good idea to contact her mysterious unseen mentor to let him know what she was up to. We first encountered this mentor in an earlier story where he was introduced for intricate plotting purposes, without any clear idea of his identity. No need to worry about that now, however, for when Tiny Enid reached for the pneumatic speaking funnel she realised it was clogged with dust and pebbles. Even if she did manage to get a signal, all her mysterious mentor would hear from her would be mangled mufflement. She threw the funnel aside and revved her engines with renewed derring-do.

There was much turbulence during the flight, and much turbulence too inside Tiny Enid's head. We think of her as a self-possessed and unflappable heroine, and she was, but often that resolute exterior masked inner turmoil. Like any of us, Tiny Enid was subject to entrancements and ecstasies, to sloshes of despair and to cranial hullabaloo. Weirdly, rather than planning what she would do if the dustbin of history turned out, after all, to be an ash heap, and an ash heap in a flat windy area where the ashes would be blown and scattered, she was instead mulling over something else she had read in that week's *Ipsy Pipsy Woo*. In his weekly column, Father Ninian Tweakling had

set a moral conundrum. Faced with the choice, which would you save from a burning tower - a half-starved yet impossibly cute puppy, or the horned and cloven-hooved incarnation of the Devil himself? This was precisely the kind of daring rescue Tiny Enid could imagine herself making one day, but she had to discount her immediate response, which was that she would cleverly extinguish the fire, carry the puppy directly to a dog hospice, and return to save the Devil, but bind him in chains and make him promise to mend his ways. Father Tweakling made plain that there was a choice to be made, between puppy and Beelzebub, and a great moral lesson to be derived from the making of it. Tiny Enid had been turning it over in her mind for a couple of days now, and it continued to busy her brain as she soared through the sky towards where she hoped she would find the dustbin of history.

She had still not come up with an answer when she brought the bi-plane down on to a landing strip attached to an apricot pericarp testing station. From here, she would have to hike across the plains, but first she stopped in at the station and asked the fruit scientist based there to give her a cup of tea.

'Tell me,' she asked in her shrill, fearless way, 'Am I right in thinking that about fifty miles west of here across the plains I will find an enormous dustbin?'

The fruit scientist paused in his tea making, fixed the plucky tot with a watery gaze, and said, 'Ah now, miss, some say as there is and some say as there ain't. And me, I wouldn't rightly know neither way. Milk?'

'You speak more like a bumpkin than a fruit scientist, sir!' shouted Tiny Enid, 'And yes please, milk in my tea, thank you.'

Even though she was irritated by the fruit scientist's semiliterate drivel, Tiny Enid never forgot her manners.

'Why might you be looking for a big dustbin all the ways out here then, little one?' asked the fruit scientist.

'Because, O man of apricot pericarps, I am resolute and intrepid,' replied our heroine.

And soon enough, as good as her word, Tiny Enid was on her way across the plains. As she thumped her way westwards, she wondered if the fruit scientist had been putting on an act in a misguided attempt to warn her off. Could the dustbin of history be a dangerous dustbin? If it was, Tiny Enid would be not cowed, she would snub her nose at it and carry on regardless, for she was frightened of nothing. She stopped at a place that was a bit less flat

and windy than the rest of the plains and sat and smoked a cheroot, taking from her pippy bag the gazetteer she had packed earlier. Consulting the index, she saw that there were entries for neither *Ash heap* nor *Dustbin* but under *History* she found an illuminating survey of everything that had happened upon the plains for the last thousand years, from the battle of the boppityheads to the hunting to near extinction of the lopwit to droughts and floods and windiness to the establishment of the apricot pericarp testing station. It was all very interesting, and Tiny Enid lodged it in her memory banks. One day, she knew, she would no longer be tiny, and adventure would lose its allure, and she pictured herself grown and a bit dotty, sitting in a cottage writing her memoirs, and she wanted to forget nothing, for she was determined that she herself would never be dropped into the dustbin of history.

And then she sat up with a start. It suddenly occurred to her that, when she found the dustbin, and peered down over its edge, she might lose her footing and topple into it! Perhaps it had a greasy rim, or lethal uneven patches where it had been gnawed by wild animals. She rummaged in her pippy bag and blasted the heavens that she had not brought a goodly length of mountaineer's rope and clambering hooks. Well, she had faced peril before and would face peril again. Stubbing out her cheroot and crushing it under her corrective boot, she pressed on into the west.

The sun was sinking when Tiny Enid arrived at a compound surrounded by a security fence. She smiled to herself at the thought that, though she may have neglected to bring mountaineer's rope and clambering hooks, she never went anywhere without her razor sharp security fence slicing shears. Dipping into her pippy bag to get them, she read a sign affixed to the fence. *Large Flat Windy Uninhabited Plains Municipal Hygienic Waste Disposal Chute Compound*, it said. Tiny Enid stamped her club foot and let out a shrill cry. The dustbin of history was neither a dustbin nor an ash heap but a chute! This put an entirely new complexion on her adventure. To salvage those things that had been deemed historical irrelevancies, she would have to find where the chute terminated, somewhere subterranean, and she had not brought a spade. One option, of course, was to fling herself recklessly down the chute, but that would be like toppling over the edge of the dustbin. She put the shears back in her pippy bag and sat down to think. She wondered if the lesson to be learned from the answer to Father Tweakling's moral conundrum could help her now. A burning

tower, a starving puppy, the Devil incarnate, and now add a hygienic waste disposal chute. . .

All of a sudden, Tiny Enid knew exactly what to do. She raced back to the apricot pericarp testing station, felled the fruit scientist with a few well-aimed kicks to the head and the stomach, clamped a bleeping tracker device around his ankle, shoved him into a wheelbarrow, pushed him west across the plains, disabled the municipal compound alarm system, sliced a hole in the security fence, and dumped the fruit scientist down the chute. Popping a radish into her mouth, she snapped open the tracker device palmpod, and watched as the fruit scientist's avatar, a cartoon head bearing a striking resemblance to Ringo Starr, tumbled, beeping, deeper and deeper down below the windy plains, tumbling and beeping, until at last it came to rest at what the coordinates told Tiny Enid was the earth's core. So this was the dustbin of history.

Tiny Enid had attended enough geology lectures to know that the centre of the earth is a ball of ferociously hot boiling burning magnetic rock, and that pretty much anything tumbling out of a chute on to it would not survive for a moment. She knitted her brows, fretful that her daredevil mission looked set to end in failure, a word, of course, the diminutive adventuress neither acknowledged nor understood. Turning on her heel, she clumped back across the plains to the landing strip, and steered her way across the skies until she was home, and she sat at her table scoffing down a bowl of milk slops, resting her club foot on a dimity cushion. By the time she had drained her bowl, she had a plan. Part of it would have to wait until the next issue of *The Ipsy Pipsy Woo* came out, wherein she was sure a moral conundrum from Father Ninian Tweakling would lead her on the correct path, once she had solved it. But the other part of her plan could be set in motion immediately. Lurching over to the desk upon which her metal tapping machine sat polished and gleaming, she transmitted a message to her mysterious unseen mentor.

I must journey, Jules Verne-like, to the centre of the earth, she tapped, and clearly such an expedition will cost a bob or two. Please start a fundraising appeal immediately. Yours sincerely, Tiny Enid.

And thus did the venturesome mite's next hectic and compelling adventure begin.

Impugned By A Peasant

I WAS IMPUGNED by a peasant. It was a Thursday afternoon and I was walking along a lane, between aspens and larches. I saw the peasant up ahead. He was leaning against a stile and as I got closer I saw he was idly swinging a flail to no great purpose. As I passed him, he impugned me, in some sort of rustic invective I barely understood. I would have dashed him to the ground with a single blow, but alas!, I am a milksop and a weakling and I merely passed on by along the lane, blushing and furious.

Later, as I sat in a countryside canteen drinking a tumbler of Squelcho!, I reflected upon this peasant and his impugning. What was he doing, leaning against that stile? Why was he swinging a flail? In what brutish argot did he speak? Much to my disgust, I realised I was obsessed by him, as, in *Death In Venice*, Gustav von Aschenbach is obsessed by Tadzio, or in *Love And Death On Long Island*, Giles De'Ath is obsessed by Ronnie Bostock. But Tadzio and Ronnie are young and beautiful, whereas my peasant - *my* peasant! - was old and snaggle-toothed and filthy and wretched. My hands were shaking, and I slopped some of my Squelcho! on the canteen table, drowning a fly.

As I returned along the lane, I adjusted the cravat around my neck, to give it a more rakish look, and I primped my bouffant, and I modified my trudge to a sort of flouncing prance. As I neared the bend in the lane beyond which the stile would come into view, my heart began to thump violently and my mouth became so dry I gasped. Would my peasant still be there? Would he impugn me again? I wanted to run back to the safety of the canteen, but at the same time I was desperate to see him once more, so filthy, so rustic, so ancient, so vile!

How can I express the sickening sensation I felt as I rounded the bend and saw that my peasant was gone? It was as if a knot of vipers writhed within my guts. Sunlight dappled through the aspens and the larches, a breeze refreshed the air, and there was the stile...but leaning on it now were two impossibly attractive youngsters, playing conkers. Closing in on them, panting like a monster of depravity, I saw they wore name-badges. One was Tadzio, the other Ronnie. I was barely coherent as I babbled at them, asking if they had seen a peasant, an old filthy snaggle-toothed peasant with a flail, had they seen in which direction he had gone, and when, and was he going fast or slow, with purpose or without, and did the sunlight glisten on his greasy matted hair?

First Tadzio, then Ronnie, impugned me. In particular, they impugned my cravat and my bouffant and my flouncing. I crumpled to the ground, weeping and neursathenic. I would have welcomed death, there and then. But of course, I did not die. An hour or two later, I got to my feet and dusted the muck of the lane from my Italianate suit. The sun was sinking in the west, and Tadzio and Ronnie were long gone. I picked up a pebble and chucked it inexpertly at a linnet perched in an aspen. I missed the bird, of course, and I pranced away from the stile and made my way home.

Years later, looking back on that afternoon, I can no longer picture the name-tagged youths, but the vision of the peasant is as clear to me as if he were sat here opposite me. I do not have him, of course, but I have his simulacrum, posed in the armchair, built of cardboard and wire and wool, with piano keys for his teeth and a light dusting of authentic countryside muck, and when I activate the console he impugns me in that mechanical, guttural, rustic invective I had a character actor record for me, and which, still, still, I barely understand.

To Knit Knots, Peradventure

MUCH HAS BEEN written, in the past, by people who knew of these things, about the knitting of knots. Knots, we learn, have been knit from cord and twine and rope and string and wool, among other materials. While it is true that more knots have been tied rather than not, without the aid of knitting needles, it remains the case that the knitted knot has its own special place in our hearts, whether our hearts flutter like a bird's or a squirrel's heart, or pound like a drum. For with the knitted knot we see a true craft, whereas it can be argued that the mere tying of knots, while sometimes requiring deftness and digital agility, can as well be done by a brute in a hurry. Not so the knitted knot.

Hurrying brutes, particularly those whose tails thump upon the ground as they rush headlong to the scene of their next enormity, are most unlikely to have the patience and wit necessary for the knitting of a knot. Nor are their paws likely to be dexterous enough to handle knitting needles, or even crochet hooks. Crochet is not knitting, of course, and the crocheted knot is a different creature to the knitted knot, and one with its own literature, exemplars, and paragons.

There exist pattern books containing instructions for knitting knots, and depictions of knots so knitted, but it would be a mistake to think that one needs such a pattern before embarking upon the knitting of a knot. Some of the finest knitted knots have been the work of improvisers, brave, adventurous souls who begin to knit with no other aim in mind than the knitting of a knot, its final form unimagined, not even a blurred wisp in the mind's eye of the knitter.

Even improv knot knitters, however, need a degree of foresight, for they will wish to avoid the act of knitting being interrupted by a hurrying brute.

Such interruptions can prove fatal, if not to the knitter then almost certainly to the knot. A brute in a hurry, coming upon a knitter, will tear and shred and rip and rend, all the while roaring its brute cries as its tail thumps the ground. Thus the knitter of knots is advised, in many of these books of the past, to find a secluded haven in which to knit. To be hidden behind a clump of brambles, or snug in a concealed nook in a cave, or safe behind the ramparts of a mighty and towering fortress, each of these has been recommended. A knitter's choice of refuge will depend to some extent on the nature of the brutes who hurry through the lands in which they knit. There are single brutes who roam alone, and pairs, and occasionally trios, but by far the most common, and the most frightening, are those who hurry about in packs.

Various writers have pointed out that the knitter of knots can use the knots they have knitted as part of the apparatus to bind and immobilise a hurrying brute. This is undoubtedly true, but these same writers tend to neglect the inconvenient fact that, before such binding and immobilising and judicious use of knitted knots can occur, the hurrying brute must first be overpowered. In most cases, at least those cases that bear examination, the overpowering of a brute in a hurry requires inhuman strength, and the kind of musculature rarely found in the average knot knitter. Even more important, then, to ensure that before the very first clack of needle against needle, the knitter has located a place of safety in which to knit.

Perhaps the finest of the books I chanced upon when researching this article is actually more a pamphlet than a book proper. It is *How To Knit Knots While Remaining Invisible To Hurrying Brutes* by Dobson (out of print), and contains a plethora of terrific mezzotints by the mezzotintist Rex Tint. Dobson claims to have invented a so-called 'enshrouding spectral ether-cloak' which, when activated, renders the knot knitter invisible, thus obviating the need for a time-consuming search for clumps of brambles, nooks in caves, or mighty and towering fortresses. It also silences the clack of knitting needles, or at least drowns out the clack, by generating a noise like the buzzing of a million hornets, audible only to a brute hurrying past, its tail thumping the ground. I suspect that Dobson's 'cloak' is wholly spurious, but the pamphlet is worth it for the mezzotints alone.

Instances Of Inanity In Blodgett

LET US CONSIDER three particular Blodgettian inanities. There are, of course, many, many more, so many they are numberless. But it is worth looking in detail at these three, if only to get the measure of the man.

His tin shadow. The tale is told that Blodgett awoke one day in a state of terror. Whether he had had a night of awful dreams brought on by a bedtime snack of processed goat's cheese triangles and gooseberry paste, or whether he was just in a flap, we do not know. What we do know is that when he flung open his curtains to greet the day, Blodgett found the sky to be hazy and overcast, and the sunlight so weak that it cast no shadows. In his tumultuous mental state, Blodgett took this as evidence that he was becoming, or indeed had already become, insubstantial.

A sensible person would have tested this misperception by, for example, the Dr Johnson trick of kicking a stone, but there were no stones on the floor of Blodgett's hotel room, not even a pebble. Doubtless there are other experiments Blodgett could have tried, such as bashing his body against the walls, or plunging off the balcony. But the mania seems to have had him in its grip. Looking at himself in the mirror was no help, as Blodgett always had a grey and ghostly pallor. It was one of his defining features. As a tot, he was always cast as a ghastly wraith in the school play, even when such a character was not actually required. Peering at himself now, in the milky light of his Tyrolean hotel room, Blodgett fancied that he was becoming transparent.

Hastily dressing in what fashionistas would deride as 'tatterdemalion casual', Blodgett crashed out of the hotel into the abnormally bustling streets. All these Tyrolean folk going to and fro, bent on their mysterious Tyrolean business, seemed solid enough. Blodgett, on the other hand, felt himself wafting, as if

he were but a wisp that would be blown away by the first gust. The haze was oppressive however, and there was no hint of wind. Blodgett found a cafeteria attached to a secondhand snowplough dealership where he took breakfast. As he dunked iced dough fingers into a thin broth, he kept checking to see if his shadow had appeared, but there was no change in the light. It does not seem to have occurred to him that nothing else was casting a shadow in that town, on that morning. He was, as usual, a monster of egocentricity.

The reports tell us that after breakfast, Blodgett visited the town's one and only metallurgical institute, where he badgered the janitor to let him in. It appears that he then armed himself with some hammers and cutting blades, found a supply of tin, hammered a quantity of tin into a flat sheet, and cut an outline of his body with the blades. He was seen carrying his tin effigy through the streets, heading towards a Tyrolean glue and adhesive supplier. The next witness statements indicate that Blodgett had glued the feet of his tin self to his heels, so that as he strode through the streets and lanes and expansive boulevards of the town, he dragged the tin Blodgett behind him, like a shadow. It is said that he was much becalmed, and no longer jangling with terror.

The Swiss dramaturge Rolf Turge wrote a squib based on Blodgett and his tin shadow, in which the lead character goes berserk when the haze disperses and sunlight batters down upon the town, casting shadows so strong they are as black as pitch. In real life, Blodgett was oblivious to the sun, and he dragged his tin shadow with him for months and months, until the glue dissolved when he stepped into a chemical puddle outside a post office in Pepinstow.

His dockside groans. Can one reasonably include Blodgett's dockside groans in a list of his inanities? After all, which of us has not groaned when trudging around the docks? There is surely something about all that clanking and shouting, the winches and bales, the crates and chains, the chugging and hooting, the stink of oil and fish and brine, that elicits a groan from the sunniest of dispositions, and not just a single groan but a whole series of them. Why, then, charge Blodgett with inanity, when his dockside groans were of a piece with yours or mine? Do we succumb to inanity too? Well, no, of course we don't. We are level-headed, sensible persons. And Blodgett, of course, was not. He lived in a fool's paradise. So when we consider him plonking himself down on an iron bench at Pepinstow docks, and groaning, we think to ourselves, 'there is a man flailing helplessly in the extremes of inanity'. He may no longer

have a tin shadow glued to his heels, for the glue dissolved just a couple of hours ago in a chemical puddle outside the post office, but he is by no means freed from his embonkersment. Look, a gull has perched on the bench next to him. Now, soberly, taking your time, judge them both, the man and the bird, and choose which one you would trust to best perform a simple task such as savagely ripping and rending a sturdy cardboard box to shreds. Your answer will not, I think, be the man with the ghostly pallor who sits there groaning, groaning at the dockside.

His futile picking at unbuttons. Blodgett devoted much of his time, one autumn, to a study of the unbutton. At first, he went off on completely the wrong track. Adducing that the unbutton was 'that which is not a button', Blodgett mistakenly concerned himself with 'that which is, where the button is not', in other words, the buttonhole, the emptiness, the void the button will, one day, occupy, or, perhaps, once did occupy, before its thread snapped and it fell into a puddle, perhaps even the chemical puddle outside the post office in Pepinstow, where it lay alongside Blodgett's unglued tin shadow. But of course a buttonhole is but a buttonhole, not an unbutton. Autumn was a month old before Blodgett realised his error. He had been shuttered in his Tyrolean hotel room picking futilely at buttonholes, only occasionally stepping out to wolf down breakfast and afternoon tea and dinner at a cafeteria. Then, one morning, he had an epiphany. A monologue devised years later by the Swiss dramaturge Rolf Turge gives us a flavour, albeit imagined, of the Blodgettian brainpan pirouettes of that day.

I was picking futilely at a buttonhole when a crow landed on my Tyrolean hotel room windowsill. I cast aside the buttonhole and looked at the crow, and the crow looked at me. I thought, if I were to make a puppet of the crow, out of black rags and tatters, I would use buttons for its eyes, would I not? And then I thought, perhaps the crow is thinking of making a puppet Blodgett, out of torn-up shrouds and winding-sheets. Would it, too, make my eyes out of buttons? Or, being a crow, primed by the bird-god that made it to peck out my eyes, would it need, for its puppet, not buttons, but unbuttons? That is when I realised that the unbutton is something greater, stranger, far more uncanny than a mere buttonhole. The crow flew away, bent on Tyrolean worms no doubt. But I had seen the error of my ways, and I stamped my foot repeatedly upon the buttonhole I had been picking at with such futility, and I crashed out of my hotel room into the street, the abnormally bustling street, and my eyes glowed brightly, real

eyes, not shiny buttons on a puppet, and I strode with my head held proud and high, seeking afresh the true unbutton I knew, now, was there, somewhere, hidden in plain sight.

By the time autumn turned to winter, Blodgett had found an unbutton, or at least what he took to be one. Certainly it met the definition of 'that which is not a button', and Blodgett pounced upon it, there in that Tyrolean town. Yet, having found it, what did he do? It is a measure of the man's inanity that he simply picked at it futilely, for days on end, sitting on an iron bench at the dockside, groaning, shadowless, having fled the Tyrol for Pepinstow, in the autumn of 1963, just before the Kennedy assassination, and the Beatles' first LP.

That Awful Mess At Sludge Hall Farm

IT IS A meteorological peculiarity that the sky over Sludge Hall Farm is always leaden, the air thick and oppressive, as if a storm is imminent, but a storm never comes. Equally anomalous is the fact that, over at Sludge Hall itself, the storminess never ceases, the semidilapidated building forever assailed by thunder and wrack and downpour.

One does not often meet with a trio of stylishly dressed Italian police investigators tramping up the path to Sludge Hall Farm. In their Giuseppe Fonseca suits and Boffo Splendido shoes, they cut the sort of dash not seen in this landscape for a century, since the heyday of the so-called '*peasantry moderne*' movement. They have come from Sludge Hall, where they were received in the cubby by the monopod major domo, who served them with cream crackers and iron tonic. Thus fortified, the detectives announced their intention to visit the farm. The major domo shuddered, but swiftly dissembled, creaking on his crutch over to the dresser upon which rested Sludge Hall's only metal tapping machine, a vintage wonder.

'I shall let the farmer know to expect you,' said the major domo. The detectives preened their mustachios and glanced at each other, and then at their host, and then out of the smudged cubby window, its frame rattling as the tempest roared outside.

Having tapped out his communiqué, the major domo made arrangements for Lars, the factotum, to take the Italians on his covered cart half way towards the farm, to the point where the storm weirdly ceased and the leaden pall sapped all vigour from the air. And it is some yards beyond where Lars dropped

them off that we find the detectives now, each walking with insouciance and swish. If Sludge Hall Farm harboured a comely milkmaid, no doubt she would swoon at the sight of such unimpeachable foreign elegance. Alas, it is many a long year since comeliness in any form has blessed the farm. As the policemen are about to learn, it is now a grim and godawful place.

No one knows the name of the farmer of Sludge Hall Farm. He is a hermit and a mystic and a polevaulting champion. Though aged and wizened, and though his many, many medals are now rusted and the velvet cushions upon which they sat are eaten away by worms, the farmer still polevaults every day, morning and evening, under the leaden sky at Sludge Hall Farm. He is puffing from a polevault as the Italian detectives push open the gate and greet him.

One wonders what will happen. Will the farmer of Sludge Hall Farm speak for the first time in twenty years? Will he use his mystic powers to crack asunder the close-knit and almost telepathic team spirit of the detective trio, until they are snarling at each other like mad dogs and fighting with pitchforks? Will one of the detectives seek refuge in a barn, only to be set upon by a hideous mutant angry pig that has snapped its chain? Will the pig, its thirst for Italian blood unquenched, then rampage around the farmyard causing the surviving pair of policemen to hide in a hayloft? Will the farmer placate his mutant pig and place it in a trance? Why is the hay in the hayloft not like normal hay? Is it hay from another dimension, or from somewhere else in the space-time continuum? How has the farmer managed to fill the Sludge Hall Farm hayloft with inexplicably bizarre hay? Why have the mustachios of the Italian detectives shrivelled by dint of their huddling in the hay? What in the name of heaven is the mystic farmer doing, leading his entranced pig in ever more rapid circles around a bonfire? What is the exact nature of those sparks shooting from the fire? Why is the leaden sky turning a violent orange? Why are the detectives now sprouting hay from every pore? Is there any intelligible meaning to the deafening grunts the entranced mutant pig is making as it circles around the fire faster and faster until it is a blur? Why, back at Sludge Hall, are the major domo and Lars hyperventilating, convulsed by giggles, slapping their thighs and dancing a jig upon the dining room table?

Tomorrow, when we read the front page headline in the *Daily Farmyard Polevaulter*, will we be any the wiser about that awful mess at Sludge Hall Farm?

The Muscular Fool And The Other Fool

A FOOL DUG a hole in the ground with a spade. When he had dug deep enough, the fool put aside the spade and sat down in the hole, deep enough in this instance meaning that from his sitting position his head was below ground level. The ground itself was fallow. We should remember, even if the fool did not, that 'The lark's shrill fife may come / At the daybreak from the fallow'. So, at least, was the assertion of Sir Walter Scott in *The Lady Of The Lake*. He goes on to say that 'the bittern sound[s] his drum / Booming from the sedgy shallow', but there were no shallows, sedgy or otherwise, in this fallow where the fool sat in a hole he'd dug, nor any bitterns to boom. Scott brought a curse upon himself by making disparaging remarks about the Muggletonians in one of his novels¹, but the fool had not been cursed. He was simply a fool.

It is pointless to ask of such a person, 'why have you done what you have done?' Either he will not reply, or, if he does, he will dizzy your brain with his explanation. You might understand the individual words he shouts or mutters at you, but you will be hard pressed to make any sense of them when you join them together. That is one of the things about fools, they drive a stake through the heart of reason. I used to be a fool, so I know that only too well.

I was not the kind of fool to dig holes in the ground with a spade, for my foolishness led me down other pathways. I could often be found in department

¹NOTE : In *Woodstock, or The Cavalier* (1826), a character named Tonkins meets a violent end. Scott regrets that 'his brains had not been beaten out in his cradle' to prevent him growing up into 'one of those Muggletonians'. For this he was cursed by Robert Wallis, a Muggletonian from Islington.

stores, wandering from one floor to another, via the escalators, up and down, all day long, never making a purchase, followed about by in-house detectives, chanting. I mean that I was chanting, not the detectives. The detectives had no time to chant, they were too busy keeping track of me.

They would have had no trouble tracking the fool with the spade, for he had dug his hole in the ground and now he was sat in it, quite still. The in-house department store detectives could have gathered in a ring at the rim of the hole and kept their eyes on the fool for hours. But they would not be likely to do so. Being in-house types they did not do any detecting outwith the precincts of the department store itself, not unless one of them went rogue, and was overzealous in his duties. That had been known to happen. But not on this occasion.

Fools come in all shapes and sizes. The fool in the hole in the fallow was muscular, which ought not be a surprise when you consider that it takes some strength to dig a hole in the ground deep enough to sit in so that one's head is hidden from view. You or I might be panting and shaking after such exertion, but the fool sat in his newly dug hole looking for all the world as if the most energetic thing he had done all day was to stir a spoon in a bowl. That was what he had done first thing, before marching across the fallow with a spade over his shoulder. He had poured porridge into a bowl, like a bear in a fairy tale, and then stirred it with a spoon, and then spooned it bit by bit into his mouth and swallowed it, and then he licked the bowl clean. These were not the actions of a fool by any means, but then most fools have moments, even whole mornings, of lucidity. Yet as soon as he had prepared and eaten a sensible breakfast, the fool reverted to inexplicably foolish behaviour, and went out and dug a hole and sat in it.

When I was a fool, I too usually ate a proper breakfast at the start of the day, though in my case it was rarely porridge. I had been traumatised by the version of the fairy tale of the three bears told to me as a bedtime story by my Ma. In Miss Eleanor Mure's telling of 1832, it is not Goldilocks who enters the bears' cottage while they are out and about, but an ill-tempered old woman. When the bears come home, they first try to burn her, then to drown her, before finally chucking her aloft on St Paul's churchyard steeple, upon which she is impaled. Thus as an infant there was fixed within my little brain the association of porridge with impalement, and I became keen on cornflakes. Even at the

peak of my foolishness, I seldom set out without a stomach full of Mr Kellogg's finest. When milk was scarce, as it often was, given the pitiable state of the cows where I grew up, I would just shovel the cornflakes down my gullet straight from the carton.

It may be the case that the fool in the hole sometimes had to make do with dry oats for his breakfast, if he too experienced problems obtaining uncontaminated milk. That would depend upon the cows in his locality, and whether they were hale or sickly. Irrespective of their health, and the potability or otherwise of their milk, it could happen that a blundering cow might roam into the fallow field and topple into the hole dug by the fool. If the fool was still sitting in his hole, he would find himself underneath a panic-stricken and possibly injured cow. Being a muscular fool, he would probably be able to push the cow off him and to climb out of the hole. One might hope that pangs of compassion would burst through his foolishness, at least temporarily, and that he would rush away to find the farmer or a veterinary surgeon, but there can be no guarantee of that. Fools can be so well wrapped up in their own foolishness that their behaviour appears ruthless and despicable. So it may be that, his hole now being occupied by a cow, the fool would simply retrieve his spade from where he chucked it and dig himself a second hole, in which, once dug, he would sit, in the fallow where no bitterns boomed but a lark would fife at daybreak, shrilly. If the fool was still sitting in his hole come the dawn, having spent the night under glittering stars, the lark's fifing would almost certainly awaken him.

Now, consider the situation. We have already ascertained that this fool is the sort of fool who thrives on a proper breakfast of porridge. You cannot make porridge while sat in a hole dug in the ground, even if you are a brainbox rather than a fool. So the fool, intent upon his breakfast, would clamber up out of his hole and begin mincing across the field towards wherever it was he could rely upon the makings of porridge. One can be both muscular and of the mincing sort, whether fool or no. Again, we may hope that the fool's heart would be stirred at the sight of the stricken cow in the adjoining hole, but with a stomach clamouring for porridge the fool is not likely even to notice the other hole or the cow within it. The cow may bellow, but the fool, in the extremity of his foolishness, will misconstrue the bellowing as something else, as, say, the fifing of a mutant lark, or a factory hooter, for there is a factory

over yonder, for the making of fireworks and other explosive devices, and its workers are summoned at dawn by means of a hooter. To a fool's ears, all sounds can become confused.

On this bright morning, as the fool minced across the fallow towards his porridge, a cherry-cheeked farmer was in his barn counting his cows. He counted them thrice, just to make sure he was correct in his apprehension that one was missing. And then he resolved to tramp his fields until he found his cow. In the distance, the bells of St Bibblybibdib's clanged, and in the fallow, the fool and the farmer met, the one mincing from the east and the other tramping from the west. The farmer asked the fool if he had seen his cow. The fool replied, but as we have seen, though his individual words were coherent, they made no sense when joined together. There can be danger when fuddleheadedness shares space in the brain with a hot temper, and the farmer was hot-tempered, as was betrayed by his cherry cheeks. They were cherry because his blood often boiled. Little things enraged him, from misdirected farm postage to creaking wheelbarrows. Fretting about his cow, and stupefied by the fool's response to his simple question, he lashed out at the fool with his big hairy farmer's fists. Though muscular, and quite able to triumph in any fight he got into, the fool was disadvantaged by the sudden ferocity of the farmer's onslaught, and he toppled to the ground. In so doing, he clonked his head on a large pebble. Miraculously, the clonk caused an enjugglement of bits inside his brain, and he became instantly, and permanently, lucid, and no more a fool than you or I. He jumped to his feet, and shook the farmer's hairy hand, and pointed to where the cow languished in a hole dug in the fallow, and promised the farmer he would help to rescue it as soon as he had had his breakfast porridge, and away he minced with a clear head and bright eyes.

My own transformation from being a fool to no longer being a fool had nothing in common with this tale. I suffered no clonk on the head, nor was I mincing across the fallow as church bells clanged. I had dug no holes in the ground, and there were no cows to be seen. I was in a city far away when my foolishness evaporated, sprawled on a divan, twitching and shattered, with a belly full of cornflakes and milk that, had I but known it, was contaminated. It was the seething microscopic beings lurking in the milk that burrowed their way up into my brain and nibbled away the weird bits that made me a fool. When their nibbling was done, the tiny, tiny beings burrowed through the

top of my skull and were smothered by my bouffant. I picked out the dead shrivelled things with tweezers, and put them in a jar, and I put the jar on my mantelpiece, and there it stands. It can do no other. Jars stay put, once you have placed them where you want them. I only learned that lesson when I was no longer a fool.

Sieve Project

GIVE ME A sieve or a riddle and, boy oh boy, before you can say 'lumme, guvnor, knock me down with a feather', I'll have a pan of fine powder from which all the cloddy clumps have been winnowed. By pouring a little warm water in to the pan from a bowl, and stirring it with a stick, I will soon have a paste. And you know what? I can add dye to the paste to make it any colour I like. It doesn't matter what colour the powder was originally.

The next thing I can do is to make the paste a little tacky by adding a binding agent. In 1859, William H Gregory published *Egypt In 1855-56*, where he remarks, inter alia, that 'The rocky walls were black and sticky, and seemed to sweat a thick, fatty, viscous liquor'. That is precisely the kind of paste we want in our pan.

Now we return to the sieve, or riddle, which holds all the clumps that didn't make it through. The first thing to do is to remove them, one by one, and place them in a line on your countertop. Sort them in order of size, so that you have a row of clumps gradually ascending from tiny to titanic. Of course, the tiniest of the clumps will not be too tiny, for remember that what you have here are the leavings in the sieve. What I always do at this stage is to count the clumps, just to give me some idea of what lies ahead, in terms of time and effort. Then I get a duster from the duster drawer and very carefully swab all the clumps, one by one, wiping off any grime or filth from them.

When this part of the process is complete, shake the duster violently over a bucket or pail, to collect all the bits of unutterable filth. However energetically you shake the duster, some minuscule crumbs of dirt may cling to it. These can be removed by aiming a jet of fast-rushing air from a nozzle over the whole

surface of the duster, pointing the jet in such a way that the last remnants of grubbiness fall plop into the bucket or pail.

If you have got this far with the project, give yourself a pat on the back, or, better, get someone else to pat you on the back, or to give you a bear hug. Try, though, not to be tempted to take a breather for a cup of tea and one of your cheap Bosnian cigarettes. I make every effort to press right on, fearing a lack of momentum. Maybe that's just me. You might be able to put your feet up and even take a nap, but I wouldn't risk it.

Next we wash our hands, before pouring the viscous paste out of the pan into a clean bowl. We lay paper towels out on the countertop. We grasp a pair of tongs. There are three basic classes of tongs, to wit: (a) tongs which have long arms terminating in small flat circular ends and are pivoted close to the handle, as in the common fire-tongs, used for picking up pieces of coal and placing them on a fire. (b) tongs consisting of a single band of metal bent round one or two bands joined at the head by a spring, as in sugar-tongs (a pair of usually silver tongs with claw-shaped or spoon-shaped ends for serving lump sugar), asparagus-tongs and the like, and (c) tongs in which the pivot or joint is placed close to the gripping ends, such as blacksmith's tongs or crucible-tongs. Which class of tongs you use is entirely up to you. I did not tell you what colour to dye your paste, nor am I going to limit your choice of tongs. There are ancient freedoms we must strain with all our might to protect.

Starting at the end of the row of clumps where you placed the tiniest clump, pick up the first clump with the tongs and dip it into the paste, until it is coated, and then place it carefully on the paper towels. Relax the tongs, and proceed to the next clump. Continue without pause until you have dipped and coated all the clumps with paste. Do not allow a squadron of Messerschmitts screaming across the sky to distract you.

While waiting for the clumps to dry, I take the opportunity to carry the bucket or pail full of filth to a municipal filth depot, where I upturn the bucket or pail and empty it. Back home, wipe the insides of the bucket or pail with a rag. Do not use one of your dusters. That is not what dusters are for.

You now have a set of pasted clumps, each of which has two little unpasted patches where it was gripped by the tongs. There is likely to be a third anomalous patch after you have picked up the clump to place it in the bucket or pail.

Given the viscosity of the paste, a shred of paper towel may remain stuck to the clump. Treasure this imperfection.

When all the clumps are gathered in the bucket or pail, I always feel like singing a round of glees, but you don't necessarily have to. What you must do is to take the bucket or pail and place it in your porch. Nothing quite pulls a porch together as winningly as a bucket or pail of clumps covered in paste, each clump with its two or three little unpasted patches. And if you don't believe me, consider this entry from the diaries of Lady Chlorine Skippington-Pip, denizen of the Café Showoff:

28th March 19-. Dennis [Prong] came to visit, accompanied by his wolfhounds and a crack troop of snipers fresh from dispersing unseemly rioters. I had hoped to treat them to tea and biscuits and lobster, but they spent the whole time shuffling around in the porch, absolutely transfixed by my bucket or pail of clumps covered in paste, each clump with its two or three little unpasted patches. It proved quite a hit. It was dark by the time they scuttled off. Despite the cheerfulness of the porch time, I felt suddenly overcome with desolation and anguish, and slumped on one of my carpets, sobbing, sobbing, long into the night, until distracted by a squadron of Messerschmitts screaming across the sky.

Elks In Snow

AH, THERE WAS snow, so much snow, snow falling without pause, until the world was white, and cold, so very cold, we shivered in our hovels. And there were elks in the snow, massive, and elegant, and stamping their hooves. That is what elks do, in snow, they stamp their hooves. See them, nostrils flared, stamping their hooves in the snow. See them from your hovel, where you are shivering. Your chromosomes are anomalous, and your head is misshapen, and you have no hat, and you wish you had a hat, you have pored over catalogues of hats, yet never had the cash to buy a hat, not even the cheapest of hats, there are god knows some hats so cheap it is a shame to put one on your misshapen head, a public shame, for seeing the cheap hat atop your misshapen head there will be many an urchin and a ragamuffin who will delve deep into their store of abusive words and spout them at you, safe in the knowledge that you will not retaliate, for they know you for a milksop, a milquetoast, a man of misshapen head and of cheap hat who would not dare to clap them around the ears, even if, after their cruel words, they picked up pebbles, pebbles from the snow, and threw the pebbles at you, hitting you on the arms and on the legs and on the torso and on the cheap hat you wore on your misshapen head, your head, your head, your head head head head head, that misshapen head you have on top of your neck, a head you can't change, can't swap, swap for another, another more shapely head, a head you might prefer, a majestic, imperial head, one deserving of awe from the proletariat, a head to be bowed down to, a head copied thousands, if not millions of times, in niello, on medals, your head, yes, your head, but it will never be your head, because your head is misshapen, and you do not even have a hat to put upon it, not even the cheapest hat, from a discount hatters, no, all you have is your bare misshapen

head, resting upon an uncravatted neck, a head that will never be bowed down to nor nielloed in medals, a head misshapen and bearing a bouffant that invites ridicule from stylish trendies, trendies who are cosy in their cabins, somewhere else, somewhere far away, remote, remote, somewhere other than your hovel, in the snow, where you skulk, while elks flare their nostrils, and stamp their hooves, as elks do, elegantly, in snow, from time to time, on Wednesdays, on Wednesday potato nights.

Those Wednesday Potato Nights

DOBSON ADORED WEDNESDAY potato nights. It would be no exaggeration to say he was besotted with them. He would fairly skip along the twilit lanes to the appointed field, where he would join his many, many equally potatotastic pals as they

Hang on. I was always under the impression that Dobson was a solitary sort, even a recluse, sitting alone at his escritoire, with only Marigold Chew for company, and she in a different room. This is the first I've heard of 'many, many pals'.

Ah. Well, Dobson was indeed an immensely popular figure, with friends of all shapes and sizes scattered in bailiwicks near and far. What one has to remember is that most of the time he shunned them. But they were a forgiving lot, entranced, perhaps, by the honour of being counted among the so-called 'pals of the pamphleteer'. And so, at twilight on Wednesday potato nights, they gathered in a field, a happy band, and

This all seems a bit dubious to me. One minute Dobson is shunning his friends, as we might expect of him, and now he is skipping along a lane with them, presumably with an idiot grin on his face and flowers in his hair.

Your presumptions are wrong, whoever you are. A man - even a pamphleteer - can be happy without sporting an 'idiot grin'. And flowers in the hair is your own invention. There is nothing to suggest Dobson adopted such a hippy head decoration. As for shuttling back and forth between the enshunment and the unshunment of his pals, how could it be otherwise if we regard Dobson as fully human, with all the flaws and inconsistencies and non-hippy headgear choices of an everyman? Now, gathering in the field, armed with their potatoes and camping-gaz stoves and flasks of water, the enthusiasts watched the last glimmers of sunlight vanish below the horizon, and ignited their torches of

petrol-soaked rags tied to the ends of sticks. Over yonder, sprites disported themselves in the fug above the eerie marsh.

What?

Over yonder, sprites disported themselves in the

Yes, I heard what you said. Surely a fug is something you get in a confined space, like the fug of smoke in the saloon bar of the Cow & Pins in the days before the smoking ban. You wouldn't get a fug over a marsh, however eerie, unless of course these are cigar-smoking sprites you're talking about.

Pipe-smoking sprites, actually. And because there is no wind on Wednesday potato nights, not even the hint of a breeze, the air above the eerie marsh is still, and the smoke from the sprites' pipes hangs there, eerily, in a fug. And Dobson and all his many pals stand in their field, torches lit, peering at the marsh-fug, as if transfixed, before setting about their potato business. They pour water from their flasks into pots, and they light the camping-gaz

You didn't mention anything about pots before, when you listed what they brought with them. Potatoes and camping-gaz stoves and flasks, you said. In fact, you didn't say anything about the torches of petrol-soaked rags tied to the ends of sticks, until they lit them. And you haven't explained what they lit them with. Matches? Zippo lighters? I like detail, and you are not providing it. Would it not be better, at the outset, to give us a comprehensive list of all the items these people were carrying along the twilit lanes towards the fields, on Wednesday potato nights?

You want a comprehensive list?

That would be excellent! A catalogue, perhaps, with a description of each item, and a catalogue number, and price, and an online shopping basket and checkout, so that if I wanted to I could use my Hooting Yardcard to actually buy the things. You would have to add pictures too, of course, in colour.

Well, that would take

And while you're about it, a supplement to the catalogue, inserted at the end, with similar details of the marsh sprites' pipes and pipe-smoking paraphernalia, for there are always various bits and bobs a pipeist needs to enjoy a proper pipe-smoking experience, like pipe-cleaners, for instance. And even though it is just a supplement, not part of the main catalogue per se, it should have a similar level of detail, with photographs of all the pipe-cleaners and so on, in colour.

That is rather a lot of work.

Yes, I grant you that. But has it not occurred to you that this is the kind of thing your readers are crying out for? It's all very well blathering on about a pamphleteer and his supposed unshunned pals boiling potatoes in a field in the night, but we want to be able to recreate these scenes in the comfort of our own community hub fenced-off frolicking compounds, and we need the kit to be able to do so. Think of the money you could make!

Well, I suppose the main catalogue wouldn't be too much of a problem. Time-consuming and a bit finicky, but I could do it. Whereas the supplement would be much more difficult. Have you ever tried to take a photograph of a pipeist sprite above an eerie marsh?

I can't say that I have.

I would need a spirit camera. Ordinary cameras would be worse than useless, all you would see would be a grey blur.

A blur will do, I'm not fussy. I can study the photographs using my etheric eerie marsh spriteoscope. Buy one, get one free at Hubermann's.

So in essence, all your interruptions have been leading up to a blatant advertisement for that confounded department store? That's despicable.

Maybe so, but as you know, Hubermann's is a byword for utter gorgeousness.

Crows And Hares

WHEN I ANNOUNCED, at a swish cocktail party, that I had visited an esoteric incensey fairy airhead goddess gift shop, it was assumed by all and sundry that I had made a mistake, believing it, in myopic confusion, to be a tobacconist's. Well, let me state loudly and clearly that I marched into what I well knew to be a shop full of woohoowoo with due deliberation. And I did so, dear readers, purely for your benefit, for I was researching the arcane and eldritch powers of crows and hares.

Rustic persons have long been aware of the magical and oracular nature of crows and hares, harbouring knowledge lost to the typical urban Hooting Yard reader. That is why I get so many letters from people who somehow expect me to be privy to ancient countryside lore, people who are too timid, or proud, to set foot themselves in esoteric incensey fairy airhead goddess gift shops. By last week I had grown so fed up with the constant stream of crow- and hare-related missives that I betook myself to an appropriate emporium.

Those of you wallowing in the slops of ignorance need to know, first of all, that a crow is a type of bird and a hare is very similar to a rabbit. Try not to get them mixed up. Memorising one of Pontius Wilmslow's so-called 'animal mnemonics' may be of help:

The crow is black, and flies across the sky. The hare is brown and gambols in the meadow.

There. Repeat that a few hundred times, until it is lodged securely in the blob of your brain, and you won't go far wrong.

In order to exploit the oracular nature of your personal crow and/or hare spirit guide, you need a few pebbles and some cards. For the latter, the best thing to do is to obtain an old pack of playing cards, steep them one by one in

bleach, and then scribble runic devices upon them with a magic marker pen. If you are not sure what a runic device looks like, just scribble any old how, on one card after another, imagining perhaps that you are a grunting primitive caveman trying ignorantly to assuage a psychotic and enraged cave-god. All that really matters is that you can tell the difference between one card and another. When you've done that, get some pebbles, scrub them clean of muck and mud, and scribble the same runic devices upon them. Divide the cards and pebbles into two sets, and chuck one in to a cardboard box marked 'Crow' and the other into a cardboard box marked 'Hare'. Decorate the cardboard boxes with winsome starry moony emblems and tie ribbons around them. Knot the ribbons with knots you have learned to tie from *Poopy Klammerberg's Book Of Magick Knots*, available from your local esoteric incensey fairy airhead goddess gift shop. Yes, I'm afraid you're going to have to step through its door sooner or later. I did, and I have lived to tell the tale.

You will be surprised how quickly you will learn whether it is propitious to consult your crow oracle or your hare oracle, or both, or neither, during particular weather conditions, or to answer specific questions. Let us say you wake up on a freezing cold morning, with the wind coming in from the west and a hailstorm brewing. Uppermost in your mind, after your nightmares, is the question of precisely how much time will pass before David Blunkett is again attacked by a cow. Instinct will tell you whether this is a matter for the crow or the hare. Taking the appropriate box from its plinth upon your homemade sacred shrine, cast a handful of pebbles upon the rug, and then deal out some of the cards. Oh, don't forget, before doing so, to cleanse both pebbles and cards by wafting incense over them and babbling a mantra. The combination of the runes on the cast pebbles and the dealt cards, and their disposition upon the rug, will hold the answer to your question. Be warned that it is not immediately obvious. In fact, it may be quite beyond your wit to understand it. In such cases, take a snapshot of the rug, with the cards and pebbles in clear view and sharp focus, and send it to me. I will tell you what it all means, for I have communed with both the crow spirits and the hare spirits, and there is an invisible star on my forehead, and straw in my hair.

Pitfalls On The Path To Sainthood

WHICH OF US does not wish to become a saint? Ask most people, and they will readily admit that the idea of being venerated after death is a very appealing prospect. The paraphernalia of shrines and icons and relics are attractive in themselves, the more so when compared to the utter oblivion into which almost all of us will fall after Death taps us on the shoulder and beckons us away.

And there's the rub, of course. You have to be dead to be a proper saint, so it is not a standard career option to discuss with your lifestyle coach or your community hub outreach adviser. I am assuming here that you have such a coach or adviser, for who can be expected to make their wary way through the complexities of our contemporary paradise o' pap without one? If your coach or adviser does recommend sainthood as a viable life-skill to be added to your CV, they are delusional, and you must cut your ties with them at once. Obviously this will lead to a few days of chaotic rudderless miasmic turmoil until you get a new coach or adviser, but better that than a fruitless attempt to achieve living sanctity.

That said, there are certain things you can do, while still alive, to prepare for your canonisation. Depending in large part upon your general health and vigour, and taking into account any dangerous medical conditions, the path to sainthood can be a long one, and there are many pitfalls along the way. When the time comes for your suitability to join the pantheon of enshrined ones is to be assessed, great store will be held by how you conducted yourself in various situations. It is well to be mindful of this, even when no witnesses are present to watch you comport yourself, for someone somewhere will act the tattle-tale, you can be sure of that.

Some activities are altogether safe, in that you need not worry overmuch about besmirching the purity of your soul while engaged in them. Hiking to a picnic spot in an area of outstanding natural beauty, and picnicking thereupon, while watched by sullen cows, is unlikely to threaten your future sainthood. But such opportunities are surprisingly rare, and you cannot spend your entire life on hikes and picnics, much as you might want to. So it is important that you beware of those occasions when it is oh so easy to tarnish your record.

Consider, for example, that you are out a-strolling by the railway sidings, sidings where it is known from time to time for enormous out-of-control locomotives to come thundering along the track, their drivers rendered incapable a couple of miles back by the sudden incursion into the engine cab of a darting hawk or crow. Your path crosses that of a baffled and woebegone orphan, come to pick primroses and peonies to brighten its dank hovel in the slums. What you must do is to resist the temptation to shove the orphan into the path of the oncoming train, cackling evilly as you do so, and thereafter twirling your mustachios like the most hackneyed of stage villains. If you follow your natural impulses, and enact this terrible deed, you are doing a grave disservice to your chances of nabbing that posthumous shrine where thousands will come to worship one of your bones. Instead, reach into your pocket and take out tuppence and give it to the orphan with the instruction to buy itself a choc ice or a toffee apple. No longer woebegone, the orphan will scamper away towards a tuck shop, well away from the path of the screeching train. Be careful, however, that the tuck shop is not on the other side of the railway sidings, for then the orphan will have to cross them to purchase its treat, and it may mistime its steps and end under the wheels of the giant locomotive after all. Though you would not be as culpable as if you had pushed the orphan deliberately, a forensically-minded devil's advocate at a later date may twist the facts sufficiently to have your motives questioned, with fateful results.

What we can learn from this example is the necessity of being aware at all times of the potential for mishap. Let us say you have an appointment to see your lifestyle coach - the new one, that is, not the delusional one you have dismissed. You arrive at the skyscraper and have, in your pippy bag, along with your usual jumble of tat, a copy of the latest issue of *Vacuuus Purgamentum* magazine, in which you have highlighted an article recommending 'best buys' in pointless gossamer fripperies. The purpose of the visit to your lifestyle coach

is to seek their counsel regarding the frippery that is just right for you. But also tucked into your pippy bag is a small canister of poison gas spray. You must be very careful, when reaching into your pippy bag at the beginning of the interview, to take from it the magazine and not the canister, for if you have the latter in your hand you are likely to aim it at your lifestyle coach and depress the knob atop the canister. Remember that poison gas is usually lethal, and you may end up having to explain your slip to both an ambulance crew and officers of the law. If an incident like this comes to light when you are being appraised for sanctity, those supporting you will have their work cut out.

Most people are aware that a condition of sainthood is the performance of miracles. Pretty much every saint has at least one attested miracle to their name, so it is understandably tempting to devote some of your time on earth to learning conjuring tricks. The reasoning is that if you can, say, produce a rabbit from a previously empty cardboard box, or saw a goat in half and then make it reappear whole, to resounding applause from an audience of credulous ninnies, or pre-school infants, then such an act can count as your miracle. I am afraid to say that this is drivel. The only miracles worth their salt are ones performed when you are already dead, and there is not much you can do to ensure that a crippled mendicant sprawled in front of your shrine beseeching you to restore their withered limbs gets up and walks away with limbs duly unwithered. A few stop-at-nothing wannabe saints have tried to arrange for such exciting scenes to take place after their demise by bribing down-at-heel actors from their deathbeds, but it is a ploy not without its risks, and rarely succeeds. The average down-at-heel actor will simply flit from your side as you groan your last and spend all the coinage on strong drink, waking up some days later in a ditch with no memory of the bargain they struck.

A further pitfall for the over-ambitious saint-to-be is to be in too much of a hurry to identify the trade or beast or sickness etcetera of which you would like to be patron. Most such patronages have already been allocated, and although there are some duplications, you should not rest your hopes on any particular role. You may have your heart set on becoming the patron saint of hedgehogs, and spend much of your time doing good works among the hedgehog population, setting up sanctuaries and so forth, but this is no guarantee that you will ever be granted your desire. Those who decide on these matters are notoriously fickle, and you may find that all those hours and

days and years spent feeding milk through a funnel to injured baby hedgehogs rescued from entanglement in bramble patches would have been better spent in the company of, say, seabirds or television chat show hosts.

As a general rule, lead a blameless life and avoid poison gas canisters and the temptations of railway sidings.

L'Homme Qui Grogne

L'HOMME QUI GROGNE was, and possibly still is, the French counterpart of the Grunty Man. History tells us that he was active in the countryside around Avignon during the period when it was the seat of the Papacy, that is from 1309 to 1377, between the reigns of Pope Clement V and Pope Gregory XI. There are some mischievous wags who claim this as evidence that the Grunty Man is a practising Roman Catholic, but I think we may safely turn our noses up at them, sniffily. It is of course the case that for as long as anybody can remember the Vatican City at Rome has been periodically menaced by the so-called *l'uomo grugnito*, and I will have much to say on that at a future date, if you are good.

L'homme qui grogne is said to be hairier, huger, and grunter than the Grunty Man, and thus more terrifying. He made regular incursions, by nightfall, into Avignon itself, but never managed to scale the immense eighteen-feet thick walls of the Gothic Palais des Papes, and so was never able to carry off one of the Popes, or his nuncios, back to his nest in the woods. You raise your eyebrows at my use of the word nest, but it is carefully chosen, for one of the chief differences between the Grunty Man and l'homme qui grogne is that the latter lurked not in a lair, but in a series of nests built of twigs and branches and forest debris high in trees. When exhausted from his countryside predations, or just in need of a bit of peace and quiet, l'homme qui grogne would clamber in his ungainly and grunty way up the trunk of a mighty hornbeam or cedar and flop into the nest he had made there. It must have angered him that, with all his climbing practice, the Palais itself remained impregnable. No doubt that is why the peasantry told tales of loud and frustrated grunting noises being bellowed from treetops around Avignon. Sophisticated cityfolk sneered at their

rustic neighbours for such stories, but we hear an echo of them in, for example, the *Ballades et Bagatelles* of the fourteenth century überminstrel Lothar Pangué. Dennis Beerpint's grandmother made prose translations of some of Pangué's pieces, and in one of them we find this:

A woodsman ran screaming from the woods. He had lost his cap and his hair was dishevelled. He threw himself into the river and swam downstream until he reached the village of distressed mumbling. There he was hauled out of the water by a tavern keeper who put smelling salts under his nose. 'Pray to God in heaven!' shouted the capless woodsman, 'For I have heard loud and frustrated grunting noises from atop a gigantic hornbeam and I am too frightened ever to go back into the woods! How am I to feed my children?' The kindly tavern keeper handed the woodsman a mop and told him he would give him a sou if he swabbed the filthy floor of the tavern. And every day he swabbed the floor he would get another sou. And a year passed, and the woodsman had enough sous to feed his scrawny children with slops and gruel. He thanked the tavern keeper and jumped into the river to swim upstream back to his horrible cottage bordering the woods. But the weight of the sous in his pippy bag dragged him under, and he drowned, and his children starved.

It is a typically Panguesque fable, ending in horror and ruin and death, and it seems clear to us that the source of the woodsman's fright is l'homme qui grogne. There is a sense in which we wish Lothar Pangué was explicit about this, perhaps having the French Grunty Man lumbering out of the woods at the end of the tale and gobbling up the defenceless children in the cottage. But perhaps Pangué was mindful of a rival set of legends about l'homme qui grogne, in which, far from being a grunting ogre of terror, he is a tragic figure, a huge and hairy lumbering monster who thinks he is a little sparrow. In this tradition, his nesting habits are explained, but the constant attempts to clamber over the walls of the Palais des Papes are ignored. As a sparrow, of course, or rather, in the delusion of sparrowdom, l'homme qui grogne does not feed on human flesh, and thus would have no motive for attacking the woodsman's orphaned tinies in the cottage.

Several researchers have tried to tie the two sets of legends together. The stumbling block is always the dilemma of why a grunty man which believes itself to be a bird would be so desperate to see the Pope. Hattie Meldrum's paper entitled *The Giant Savage Catholic Flightless Grunting Sparrow Theory* is bogged down by far too many footnotes to forward a convincing argument,

and in any case her witterings were demolished by Tob during a television chatshow appearance. Sadly, Tob is better at crushing other's reputations than advancing his own peculiar lines of thought, and to date he has published nothing.

After the Papacy returned to Rome in the Great Schism, stories about *l'homme qui grogne*, in either of his incarnations, became fewer, until gradually he was utterly forgotten. Then suddenly, early in the twentieth century, he reappeared, blamed for a series of railway accidents in and around Avignon. This latterday *l'homme qui grogne* is yet another variation on the legend, still hairy and huge and grunty, still terrifying, but now waylaying steam trains as they putter along French rural branch lines. There is no suggestion that he thinks himself a sparrow, nor any kind of bird at all. But neither, according to the tales, does he threaten children, except inadvertently, should they be railway passengers. Now, *l'homme qui grogne* is impelled by a ravening hunger, a hunger that can only be sated by shovelling great pawfuls of burning coal down his gullet. And that is what he does, or did, in the last century. Every day. In and around Avignon. Grunting.

Pelican

THERE WERE PELICANS I hungered to see. Those huge, scooping bills, gulping down fish small and large, from sprats to trout. I felt an affinity with pelicans, even though the only pelicans I had ever seen were illustrations in reference books, *The A-Z Of Seabirds* and *The Life Of Pelicans*, for example. Was it because I could imagine opening my gullet and swallowing fish whole? It may have been. It is true my diet consists mostly of fish, bream and plaice, mackerel and eels. Especially eels. I prefer to eat them whole, and raw, and still alive. Into my maw goes the eel, head first, terrified I expect, but then that is the way of nature, creatures feeding upon each other. If I am ever swallowed whole by some beast bigger than me, I will not complain. I will be scared stupid, but nestling within the fear of an imminent doom will be a sense that this is the way the world works. I have never seen myself as a nibbler, a mouse, say, at a piece of cheese, or a beaver gnawing upon a log. There is that in me which is attracted by the engorging of a living, wriggling, squirming, sea-salt smeared piscine creature, all in one go. I expect I get it from my parents, Roman Catholics who dutifully stuck to fish on Fridays and had terrible table manners. Pa would nip out to the fishmonger's and bring home a wrapped package of something that had been swimming innocently but a couple of hours before, and smear it with sauce and sprinkle it with salt and pepper and cut it up with a knife and fork and ration it out. Greedy me, I always wanted the whole thing, I never wanted to share, and as soon as I was grown and no longer dependent upon my Pa for my fish I would indulge myself, from Saturday to Thursday as well as on Fridays. Haddock, plaice, and those yummy yummy eels, I feasted on them all. When I realised I wanted to eat them alive I stopped going to the fishmonger's and bought myself a fishing rod and headed for the

riverbank, I even got myself wading boots, and I cast my line in the muddy river and discovered a knack for fishing. It was as if they came to me, biting my bait, offering themselves, wanting to be eaten up and serve my appetite. And they did, oh they did, in their teeming thousands, even the swivelbacks and the gunnies and the ling. I have never seen a pelican, but when I preen before the mirror of an evening it is a human pelican I see, one whose stomach is stuffed with fish, a human pelican missing that mighty bill but otherwise just as ravenous, and just as elegant.

Dobson's Kitchen Groanings

I WAS MISTAKEN, once upon a time, to suggest that Dobson wrote a pamphlet entitled *Kitchen Groanings*, like the late eighteenth century work of the same name penned by an angry cook-wench or discontented housemaid. I was sure there was some kind of Dobson connection, and leapt to the most obvious thought, that it was yet another out of print pamphlet by the out of print pamphleteer. Unable to place it, however, I knitted my brows and set the tiny engines a-whirring in my pea-sized yet pulsating brain, and eventually, in the middle of the night, I realised I had been thinking of a radio programme made by Marigold Chew in the dying days of 1953.

Invited by the visionary producer Doug Hammarskjöld - no relation to the then Secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld - to create a piece of sound art for his fledgling long wave station Radio Doug Hammarskjöld, Marigold Chew rummaged in the broom cupboard where she alit upon her vintage Blattnerphone, a modified wire recorder that was the precursor of the mid-twentieth century tape recorder. The brief she had been given by the producer was precise.

Dear Marigold Chew, he wrote to her in his spidery handwriting, Here at Radio Doug Hammarskjöld we are on the lookout for pieces of belligerent, combative, confrontational sound art of between six and ten hours in length. Usually, the stuff we are sent consists of a lot of guttural shouting, often in German, which is fantastic as far as it goes, but it would be nice to bombard listeners with something a little more challenging. I know you used to sweep across the fields outside Pointy Town twenty years ago with your Blattnerphone, recording cows and peasants, and I wondered if you would rummage around in your broom cupboard for the vintage machine and make

a programme for us, which we would broadcast every day for months on end, or at least until our licence comes up for renewal.

Marigold had fond memories of the bucolic field recordings she made in her younger days, and looked forward to heading out to her old haunts, armed with the Blattnerphone, mindful that there would be new cows in the fields and older peasants digging the ditches. She was already putting a sound collage together in her head, deciding to add the noises of rutting badgers and babbling brooks to the mix. She took the Blattnerphone from the broom cupboard and put it on the kitchen table and went upstairs to dig out the bus timetable and a map from her bedside bus and train timetable and map and chart and diagram cupboard. Alas, on the landing she tripped over a pile of Dobson's out of print pamphlets, fell, clonking her head on a hard thing, and lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, down in the kitchen, the pamphleteer himself had just returned from a pointless errand. He was exhausted and rancorous. Carrying the kettle across the room, from its place of boiling, on a counter, to its place of filling, at the sink, he bashed it inadvertently against the Blattnerphone and in so doing flicked the switch which set the machine recording.

For the next six hours every noise that Dobson made was picked up and preserved for posterity on the thin steel tape of the Blattnerphone. Most of these noises were groans, for Dobson sat slumped at the kitchen table with his head in his hands, shifting only to make and then to drink copious cups of tea. If, by his groaning, he was trying to gain Marigold Chew's attention, he was staring failure in the face, she being splayed flat on the landing away with the fairies. Indeed, she later recalled that during her swoon, which lasted the same six hours as Dobson's groaning in the kitchen below, she had visions of fairies and elves and peris and aziza and nymphs and satyrs and tien and leprechauns and sprites and duendes and pixies and goblins. It was not often her head was cluttered with such twaddle, and when she awoke she was mightily discombobulated.

'Mighty is my discombobulation, Dobson,' she said, as she staggered into the kitchen, and she told the pamphleteer of her trip and fall and clonk and swoon.

Dobson groaned.

'The worst of it is,' she continued, ignoring him, 'That my head is now so fairy-filled, presumably as a direct result of the clonk, that I am having the

devil of a job trying to remember what I was doing. Or indeed why on earth I might have rummaged in the broom cupboard for that dear old Blattnerphone, which I see is perched on the table, whirring away.'

Dobson's groaning had been so terrific he had not even noticed the modified wire recorder, perched like a miniature science fiction windmill between a packet of cornflakes and the tea strainer. But before he could speak, a hammering was heard at the door, like the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. Dobson ceased groaning and went to see who it was who could be paying a visit at so ungodly an hour. It was visionary producer Doug Hammarskjöld, who shoved the pamphleteer aside as if he were so much chaff, and bounded into the kitchen, where he babbled at Marigold Chew as if in an ungodly frenzy. Ungodly hours and ungodly frenzies can often come in twos, and, like magpies, even in threes, and as if to prove this last point an ungodly magpie came swooping through the sky and smashed into the kitchen window, clonking its small birdy head and falling into a swoon not unlike that from which Marigold Chew had just awoken. Such are the furious interconnections of the known universe.

'Marigold, Marigold!' babbled Hammarskjöld, 'I see you have been making your tape of belligerent, combative, confrontational sound art of between six and ten hours in length, albeit in your kitchen rather than out in the field. Thank heaven you have done so! I must snatch the tape immediately from the Blattnerphone and take it to the studio, for we have suffered a calamity involving carpet beetles and the chewing clean through of wiring and other dramatic events, worse than the worse things that happen at sea, and if I do not have a field recording to broadcast right now, my fledgling long wave station will be shut down by the radio police!'

Thus it was that, later that evening, listeners to Radio Doug Hammarskjöld were treated to six hours of Dobson's kitchen groanings, and the station was saved for another day. The programme caused a short-lived brouhaha, and the column inches of obscure avant garde sound art magazines were filled with guff about it. Marigold Chew herself disowned the recording, and rightly so, for it was not the tape she meant to make. Although, since the dying days of 1953 when all this happened, Brian Eno has taught us to honour our errors as hidden intentions, Marigold Chew never counted herself as an Enoist, and forever regretted that she had not caught up with the cows and peasants, the

badgers and brooks, for which, as far as she was concerned, the Blattnerphone had been invented. In any case, as she wrote in a letter many years later:

I had to listen to Dobson's kitchen groanings day in, day out, for as long as they lasted, and I did not consider them to be sound art. If I want sound art, like any sensible person I will listen to ill-tempered Germans shouting their heads off, or to cows and peasants and rutting badgers and babbling brooks. Dobson's kitchen groanings, like all his other groanings, were to me merely the groanings of an out of print pamphleteer. He ought to have been writing, not groaning in the kitchen with his head in his hands as the Blattnerphone whirred and hissed, and the stunned ungodly magpie lay on the windowsill, away with whatever fairies clutter the tiny heads of birds.

The Cruel Sea

THE CRUEL SEA. The dismal pond. The glued vicar. The obsolete pudding. The terrible sludge. The grimy harpoonist. The Dutch pillbox. The prominent moustache. The customised hat. The awful pan. The disguised shrubbery. The pale horseman. The wicked nephew. The clueless dolt. The filthy sniper. The hot flap. The rotting twig. The crumpled swine. The village idiot. The spasmodic throbbings. The puckish stormtrooper. The flailing chump. The godforsaken peasouper. The dribbling maniac. The shabby cartographer. The unhinged wrestler. The tiny toadstool. The wielded hoe. The bloody stump. The tin bath. The crunchy plover. The urgent message. The ticketboo avalanche. The cupped sprain. The turquoise pip. The shoved helmet. The fantastic Moira. The governed tang. The collapsed lung. The indigestible suet. The stuck shirt. The old git. The worrisome spinster. The shambolic circus. The disgusted postman. The cheap bale. The splendid toucan. The fractious hamster. The baleful merchant. The spiffing socks. The Dungeness werewolf. The intrepid golliwog. The gaudy spats. The bewitched gubbins. The tawdry lump. The tungsten spigot. The wilful witch. The Ruritanian tyrant. The speckled toffee. The crumpled pooper. The insignificant mendicant. The woeful copse. The bad shunter. The first Adam. The globular emission. The spent fork. The other fork. The cataleptic nincompoop. The boiled dish. The sudden rink. The icy wastes. The dirty placebo. The incomprehensible gibberish. The fat fissure. The tansy klopstock. The gruesome boots. The Mexican floozie. The sordid details. The tattered tent. The vindictive biologist. The shabby phantom. The crashed pantechonicon. The odd chimp. The slimy bog. The shattered walnut. The horrible dirigible. The muddy waters. The contaminated mayonnaise. The belligerent scruff. The tidal estuary. The sodden moorhen. The avenging pig.

The omnipotent Dagobert. The teeming downpour. The slapdash embroidery. The stale cake. The unbreakable jugs. The bonkers churning. The copper tricycle. The idiot savant. The charmless ragamuffin. The shredded diktat. The holy farmyard. The blistering flotsam. The deaf wonk. The gladsome cravat. The industrial stapler. The careworn widow. The lopped fig. The bulky cargo. The hepcat smoothie. The fundamentalist satrap. The oiled hair. The brusque Ostender. The lovely pie. The crushed kaboodle. The glamorous trumpet. The foul expat. The immense saucepan. The sequined tugboat. The gorgeous innards. The frail sot. The desperate genuflection. The dark peel. The grotesque kipper. The unsinkable sieve. The chumpot tawny. The albino chicken. The Germanic straw. The wiggling blob. The dug ditch. The safety pin. The fictional athlete. The abominable beaker. The popped savage. The glitzy surgeon. The extra limb. The chubby pickpocket. The pitted ointment. The wan hoop. The stricken passengers. The dotty haberdasher. The clumsy ghost. The frightful crevasse. The cloned duck. The unfortunate blot. The skindiving fatso. The drugged weasel. The jellied eel. The monstrous bag. The unreliable toothpaste. The preening bombast. The bitter chutney. The damp patch. The cluttered freak. The mordant heron. The sleeping ogre. The delightful custard. The unspeakable goat. The double chimney. The restricted barn. The potty boffin. The golden glut. The tugging pang. The clatterboard bodice. The shining throne. The plump shrike. The girly mittens. The sticky wolf. The Baptist cocoa. The snivelling orphan. The cantankerous toppler. The vile rug. The insanitary hellhole. The plastic splint. The chipper baronet. The navy buttons. The cheesy blubber. The surviving thieves. The untidy shore. The metal stick. The invisible tapeworm. The bent captain. The disgruntled Jesuit. The gleaming gloaming. The ratty scrimshaw. The hard biscuit. The grubby spittoon. The withered hoist. The ashen jackanapes. The gilded dustbin. The last splat. The heavy hod. The token undertaker. The whooper swan. The cruel sea.

Little Ruskin, Episode One

‘I was extremely fond of digging holes, but that form of gardening was not allowed.’

– John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, Volume I (1885/6)

LOOK, CHILDREN, THERE goes little Ruskin, marching up the path with his spade over his shoulder! But who is this come a-lolloping towards him? It is Mr Snippage, the kindly old gardener, Mr Snippage who leaves ants'-nests undisturbed so little Ruskin can investigate them with his already piercing observational skills.

‘What ho!’ says Mr Snippage, ‘Now what would you be about, little Ruskin, with that spade over your shoulder?’

‘I am going to dig holes here in our Herne Hill garden, Mr Snippage. I am extremely fond of digging holes,’ replies the infant.

‘Ho ho ho,’ laughs Mr Snippage, ‘I knows you are, little Ruskin. But I don’t think your Ma takes too kindly to all your hole-digging, does she now?’

Little Ruskin blushes. Last summer he had dug so many holes the house on the hill had been at risk of subsidence. That is why he plans to dig this year’s holes at the farthest end of the garden. But he can find no words to say in reply to Mr Snippage.

‘I know your Ma gets you a-Bible reading every morning,’ continues the gardener, ‘And I know she added an eleventh commandment, didn’t she?’

Little Ruskin nods.

‘Thou shalt not dig holes in the garden,’ quotes Mr Snippage, ‘And she didn’t mean the garden of Eden, did she now?’

Little Ruskin tosses his spade aside and begins to sob.

'There, there,' says Mr Snippage, mussing little Ruskin's carefully-combed hair, 'Let's you and me see if we can't find an ants'-nest to study.'

And he takes little Ruskin by the hand and leads him off towards where he knows there will be an ants'-nest or two.

Ma Ruskin looks on at the scene from the drawing-room window. She clutches her doctored Bible to her bosom and offers up a prayer of thanks that the kindly old gardener has turned little Ruskin away from the path of sin.

Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet

MAGNET BOY! THE Boy Magnet, the most magnetic cartoon character of the Atomic Age, was the brainchild of a washed-up has-been called Lamont Pinochet. As with his namesake, the brutal Chilean dictator, Pinochet's surname was mispronounced as 'Pinoshay' by all and sundry. 'I have a hard T, like Turandot!', the cartoonist used to shout, slumped in the gutter, as he often was before the late-flowering success he found with his magnetic hero. Even after that success, he spent much of his time in the gutter, for he had grown familiar with it, and felt comforted by the proximity of drains.

It is said that once, when he was in the gutter, Pinochet got embroiled in a terrific argument with a passer-by who insisted that General Augusto Pinochet himself pronounced his name 'Pinoshay', and that Giacomo Puccini specifically intended Turandot to be pronounced 'Turandoh'. The cartoonist was by this time so washed-up that he could barely summon the energy to respond, but it was the one thing he felt fierce about, so he inhaled the fumes from the nearest drain and gave his opponent a verbal battering. I have my doubts that this incident can be true, for at the time the Chilean would have been a youngster, and not yet a general, and unknown on the world stage. Be that as it may, there is something uplifting in the picture of the bedraggled cartoonist, dressed presumably in rags, gathering his wits in a Winslety gathering way, and demanding his final T be spoken aloud. Which of us can be sure we would have such gumption, even if it seems to be a trivial thing to get into a lather about?

Gumption, of course, is the quality we most readily associate with Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet, together with perkiness and magnetism. In all his adventures, set in the fictional city of Magnetville, battling evildoers and

outwitting communists, Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet shows such incredible levels of gumption that, even as we cheer him on, we fret about his health. How is it, we ask, that such a little chap, albeit one whose physical form takes the shape of a snub-nosed perky head atop a large horseshoe magnet, can display such gumption week in, week out, without falling prey to the sort of debilitating weakness and neurasthenia that put Edgar Allan Poe in his grave at the age of forty? Ah, but then we remind ourselves that Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet is fictional, and does not suffer the worldly buffets that beset Poe, and we are relieved. But worldly buffets certainly beset Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet's creator Lamont Pinochet. Even before he found himself in the gutter, curled up by drains, he had been thrown from horses, trapped in the mountains, buried alive, stranded on a beach, pursued by bears, ravaged by toxins, imprisoned for tomfoolery, shoved in front of an express train, attacked by irredentists, smothered by pillows, punched by a pig farmer, locked in a cubicle, spat at by Mormons, burned by the sun, plagued by whitlows, bled by cupping, tarred and feathered, and pelted with pebbles. He had also repeatedly had his ears syringed by charlatans. He faced each and every one of these outrages with whining and self-pity, crawling ever further down a moral slope towards degradation and disgust.

And yet all this time he was scribbling his cartoons, on scraps of paper, on the backs of fag packets, on his own forehead. Somehow none of these earlier creations ever caught the public imagination, or even Pinochet's own imagination. There was a strip based on the more recondite essays of John Ruskin. There was a plethora of chapbooks featuring a talking celery stick called Drax, but because Drax came from another, celery-dominated planet, he spoke in space-gibberish. There was a character called Unconscious Squirrel!, a squirrel that was unconscious. Pinochet plugged away, trying out each and every idea that popped in to his head, no matter how stupid, and all the while the gutter beckoned. The gutter, the gutter... the gutter that, miraculously, inspired Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet. Oh, how I would love to reproduce just one, tiny picture of my cartoon hero. But I cannot, for to do so is forbidden. In his last will and testament, done in cartoon strip form, Lamont Pinochet declared that, with his death, all trace of his life on earth be wholly and utterly obliterated. 'I shall be expunged!' sings his alter ego, a singing ringing carpet beetle. And so it came to pass.

Notes On Skippy

SERIAL CORRESPONDENT TIM Thurn is perplexed. *O beloved Mr Key, he writes, For some years now, Hooting Yard has been my unerring guide, informing my opinions and attitudes and in some cases even my behaviour. Rarely will I venture a viewpoint upon any topic without first doing a mental accounting of what the Yard has taught me. Thus I find myself in a state of some befummoxment on the subject of our canine pals. I am unmoored. I am unable to work out the approved 'line' on dogs. One day you tell us dogs are boring, but then you write, with some affection, of Skippy, a dog you feed and pamper and which appears to be your domestic pet. I cannot be the only reader who is utterly confused by these divergent dog attitudes, and would be extremely grateful if you could, in some wise, shed light upon the matter.*

I will not reproduce the remainder of Tim's wordy letter, which veers off into an account of the many and various dogs with which he has come into contact during his life. Better that I set him straight without further ado. Clearly, when reading of Skippy, Tim picked up on the words 'bark' and 'hound' and 'cur', and also I assume on the detail that Skippy is fed, from a bowl, on reconstituted meat chunks in jelly. Any reader, not just Tim, could be forgiven for thinking that I was referring to a dog. But dogs are not the only beasts that bark. Seals bark. Skippy is, in fact, a seal.

Now, it is certainly true that seals are rarely, if ever, referred to as hounds or curs, and are not, in the general run of things, fed in the manner or with the fare Skippy enjoys. But Skippy is a particular kind of seal, known as a selkie or sealchie, that is, an allegedly mythical type of seal which, when on land, can shape-shift, and take on other forms, often human, but sometimes dog or cat or cow or, extraordinarily, wasp or hornet. The selkie is not, however, a wholly convincing shifter of shape, and whatever form it takes as it flops onto

land from its watery domains, it always retains a recognisably pinnipedian character. If one were lazy, one might call Skippy half-seal, half-dog, but that is too simplistic and gives quite the wrong impression of his physical appearance. Depending upon the time of day, and the play of light, and the humidity of the air, Skippy can look almost exactly like a common seal, or a mastiff, or even, from some angles, like a giant ungainly sparrow.

Whatever form he takes, on land, he barks, and tends towards other dog-related behaviour, such as fetching thrown sticks, drooling, and, when allowed, leading blind people safely through the many imperilments of the cityscape. Though myopic, I am not blind myself, but I make a little bit of pin money by renting Skippy to sightless folk who require a canine guide for half an hour or so while their regular dog is meeting an appointment at the veterinary surgery, which happens to be bang next door.

It will be said that I must have known, when describing Skippy as a hound and a cur, that readers would leap to the conclusion that I was referring to a dog rather than to a selkie. After all, selkies are not the most common of beasts to keep as domestic pets. I grant that. In mitigation, all I can say is that, on the day I was writing about, the quality of the light seeping in through the windows, and more particularly through the bathroom window, a sort of milky, soapy, lucence, lent Skippy a dogginess such that even I could forget for a moment that he is in fact a seal.

More problematic is the matter of Skippy's diet. As far as I am aware, most seals like to eat fish, often swallowing them whole. Whether it be sprats or sardines or dabs, the average seal, and indeed the average selkie, if there is such a being, can happily eat nothing but fish throughout its life, a life, by the way, which an actuary would calculate at roughly twenty-five to thirty years. On the other side of me from the veterinary surgery there is a seal actuary's office, and I checked those figures with him, a few minutes ago, in a break between paragraphs. I did not mention it at the time, thinking it better to present the information at a pertinent point, rather than interrupting my flow to buttonhole you with a newly-discovered fact. Incidentally, Mr Ten Boom, the actuary, is blind, and he has a sickly guide dog often in need of stomach pumpings at the veterinary surgery, so I regularly hire Skippy out to him for little trips to the newsagent or the greengrocer, located as they are on the other side of a wide boulevard frantic with hurtling container lorries. Mrs Ten Boom, the actuary's

wife, knitted a splendid little tabard for Skippy to wear on such excursions, yellow with black stripes, which can give him a disconcerting resemblance to an enormous bee.

But I must keep on track and return to the important matter of Skippy's diet. I recognise that, having described my pet selkie as a hound and a cur, and mentioned his barking, the clincher for Tim Thurn and other readers, leading them to assume I was writing about a dog, was the reference to a bowl of reconstituted meat chunks in jelly. After all, long years of experience tell us, whether we are dog owners or not, that such a meal is *de rigueur* for our canine pals. I will not muddy the waters by pointing out that cats are commonly fed on broadly similar lines. I have not received any readers' letters asking me to clarify whether or not Skippy is of the feline persuasion.

As a selkie, one might expect Skippy to salivate happily at the sight of the aforementioned sprats and sardines and dabs, but not at food fit for a dog presented in a bowl set upon the floor. Many seals jump in the air to catch thrown fish, rather than snuffling with their faces buried in a bowl. Yet recall, one of the defining characteristics of the selkie is that, while in water it is wholly a seal, upon land it shifts shape and takes on, partially and spookily, other forms. We cannot expect a transformation, in certain lights, of its outward appearance to go unaccompanied by a corresponding terrestrial enjumblement of its innards. The innards of a seal or a selkie are not merely blubber, they are as complex and miraculous as the innards of many another organism. If you have ever dissected anything, be it a fruit bat or a buttercup, you will know whereof I speak. Thus, once having heaved itself ashore, and bid goodbye to the sea, either temporarily or permanently, the selkie's transmogrification, even if it is mythical, is startling. In Skippy's case, by becoming in some manner doggish, he discovered doggish appetites. We have already ascertained that Skippy enjoys chasing after thrown sticks. Why, then, should he not see the allure in a bowl of reconstituted meat chunks in jelly placed before him on the floor? That does not make him a dog. It makes him a selkie which, on land, in the play of light, appears to the human eye to be a dog, more or less, if one does not examine him too closely.

It will be asked whether a selkie chooses the terrestrial form it adopts, or whether, as it emerges from the sea, it is subject to forces both eerie and inexplicable, and takes the form destined for it by the seal-gods. I confess I do

not know the answer to that question. Better minds than mine have wrestled with it, not least Mrs Ten Boom, the seal actuary's wife, the tabard knitter. As she knits, she devotes her powerful brain to all sorts of abstruse and thorny problems, regarding not merely seals and selkies but to anything that exercises her. By no means does she confine herself to the aquatic and amphibious. She is, it is said, one of the few people living who has read every word ever published by the out of print pamphleteer Dobson, and not just read them but annotated them. Unfortunately, though dozens of Dobsonists have beseeched her to make public her notes and marginalia, she refuses, point blank, often with the aid of a baseball bat. She is a dear old thing, a good neighbour and a tabard knitswoman of genius, but, just as there are religionists who claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus, Mrs Ten Boom insists upon an exclusive Vulcan mind-meld with the pamphleteer, and bashes senseless with her bat anyone who tries to broach it. For my part, I salute her, as does Skippy, who has recently devised a fantastic saluting gesture with his right flipper, which looks, in a certain cast of light, like a paw.

Lars Porsena Of Clusium

LARS PORSENA OF Clusium, by the Nine Gods he swore that the great house of Tarquin should suffer wrong no more. Over in Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus had been overthrown, and he asked Lars, as a fellow Etruscan, for help. Lars thought about it for a bit, and it was when he decided to march to Tarquinius' aid that he did the swear-y bit with the Nine Gods. That took a good deal of time, as some among the Gods demanded that when they were sworn by, the swearing had to be an elaborate invocation of rolling phrases, complex rhymes, and repetitive beseeching. Lars Porsena was well-prepared, taking a packed lunch and a big flask filled with a foamy hallucinogenic potation up into the Etruscan hills where he planned to do his swearing.

There has been some debate about the precise identities of the Nine Gods. E Cobham Brewer has them as Juno, Minerva and Tinia, or Tin, or Tina, the three chief Etruscan Gods, joined by Vulcan, Mars, Saturn, Hercules, Summanus, and Vedio. But his list finds no place for such exciting Etruscan deities as Catha and Usil, Selvans, Turan and Laran, nor Thalna, Turms and Fufluns, sometimes known as Puphluns. It seems scarcely credible that a king like Lars Porsena would leave Fufluns out of his swearing on a hillside. We might want to consider the alternative godly roll-call given by Pebblehead in his bestselling paperback *Lars!*, where he gives pride of place to Tina and Fufluns, and chucks in seven others mentioned above. It is true that his book is a novel rather than a history, and that he veers off into a subplot about Tina and Fufluns canoodling in the Etruscan forests, but Pebblehead has studied these things and has the benefit of a number of scholarly works published since Brewer's day, including Dobson's pamphlet *The Sane Person's Guide To Swearing By The Etruscan Gods* (out of print).

So there was Lars, a few days before he set out for Rome, up in the hills under a louring sky. He ate some bite-size cottage pie-style snacky chunks and washed them down with several gulps from his flask, ensuring that his brain underwent preliminary dislodgement. Then he gathered some sticks and tied to each stick a colourful ribbon he had brought with him in his kingly Etruscan pippy bag, and he poked the sticks into the hillside muck to form a magick pattern, nine sticks in all, one for each God. He took a few more swigs from his flask, further shattering his reason, and then he sprawled in front of the stick tied with a beige ribbon, representing the God Usil, and began screaming his head off.

'Usil, Usil, Usil!' he bawled, 'Ooooo! Sil! Ooooo! Sil! Grant me the will to kill, Usil! Let me not dilly dally nor be ill, Usil! If I catch a chill, Usil, up in these hills, give me some pills, Usil! Oooo! Sil!'

And so it went on, for hours, with an occasional pause for more foaming hallucinogenic potation from the flask, until Lars Porsena was completely cracked and exhausted. The God Usil let it be known that it was satisfied with the king's swearing by sending a shower of sparks to dance around his head and half-blind him. Lars Porsena fumbled about, untying the ribbon from the Usil stick, and burning both the ribbon and the stick, and stamping unsteadily upon the embers, and he ate another bite-size cottage pie-style snacky chunk and gulped from his flask, and then he took a nap. One God down, eight more to swear by.

We shall not bother to run through in detail the other swearings, although it has to be said that when it was Fufluns' turn Lars Porsena outdid himself. It took the best part of a day to complete what was the sweariest of the swearings by any stretch of the imagination. So wild and loud and crazed did the king become that he attracted the attention of a little knot of Etruscan peasants who were heading down the hillside after a hike. They recognised Lars Porsena by his kingly garb and were shocked to see him in so demented a state, alternately screeching fantastic ululations at a stick in the ground and shovelling mouthfuls of soil down his gob.

'One wonders what will become of Clusium, ruled by such a king,' said one peasant.

'I fear that it may be swallowed up by the nascent Roman republic and vanish from history,' said another peasant.

The third peasant in the knot chivvied his colleagues to continue down the hillside into downtown Clusium so that they were home in time for their Etruscan supper.

There was no such comfort for Lars Porsena. He still had two more Gods to swear by, and, having eaten the last of his bite-size cottage pie-style snacky chunks, had to grub about in the muck for barely edible roots before taking his next nap. By now, of course, his brain had been bent and cranked to such an extent by his potation, of which much still remained in his huge flask, that his naps were accompanied by strange and terrible dreams. He dreamed he was a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas. He dreamed he saw his head, grown slightly bald, brought in upon a platter. He dreamed he was in rats' alley where the dead men lost their bones. And he dreamed twit twit jug jug jug jug jug jug.

When he woke up, in the hills, it was raining. Hard fat drops of Etruscan rainfall hammered upon the king's head. It did not take him long to swear by Turms, for Turms was an easily-assuaged God. Lars Porsena remembered with brilliant clarity the words he had learned as an infant at his Royal Etruscan Faith-Based Community Education Hub. He had had an excellent teacher, a beardy robed figure with a squeaky voice and a genius for arresting similes. 'The God Turms,' he had said, 'Is like a silken girl bringing sherbet and at the same time like a camel man cursing and grumbling.' Lars had never forgotten that, it had been beaten into him with a stick, a stick rather bigger than the stick he now burned upon the hillside together with the ribbon he had unfastened from it. He had one more God to go, and when all nine sticks and their ribbons had been burned to nothingness he would be ready to follow the peasants' trail down the hillside and march off in aid of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus.

As he glugged another draught of foamy hallucinogenic potation, Lars wondered if, in ages to come, he too might be known as Superbus. Lars Porsena Superbus. Or even Lars Porsena Ubersuperbus. It had a ring to it. He imagined that there might come a time when a future princeling, preparing to wage war upon a foe, might come to these very same hills and swear by him, by Lars, and burn a beribboned stick in his name, and be thus emboldened and blessed. It was not beyond the bounds of Etruscan possibility that he might become a God. Would Clusium be a fit stamping ground for a deity? He would have to ensure when he made the transformation from mortal to divine that

his bodily remnants were placed in an elaborate tomb in or under the city he ruled, with a fifteen-metre high rectangular base and sides ninety metres long, adorned by pyramids and massive bells.

He polished off the sweary stuff with the final God, burned the final ribbon and the final stick, and emptied what was left in the huge flask down his throat. And then Lars Porsena stumbled away down the hillside, rain-battered and brain-bedizened, leaving behind him a pile of ashes. Soon he would hasten to Rome, and come face to face with heroic one-eyed Horatius Cocles, and make history.

Curiously, in his bestselling paperback *Lars!*, Pebblehead has absolutely nothing to say about this history. The novel ends with Tina and Fufluns doing goddy things in the ethereal realm, the eponymous king quite forgotten, and not remotely Superbus.

Sick Amid The Blossoms

'O DOBSON THOU art sick! Thou art sick amid the blossoms! O what shall we do? What shall we do? Let thy pamphlets be our guide!'

This was the little recitation made, oh so plaintively, by a band of hiking orphans who stumbled upon a sick and feverish Dobson in a blossom-bestrewn field one morning in 1956. Orphan hikes were a short-lived social phenomenon of the decade, one which is almost forgotten today. Inspired by the Swiss film masterpiece *The Hiking Orphans*, children all across the land gathered into groups and went marching off o'er hill and dale, munching toffee apples and consulting extensively detailed maps. So popular did the hikes become that many of the tots taking part were not actually orphans at all. Some became dab hands at forging death certificates, others suffocated mama and papa in their beds, or poisoned their breakfast cereal.

Dobson became a sort of patron saint of the orphan hikers following publication of his pamphlet *My Parents Are Dead, But Christ!, I Adore Hiking* (out of print). Because of the blasphemous abuse of the Lord's name in the title, the pamphlet was swiftly banned and the print run pulped, but such was the demand from hiking tinies that illegal Gestetnered copies were soon circulating, often secreted in the folds of the extensively detailed maps the orphans carried in waterproof pouches strung from lanyards around their scrawny necks.

These maps were themselves a marvel, more extensively detailed than any other maps ever made. It was said that the most extensively detailed of them showed the precise alignment of chaffinches perched on the branches of an aspen you would pass if you bore left at the hedge in which a rusted farm implement had been shoved and abandoned.

Unusually, Dobson's pamphlet included an illustration of the great man, a linocut by the hyperrealist linocutter Rex Hyper which showed the pamphleteer's visage in breathtaking hyperrealism. So familiar was his face to the more indefatigable orphan hikers, who pored over it whenever they sat down on a log to rest, that when a band of them came upon the sick and feverish figure sprawled amid the blossoms, they instantly recognised him as Dobson. Hence their plaintive recitation. Let us parse it.

'O Dobson thou art sick!'

The orphans are making it plain that they recognise the crumpled invalid for who he is, and they recognise, too, that unlike the blossoms amid which he languishes, he is far from blooming. We might criticise them for not being more specific in their diagnosis of his ague, but ought to remember that they are mere tots, and orphaned tots at that, except for the one called Vincenzo, who is a fraudulent orphan, having used his pocket money to purchase a counterfeit newspaper cutting claiming his ma and pa perished in an avalanche.

'Thou art sick amid the blossoms!'

By repeating their declaration of the pamphleteer's medical condition, the orphans reinforce its seriousness. This is no fugitive swoon nor spasm, they are saying, nor is Dobson lying there with his limbs splayed out because he has simply tripped upon a clump. And having driven home the point, they go on to place it in a geographical location - 'amid the blossoms'. If an air ambulance is coptering in the vicinity, equipped with fantastic sound detection technology calibrated to pick up piping orphan voices, they have pitched their recitation superbly. But of course, in 1956 such air ambulances were rare, and rarer still those with fantastic sound detection technology calibrated to pick up piping orphan voices. And the chances of one hovering in range of the blossom-bestrewn field in which Dobson lies crumpled are so remote as to be not worth a fig. Tiny they may be, but the orphans know this, and thus the despair of the next line.

'O what shall we do?'

We may be brave and doughty hikers, they say, we may be free from our often repressed and oppressive parents, God rest their souls, except for Vincenzo's, obviously, yet we are still but fragile and vulnerable tinies, and faced with this dramatic medical emergency we are beflummoxed and in some cases about to burst into tears.

‘What shall we do?’

The repetition here is a pleasing echo of the repetition of ‘thou art sick’ in the opening lines. It also commands our attention. The orphan hikers are not larking about. They are confronting, probably for the first time in their lives, a mortal dilemma. Toughened as they are by their hikes, well able to ford streams and negotiate bramble patches and vault dry stone walls and run screaming from flocks of savage angry swans, they are not so tough that they can cope with the sight of a sick and feverish pamphleteer amid the blossoms. Well, Vincenzo can, because he is, let’s say, an interesting little chap. The way in which his voice drops out of the recitation for this pair of lines lends an added harmonic *jouissance*, if one is listening with due care.

‘Let thy pamphlets be our guide!’

Vincenzo’s voice returns for this triumphant ending. There is renewed hope. Medically ignorant and lacking such kit as bandages and tablets and proprietary nerve tonics, the orphans have one invaluable resource - the stricken pamphleteer’s own pamphlets! For each of them, their imaginations sparked by Dobson’s illegal pamphlet on hiking, has acquired their own little collection of his works, which they carry with them wherever they hike. They realise that by taking all their Dobson pamphlets out of their pouches and combing through the texts, they are bound to alight upon a passage absolutely pertinent to the situation. As the pamphleteer himself continues to groan amid the blossoms, the orphans end their recitation on this note of optimism.

So there we have the words in context. What is curious is that, for as long as the orphan hiking fad continued thereafter, roughly until the winter of 1958, the recitation became a sort of generic chant, along the lines of the seven dwarves’ ‘Hi ho, hi ho, it’s off to work we go’. Having been cured and then recuperated in a clinic a few yards away from the blossom-bestrewn field, Dobson was as hale and sprightly as ever, a fortnight after the orphans stumbled upon him, and yet they carried on chanting their recitation as they hiked hither and yon, from the outskirts of Pointy Town to the Terrifying Grim Black Mountainous Horror Of Gaar, and even further afield, to places beyond imagining. And as our little band crossed paths with other hiking orphans, their chant was picked up, until all across the land, from Blister Lane to the Big Wet Sea, every hiking orphan knew the words by heart, and chanted and hummed and howled them as they hiked.

Whither The Bint Of Shelmerdox?

WHITHER THE BINT of Shelmerdox? The story goes that she went out a-hiking one morning and never came home. Some said she had a tryst with a tinker and ran away with him to his glen. Others spoke of a mysterious hot air balloon, spotted in the sky above the goaty place around noon. The parish priest insisted he saw her waving from its basket, but he was an old and foolish man and had had sundry hallucinations. There were those who muttered, in the shadows, of dark and desperate deeds.

Before she left, the bint of Shelmerdox ate an egg on toast and drank half a bottle of gin. She took the time to wash her dishes and place them on the drainer. But she left her purse and keys and passport and engagement ring upon the kitchen table, next to a saucer she used as an ashtray. Had she planned her disappearance, or had she not?.

The bint's fiancé, the village wrestler, was much distraught. In the market square, by the horse trough, he blubbered like a baby as night fell and there was no sign of her. The Woohoohoodiwoo Woman collected his tears in a cup, and boiled them, that she might see in the clouds of steam a vision of the bint and her present whereabouts. But the steam vouchsafed nought but unreadable swirlings, so the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman next eviscerated a few hens and read their hot bloody entrails, again to no avail. The bint of Shelmerdox had vanished off the face of the earth.

On the first anniversary, the village folk gathered in a barn and sang songs for her. They would have lit candles too, had the parish priest not eaten them all in his madness. The songs they sang were the current popular hits of the village and its hinterland, with newly-minted lyrics, some penned by the wrestler, who still wept every day.

Oh where is she now, my Shelmerdox bint? / I dab at my tears with a poor scrap of lint / If only the gods would let drop a hint / Of where she has gone to, my Shelmerdox bint!

The parish priest, whose chain was lengthened so he could just about reach the doorway of the barn, tried to offer up a prayer for the immortal soul of the bint, but he forgot why he was there, and blessed a couple of cows instead. The names of the cows were Puskas and Di Stefano. They were terrific cows, the pride of the village, and the bint had oftentimes patted their heads and whispered in their ears in that sozzled way of hers.

The commemoration was repeated in subsequent years, always with new songs from the village wrestler, still weeping copiously, and with haphazard blessings from the parish priest. One time he managed a spark of lucidity and actually prayed for the bint, though usually his benediction fell upon the cows or a patch of lupins or even the chain that ensured he did not stray beyond the village.

The Woohoohoodiwoo Woman refused to attend any of these ceremonies. But she had not forgotten about the bint of Shelmerdox. Within her hovel, among her dried-up poisonous plants and toads and beetles and pins and pokey-sticks, she carried on her eldritch flummery in secret. She had somehow got hold of the bint's passport, abandoned on the kitchen table, and made dozens upon dozens of copies of the photograph therein, on the photocopying machine in the village post office, and plastered the walls of her hovel with them. The bint stared out at her, sour, gin-soaked, and half-asleep. The Woohoohoodiwoo Woman became fixated upon the bint's smudged lipstick, convinced that the eerily shifting contours of the smudge in the passport photograph held the key to her vanishing. In some copies, the smudge resembled a subtropical peninsula. In others, it looked like a heron.

On the ninth anniversary, the villagers eschewed the barn and gathered instead at the goaty place. The parish priest's chain had been shortened after he frightened some swans in the summer just gone, and he stayed in his presbytery, sucking on lettuce leaves for their moisture. The village wrestler dabbed at his tear-stained eyes with his filthy scrap of lint, and sang a threnody.

My broken heart has the weight of lead / I can barely totter out of bed / How many more sobbings must I shed? / My bint is gone, she must be dead.

According to the village's ad hoc legal system, these words counted as a binding declaration of the death of the Shelmerdox bint. Her home and her remaining personal effects could now be burned entire, all trace of her expunged, and fireworks launched from the village green. The wrestler could stop crying and seek a new inamorata. Even were the bint to reappear, miraculously alive, she would be invisible to the villagers, fated to roam among them as a ghost.

Which, oddly, is precisely what happened, at the very moment the final firework fizzled out and was squelched underfoot by the village postie. Drunk and bedraggled and moth-eaten, the Shelmerdox bint emerged from a shrub clump and staggered across the fields into the village. She smashed the window of the off licence and hoicked a bottle of vagabond's ruin from the display, but now she was dead to the villagers and nobody saw her.

Nobody save for the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman, who inhabited a different, lopsided plane. She beckoned to the bint, and took her into her hovel, where the pair of them drank their fill and babbled about the bint's lipstick smudge long into the night. When morning came, they trudged arm in arm to the barn, and whispered into the ears of Puskas and Di Stefano, and then the bint of Shelmerdox and the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman, and the two terrific cows, headed out of the village, across the fields, and into the hills, and up into the mountains, up where the oxygen grew thin, and they passed, oh! so happy, beyond human ken, forevermore.

Inky Puck Stampings

IN HIS LATER years, Blodgett amassed a collection of inky puck stampings, kept in an album bound in the starch-stiffened fleece of a lamb. The fleece was spotted with unexplained bloodstains which Blodgett made no attempt to remove. He could have used a patent bloodstain eradication spray goo as manufactured by Don Federico's Royal And Ancient Portugese Spray And Paste Company, but he chose not to. Boffins in a lab were recently given the opportunity to scrape minuscule quantities of the blood off the binding. When they subjected it to tests, they were able positively to identify it as the blood of a fruitbat. Curious indeed, but no more curious than much else about Blodgett's later years.

In his new television series *The Piteous Whimpering Of A Soul In Torment*, celebrity historian Simon Sebag Stimmungbag examines in detail the final decade of Blodgett's life, and unearths some starling facts. I'm sorry, that should read startling facts, although among them are a number of Blodgett-starling collisions. If it seems unlikely that a man could collide with a starling on repeated occasions, as per being struck by lightning, Stimmungbag has at his fingertips a mass of convincing evidence, including ornithological records, accident reports, and ticket stubs from showbiz bird displays.

He also gives us a remarkable account of the time Blodgett decamped to a loggia, neglected to keep a log of his stay there, and upon returning home spent some six weeks dementedly chopping logs with a very sharp axe, despite being over eighty years old. He then carted the entire supply of chopped-up logs back to the loggia, dumped them outside the door, and kept a log in his journal of their gradual deprecation through theft and rot.

There are other distinctively Blodgettesque glimpses: hen harrying, bricks on the brain, tormented scribblings on parchment regarding soup, starling collisions, misted glass obscuring a decisively important bus timetable, things chewed and spat out, intimations of mortality, imitations of Christ, intimacy with a mute milkmaid, delusional vampires, card games, ditch digging, reading aloud *A Fiery Flying Roll* by Abiezer Coppe to an audience of stunned potters, other potters encountered in hospital corridors, smashed-up lobster pots, a zest for crumpled things... the historian takes us through it all, at a pace sometimes gentle and at other times hectic, and occasionally incomprehensible unless one is already familiar with the material. That is Stimmungbag's way, as viewers have come to expect from his previous documentaries on topics such as collisions in the sky and on starlings.

For most of us, though, whether or not we are students of Blodgett, it is the attention paid to the collection of inky puck stampings that is truly revelatory. Indeed, I had no idea that Blodgett maintained such a collection, nor that he kept it with such uncharacteristic care in a starch-stiffened lamb's-fleece-bound album stained with the blood of a fruitbat. Again, one has to admire the way Stimmungbag marshals the evidence, a particularly difficult task when one considers how many similar collections were destroyed after the coup which brought the new regime into power. There will be younger viewers who have never known about inky puck stampings, let alone that people used to collect them. Of course, few were kept in albums as magnificent as Blodgett's, it being far more common in those days to shove them haphazardly into cardboard pouches or discarded agricultural sacks. What shines most brightly in this excellent television series is the almost inhuman concentration with which Blodgett attended to his collection, peering at the stampings for at least three hours every day no matter what else was going on in his life or in the world at large. It is remarkable that on the day 'Lovin' You' by Minnie Riperton hit number two in the British singles chart, Blodgett spent at least nine hours not only peering at his inky puck stampings but rearranging them within his album, getting through an entire packet of stampings hinges, each one torn in half as was his usual habit. I think it says something about the man that he did not even collide with a starling that day. And it says something about Simon Sebag Stimmungbag that he has crafted such a long, blurry, black-and-white television documentary series with a deafeningly loud yet simultaneously

muffled soundtrack to which one must listen with one's ears pricked up and one's mouth hanging open, drooling into a pewter pot held by one's unpaid companion on the balcony of a sanatorium upon which the snow falls, and does not melt.

On The Balcony

I WAS DROOLING into a pewter pot held by my unpaid companion on the balcony of a sanatorium upon which snow was falling, snow which showed no sign of melting, and I realised it was going to be a hard winter. My companion was a deaf mute, and I could have used sign language to communicate this insight to her, but I was wearing thick woolly mittens against the cold, so I let it pass. She could not lip read my language, and even if she could, my beard is now so majestic that my lips are thoroughly obscured. It further occurred to me that, in a hard winter, I might perish on this balcony, covered in snow. Well, I thought, worse things happen at sea. It is a notion I have often clung to for comfort, but God knows, given some of the calamities that have blasted me over the years I do wonder just how much worse things could have been had I been aboard a boat or a raft. The idea that maritime disasters were worse than anything that could possibly happen to me on land was instilled in me at my mother's knee, and kept me shorebound even in the teeth of press gangs, blandishments and wanderlust. The press gangs were the hardest to overpower, of course, lumbering brutes flailing cutlasses at me as I staggered drunkenly from a dockside tavern at dawn. Lucky for me that even in my cups I have a gaze that could wither a row of hollyhocks. I mean that literally. It was a trick I picked up from a mountebank in a fairground tent, and one I deploy sparingly. Would it have helped me to face down imperilment at sea? I will never know, it is much too late for me to go a-sailing now. How late it is, how late. That was the title of a book by a swarty Scotchman, I recall, a book that won a prize. I doubt he had a clue what he was talking about. I stare at the falling snow from my balcony, drooling into a pot, and I think I'm the one who knows what 'late' means. The pewter drool-pot is a memento from the long ago morning of

my life. It belonged to my mother, as it had belonged to my grandmother and, I think, to my great-grandmother, all of whom kept buttons in it. Women of those eras amassed thousands upon thousands of buttons, never discarding a single one. Into the pewter pot a button would go, with all its fellow buttons. When the pot came into my possession I stuck it in a cupboard for years. Then, when my deaf mute unpaid companion signalled to me that she needed a container to catch my drool, I fossicked in the cupboard and found it. I tossed the buttons, all of them, over the balcony, a different balcony, the one in the home I was ejected from, but below that balcony too lay snow, deep and crisp and

and just as the snow here is unlikely to melt, for we are so high and the air is so cold and thin, so too the snow at home will never ever melt. It is a frozen place, where I come from, and very far from the sea.

Two Jaunts With Uncle Lars

IT IS A frozen place, where I come from, and very far from the sea. The first word I ever spoke was 'icicle', and I was in my late twenties before I ever heard talk of tugboats and barnacles and offshore gas fields. The idea that solid ice could simply melt away was so foreign to me that when I first saw it happen it really fried my wig, Daddy-o, as the hepcats would say. Not being a hepcat, I screamed and swooned.

My ghoulish Uncle Lars grabbed me by the mitten one day and dragged me off with him on one of his jaunts. We wore snow-shoes to negotiate our way across the freezing frozenness. Resting awhile in the shadow of an immense ice mountain, Uncle Lars clamped his pipe in his jaws and took from a pocket of his enswaddling furry wrappings a box of matches. After lighting his pipe, he held the still-lit lucifer against a crag of ice and I watched as it melted and dripped and vanished away, as if it had never been there at all. It was as if the world I had grown to understand had no underpinnings, was mere figment, and so my brain collapsed and I screamed and swooned.

So severe was my trauma that I was chained up in what we called a 'mad cabin' for months on end. My recuperation was slow, but I gradually began to understand the concept that ice and water and steam were but different forms of the same substance. I cannot overestimate the importance to my recovery of a pamphlet I was given on the day when one of my chains was removed. It was called *Child, Be Thunderstruck As Your Tiny Brain Copes With The Notion That Ice And Water And Steam Are But Different Forms Of The Same Substance!* The author's name, I learned, was Dobson. Sadly, the pamphlet has long been out of print.

Such was my first encounter with the twentieth century's titanic pamphleteer, an encounter which led from initial enthusiasm to wild overexcitement to monomania. I became so demented about Dobson that I risked being kept in the mad cabin for years and years. Fortunately, on a visit one day, Uncle Lars taught me to hide my light under a bushel, not literally of course, for that would have been a very foolish thing to do and despite his clumping weirdness, Lars was no fool. But I learned to temper my Dobson-zest when the warders were lurking, and went so far as occasionally asking to take delivery of works by other writers, such as Zadie Smith and Colm Tóibín. Needless to say, I never actually read such unDobsonist trash, but made use of the books as pamphlet-camouflage or as handy things to chuck at the wall with my free hand. Chucking things at the wall was my other great leisure activity in those days, and remains so. It is a great pity that Dobson had so little to say on the subject.

And yet there were so many, many topics to which the pamphleteer turned his attention. I found that, as I worked my way through the canon, I became obsessively interested in whatever Dobson was writing about, to the exclusion of anything else, even of the subject of the pamphlet I had been reading the day before. That being so, I often wonder how different my life might have been if, on the day I was eventually unchained and ejected from the mad cabin into the frozen wastes of my homeland, I had been reading something other than Dobson's short, strange, brilliant pamphlet *Why Those Let Loose From Mad Cabins Should Immediately Up Sticks And Settle At A Seaside Resort*.

Before I upped sticks and settled at a seaside resort, I said farewell to Uncle Lars. For old time's sake, we went on a jaunt. He was more ghoulish than ever, and had exchanged his pipe for some sort of newfangled smoking contraption into which he crammed fistfuls of disgusting blackened vegetable matter and sent out blooming coils of miasmic fug. We stopped again beneath the great ice mountain, and Uncle Lars again struck a match for his smoke, and again he held the match against the ice and I watched it melt away. But I neither screamed nor swooned, for I had read my Dobson, and I knew what was afoot. Uncle Lars knew that I knew, and he flashed me a conspiratorial grin. For an instant I thought I might scream at that, for the Grin of Lars, seldom seen, is never forgotten, and has sent many a poor gibbering grinee to the mad cabins. I quailed at the sight of it, certainly, but it did not utterly undo me, not

only because I had seen it once before, and was thus inoculated against it, but also because yet again I could call on Dobson, having read his pamphlet on terrifying facial expressions. I grinned back at Lars, as best I could, knowing that I might never see him again, and he puffed the match out and handed it to me, as a memento.

Look, there, on the mantelpiece of my seaside chalet. Between the toy binnacle and the heap of sand, you see that half-burned match? That is the match that was my parting gift from Uncle Lars. Sometimes I put it in my pocket, and I go down to the promenade, and I lean upon the railings and stare out to sea. As I stare I hold the match delicately in my fingers, and the whole world makes sense. I know that all the water I can see was once ice, until it was made hot by untold billions of matches lit and aflame, whereupon it became the sea. And the sea too will vanish, it will boil and seethe and become vapour, just as Dobson foretold.

The Cosmological Blurtings

AND THE SEA too will vanish, it will boil and seethe and become vapour, just as I foretold, Dobson wrote. It is the final sentence on the final page of the final pamphlet in the notorious series of so-called 'cosmological blurtings' he composed during the Space Age. Upon publication, these essays met with a level of derision comparable to the reception given to Philip Gosse's *Omphalos* (1857). But at least Gosse, the 'father' of *Father And Son* (1907) by Edmund Gosse, had a coherent, if preposterous, argument to make, trying to reconcile his scientific observations of the fossil record with his Christian beliefs as a member of the crackpot Plymouth Brethren. Dobson, on the other hand, in his blurtings, makes no sense whatsoever. It is as if he is issuing a series of grand statements about the nature of the cosmos, past, present and future, which are wildly contradictory, bonkers, and incomprehensible. Even his prose loses its shine in some of these pieces, where he chunters on about, say, stars and gravel, endlessly repeating himself and, it seems, quite forgetting the niceties of grammar and punctuation.

Marigold Chew tried to dissuade the pamphleteer from making a complete fool of himself. Fearing that what reputation he had would be damaged irreparably by the blurtings, she hid all his pencils in her mysterious cabinet. Dobson outwitted her by ingratiating himself with a charcoal burner, who gave him a couple of sticks of charcoal with which he scribbled away until Marigold Chew discovered them and ground them to obliteration with a pestle and mortar. Dobson hurried back to the declivity in the hills where he had come upon the charcoal burner, but the man had vanished, and in his place was a sparkly-eyed dwarf all dressed in green, with bells upon his cap and a startling affinity with rabbits and hares. He was like a figure from a folk tale,

and Dobson wondered if, in that case, he might be persuaded to magick up some writing instruments out of thin air, perhaps as a reward for answering a riddle or three. But the dwarf was merely a dwarf, albeit a flamboyant one who was fond of rabbits and hares, so the pamphleteer trudged back home in a foul temper.

Entering the kitchenette, he rifled through the cupboards, poured all the breakfast cereals out of their cartons into a sack, and retreated to his study. With scissors and a tube of Brian Eno's Proprietary Extra Sticky Gum For Past-ing Purposes, Dobson painstakingly cut out words from the cereal packaging, arranged them into sentences, and stuck them into his notebook. Not surprisingly, the sections of the blurtings which resulted are particularly dimwitted. He quickly exhausted his supply of cardboard words, and thumped his head repeatedly upon his *escritoire* in the ravages of despair.

At this stage, Marigold Chew tried to tug Dobson's head out of the clouds and to fix his attention upon other, mundane topics.

'Why don't you give these cosmological blurtings a rest, Dobson, and write a pamphlet about an everyday subject? Think what you could make of something like, oh I don't know, a sack full of mixed breakfast cereals, or a dwarf with rabbits and hares. Those are the sorts of topics that are screaming to be written about, I would have thought. And who better to address them than you?'

Dobson merely banged his forehead upon his desk again.

That night, the pamphleteer lay on his back in the middle of a field, staring up at the stars. The mania was still upon him. He had come to the field, towards dusk, armed with a paperback botanical guide, wondering if he might find a clump of *Isatis tinctoria*, or woad, or *glastum*, from which he could eke some blue dye to daub further blurtings. But he had left it late in the day, and there was not light enough for him to identify with certainty any of the clumps of foliage in the field. And so he stared up at the stars all night, barely blinking, transfixed.

They found him in the morning, flat on his back, soaked in dew. There were four of them, toggled out in the apparel of hikers, each of them beardy and bug-eyed and carrying rucksacks packed with enigmatic cargo, measuring instruments and metallic meters with dials and Coddington lenses and bakelite blocks from which dangled wires and clips and hooters and Mackenzie beams

and scanners and nozzles. They had maps, too, and big fold-out diagrams, and logbooks full of arcane jottings. And they had pencils.

Dobson woke up.

'Good morning,' he said, to the quartet of lanky eccentrics looming over him, 'And who might you be?'

'We, sir,' said the lankiest, beardiest, most bug-eyed one, 'Are the Brethren of Plymouth. Not to be confused, I hasten to add, with the Plymouth Brethren, a sect of Christian crackpots. We are men of science, men of parascience, of superscience, of uberscience! Our project is to untangle the knot of nature, to lay bare the secret workings of the universe! That is why our rucksacks contain an array of paraphernalia the likes of which will not be found in the rucksacks of ordinary, mortal hiking persons. Here, take a look.'

And so saying, he plumped his rucksack on the ground and unfastened its flaps and gave Dobson a glimpse of wonders.

'This is all very interesting,' said the pamphleteer, addressing the four of them as one, for now they were huddled so close together that they might have been a single beast with eight legs and four beardy heads, 'I am Dobson, the pamphleteer, and I am currently engaged in a series of blurtings which tally uncannily with the aims of your project. Perhaps we should join forces. I see you have pencils.'

Thus it was that, rather than returning home that morning, Dobson threw in his lot with the Brethren of Plymouth. For three weeks he lived with them at their encampment a stone's throw from the declivity where he had met both the charcoal burner and the dwarf, and with the aid of borrowed pencils, he completed his cosmological blurtings. When his work was done, he went back to Marigold Chew, in triumph.

Of course, when the pieces were published and comprehensively demolished by the pamphlet-reviewing critics, Dobson's reputation suffered just as Marigold Chew had said it would.

'I am not an 'I told you so' sort of person, Dobson,' she said one morning as she was spreading marmalade substitute on a potato-based snacking treat, 'But have you seen what it says in today's *Daily Keep Up To Speed With The Latest Pamphleteering Shenanigans*? No? Let me read it to you. 'Dobson's reputation will take a long time to recover from the plunge into the uttermost depths it has taken since he published his so-called cosmological blurtings. These witless

works are evidence of a weak brain. The best thing Dobson can do is to go into hiding for a decade or so, perhaps by taking up a janitorial post in some farflung place like Winnipeg."

Of course, that is exactly what Dobson did do. Marigold Chew did not join him. She stayed to hold the fort. It was a big fort, with delightful crenellations, and many flags, and it had the shiniest portcullis outside of Navarre.

The Puckington Tunnels

IT WAS A big fort, with delightful crenellations, and many flags, and it had the shiniest portcullis outside of Navarre. This was Fort Hoity, sister fort of Fort Toity, and an extremely interesting fort in its own right. For underneath Fort Hoity ran the Puckington Tunnels, those tunnels you may have come across in your reading, if, that is, you have been reading about tunnelling systems as a change from your usual diet of chicklit, gitlit, and zadiesmithlit.

There is a regrettable temptation to neglect the literature of tunnels and to be sidetracked by less meaty subject matter, by ephemera and winsomeness and the outpourings of knaves. I am not immune to such distractions myself, and in truth I ought to have done a lot more tunnely reading than I have, especially once I put my mind to writing about the Puckington Tunnels. There are huge chasms in my knowledge, and if I faced a quiz on the subject I suspect my score would be embarrassing. Perhaps not so bad as that of clueless David Lammy - unbelievably, the government minister for Higher Education at the time - whose appearance on the television show *Mastermind* elicited such delights as his belief that Henry VII succeeded to the throne after Henry VIII, and that the surname of the Nobel prizewinning scientists Pierre and Marie was Antoinette. The nitwit was not asked any questions about tunnels, but we may safely assume he would have fluffed them.

Speaking of fluff, there is a surprising amount of it in certain sections of the Puckington Tunnels. Layers, or perhaps clouds, of dust would be explicable, but it is difficult to account for the incredible fluffiness to be found underneath Fort Hoity. After all, there is not a speck of fluff in either Fort Hoity itself or in Fort Toity, and though both forts contain their fair share of dust and orts and scum and grease-stains, all fluffiness has been eradicated, forever and ever,

yea, e'en unto the Last Trump, by the installation of modern fluff obliteration technology developed by the computer giant Macrohard. Yet take the staircase down from the Fort Hoity broom cupboard and enter the Puckington Tunnels, take a left and a right and a second left, and you will be in the section of tunnel dubbed the Fluffy Zone by those in the know. There are spits and spots of fluff elsewhere in the system, but in this part it is quite simply overwhelming. Nobody knows why.

Nor does anybody know why the tunnels were dug in the first place. We know who dug them, because they are named after their digger, Puckington, the so-called 'human mole', and we know when they were dug, for every time he turned a corner or began a new stretch or created a tributary tunnel, Puckington stuck pins in a panel to form the numbers of the date and hammered the panel with nails to the tunnel wall at head height, head height for Puckington being considerably higher than for most men, for he was eerily tall, and thus all the tunnel junctions are unexpectedly cavernous, quite unlike the tunnels themselves, through which Puckington himself could only move when stooped, or by crawling upon his belly like a creeping thing as mentioned in the Bible, a pocket-sized edition of which, in the Huckabee Version, he carried in his pocket wherever he went a-digging, as a sort of charm or talisman which he insisted protected him from tunnel collapses and subterranean mudslides. Obviously there must have been one occasion when he went out with his spade and his jackhammer and his crate of dynamite and his pickaxe and his other tunnelling paraphernalia but forgot to tuck the Bible into his pocket, for on a very rainy Thursday Puckington perished, buried under a ton or two of soaking wet soil the weight of which proved too much for the wooden props with which he had shored it up in the tunnel he was digging that day, a brand new tunnel far away from the tunnels he had dug under Fort Hoity and which bear his name still and attract many a tourist and many a weekend troglodyte.

It was as a sightseer with a bent for the loveliness of crenellations that I discovered the Puckington Tunnels. I came to Fort Hoity to see the fort, as did all those in my coach party. We were a gang of fort-freaks. It happened that I became detached from my pals when, straggling at the back of the group padding through the famed Fort Hoity corridor of cupboards, I stopped to buy a carton of yoghurt from the yoghurt cupboard person. So delicious was the yoghurt that I spooned all of it into my mouth there and then, only to find that

the group had gone ahead without me and I was all alone. I blundered into the broom cupboard and followed the staircase down and thus found myself at the entrance to the tunnels. I was awestruck, as who would not be? At the time I jumped to the rash conclusion that the tunnels led directly underground from Fort Hoity to Fort Toity where, I supposed, a second staircase would take me up to the sister fort's majestic pantry, an architectural wonder of the pantry and larder world if ever there was one.

I did not know, then, that the Puckington Tunnels were the work of a madman, dug without purpose, or direction, or sense. I did not know, then, that the tunnels led nowhere, that all their twists and turns and rises and plunges ended, if they ended at all, tapering ever narrower, in blockages of black adamantine stone. I did not know that Puckington had, in spite of their apparent chaos, designed his tunnels with a lunatic genius for precision, such that he, and only he, could ever find the way out. These are dark tunnels, these Puckington Tunnels, and I have dwelt within them, since snacking on that carton of yoghurt, for over a hundred years.

Further Adventures Of Little Ruskin

"Margaret, in early youth, met with some mischance that twisted her spine, and hopelessly deformed her... I never liked invalids, and don't to this day; and Margaret used to wear her hair in ringlets, which I couldn't bear the sight of."

– John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, Volume I (1885/6)

SEE, CHILDREN, THIS couple walking along the road. One is a tall, handsome, and very finely made woman, with a beautiful mild firmness of expression, the other a conceited little boy. Why, of course, it is Ma Ruskin taking a stroll with Little Ruskin. They walk straight past the toyshop window without a glance. Little Ruskin knows he will never be allowed the temptation of toys. But Ma Ruskin has promised to take him to a spot, somewhere between Herne Hill and Camberwell, where he may pick a pebble to take home with him. Little Ruskin loves his pebbles.

As they turn a corner, Little Ruskin's buoyant mood changes, however, for ahead of them loom the great granite walls of the Charitable Mercy Home For Crippled Tinies.

'Can we increase the speed of our strolling, Ma, the quicker to be past this benighted cripplehaven?' pleads Little Ruskin.

'We shall stroll at the pace the Lord intends,' replies Ma Ruskin, not unkindly, but with her usual mild firmness.

Little Ruskin begins to tremble.

And then, children, out of the gates of the Mercy Home comes Little Ruskin's worst nightmare! It is a diminutive girlie with a twisted, deformed spine, and her hair is in ringlets!

'Aaaghh!' screeches Little Ruskin, shielding his eyes from the horrible sight and trying to hide himself in the folds of Ma Ruskin's skirts.

Ma Ruskin scolds her son for making such a din and a spectacle, and she turns him about and marches him home.

'There will be no pebble for you today, Little Ruskin!' she says, mildly firm.

And so, quaking with a mixture of disgust and horror, Little Ruskin ends up back at the house on the hill, forbidden even to jump off his favourite box.

The Temple Of Hoon Fat Gaar

BECAUSE IT WAS constructed mostly from canvas and cloth, and the canvas and cloth were fed on by moths, the Temple Of Hoon Fat Gaar is sometimes known as the Moth-eaten Temple Of Hoon Fat Gaar. Ravaged by moths and time, and lashed by wild winds that blow across the *tarputa*, it is a wonder the temple still stands, a thousand years after the first devotees entered it through the sacred flap. It has of course been much patched and stitched over the centuries, and its fabric is regularly stiffened with starch, carried in canisters for miles upon miles by worshippers of the hideous bat-god Fatso. For it is He to whom the temple is dedicated.

The wild winds that lash and batter the temple are meteorologically very interesting indeed. Students of the weather have been perplexed by them ever since modern wild wind studies began. Before our scientific age, of course, the sheer weirdness of the winds that blow across the *tarputa* was ascribed to the mercurial and petulant nature of the hideous bat-god Fatso, for it was thought that He was responsible for them, as He was for everything in the universe. We are wiser now, but no closer to getting to grips with the wild lashing winds.

Those who still believe in Fatso have a simple explanation. For them, the winds are the physical manifestation of the temperament of Fatso's magic pig. Actually, He has two magic pigs, but we can safely ignore one of them for a moment or two. The idea is that this particular pig - which, it must be understood, is not a real pig in any sense - somehow sends the winds howling across the *tarputa* whenever it is fractious or hungry or obstreperous or maddened or otherwise out of sorts. Why the hideous bat-god Fatso does nothing to placate His magic pig is an ineffable mystery. The religion dedicated to Him is short on theologians of any stripe, although one of the few to

have addressed the problem contended that Fatso spent much of his time pacifying the other magic pig, which, if ever it fully awakened, would make the wild winds that batter the temple seem like tiny pipsqueak gusts of summer breeze. Other so-called scholars argued that this implied the other magic pig was somehow more powerful than Fatso Himself, a clear heresy, so the first theologian was put in a crusher and crushed.

There used to be at least five crushers on the mud plain around the Temple Of Hoon Fat Gaar, so we must assume that there were plenty of heretics to be crushed. Occasionally, a bright young whippersnapper archaeologist will announce plans for a dig at the site, hoping to exhume a fantastical hoard of crushed bones, but not one of these schemes ever succeeds. It is said that Fatso Himself sabotages the expeditions, by causing shipwrecks and helicopter crashes and by pickling the archaeologists' brains while they sleep. In these ploys he calls on the assistance of his flock of bitterns. Unlike the two pigs, the bitterns are not magical, but nor, of course, are they real. They are phantom, spectral bitterns, beholden to Fatso for some service He did them in the distant past. We cannot guess what that might have been, for it is a topic suspiciously neglected by all the priests and wizards and jumping-about men who interpret Fatso to his followers. Or, I should say, who used to do so. There are none of them left alive today, at least none that we know of. Believers in Fatso are a dwindling band, often greasy and myopic and spindly and gormless. They tend to lack élan. Most of them, probably, would be crushed in the crushers if the crushers were still there, because one thing we can be quite clear about the hideous bat-god Fatso is that He expected His devotees to cut a dash. There may have been few opportunities for glittering social panache on the prehistoric *tarputa*, especially with those wild winds, but what rare chances there were were seized on by Fatso's followers. Great attention was paid to the angles of hats, the tying of cravats, and affectations of toffee-nosed insouciance. This is not to discount a concomitant yearning for the mud, encouraged by one of the magic pigs.

So today there are few who haul their canisters of starch for miles and miles to stiffen the moth-eaten canvas and cloth of the Temple Of Hoon Fat Gaar. Perhaps in a hundred years there will be none at all. Yet Fatso himself will still, as far as He is concerned, hold sway over the universe, and His magic pig will still make the wild winds blow, and His other, even more frightening

magic pig will doze and slumber, dreaming of havoc. It is easy for us to dismiss their very existence. Until, that is, we have struggled, stylishly, across the inhospitable *tarputa*, and stooped down to crawl through the sacred flap, to enter the Temple. Then we see what all those believers through the centuries saw, a sight so magnificent and terrifying that we sprawl helplessly in the mud, shrieking, brains bedizened, gaga for the god of all gods.

An Advertisement For Chumpots

CHUMPOT'S PATENT RAREFIED Pigfat 'n' Sourdough Paste comes in handy tubes. Spread thickly on a digestive biscuit, or between two slices of sliced-up solidified milk sludge, it makes for a perfect picnic snack.

You will well know, if ever you have been held responsible for the packing of a picnic hamper, the difficulty of picking the appropriate picnic snacks. How common it is, to be sat in a meadow, pipe clenched in your teeth, moustache bristling, to be lambasted by your fellow picnickers as the picnic hamper is unpacked and harsh words are said about, say, the sausages or the unsliced, unsolidified milk sludge. Many an idyllic picnic has been destroyed before it has even properly begun because of hamper-contents fury. Many meadows have resounded with unseemly imprecations. Many moustache-ends have been tweaked with spiteful tugs by the fingers of furious picnickers reaching across the picnic rug to assault the hamper packer. It is a sorry state of affairs, but one which Chumpot's aims to make a thing of the past. Our pastes are beyond reproach.

We have been manufacturing pastes, in tubs and tubes, for over a century, from our pasteworks in Pointy Town. Old Pa Chumpot, who founded the firm, and whose moustache was as magnificent an example of the walrus variety as has ever been grown in this town, made it his business to end picnic unpleasantness good and proper. It is easy to chuckle at those early promotional leaflets, with their clunky slogans such as 'There will be no more unwarranted tweaking of moustaches at picnics when you pack Chumpot's pastes in your picnic hamper', but they bespeak a great moral purpose. It was a time when meadows were loud with the din of moustachioed men wearing boaters, pipes clenched between their teeth, venting their fury at the choice

of snacks packed into their picnic hampers. Bebonneted ladies blushed and held their dainty hands over their ears and, in some cases, swooned. Into this maelstrom stepped Old Pa Chumpot, with pastes specifically designed to bring due decorum to our meadows. For more than a hundred years now, the firm that still bears his name has continued to manufacture exciting and toothsome pastes, usually quite edible, for use at picnics. We are proud to do so.

Dobson's Dinghy

FOR A LONG time, for years and years and years, I have been meaning to write about Dobson's dinghy. It is a subject which I am convinced will be hypnotically fascinating to my readers, and yet whenever I settle to the task, as I did yesterday morning, with the nib of my pen polished to a gleam and a fresh stack of blank rectangular paper, I found myself once again baffled and plaintive. It is not that the contents of my skull seized up, like a polar ship in pack ice, for I had done my usual crack-of-dawn brain exercises, flexing the synapses using a set of techniques culled from a Victorian Everyday book. Some might say that synapses are not things you can flex, and they may be correct, but I am sure you understand what I am driving at. The point is that I was in tiptop writing condition, hunched over my desk, nib gleaming and paper stacked and blank, and outside my window crows were stalking across the grass, fat and black and Ted Hughesy, and the sight of crows seldom fails to inspire me, no matter what I am writing about. Sometimes I have filled pages and pages blathering on about crows, and then cleverly crossed out every mention of the bird and substituted it with another noun, for example windscreen wiper or bazooka, or even with a dozen different nouns, whimsically, in a great creative outpouring the like of which would put Dobson himself to shame, were he still with us. I have tried this technique over the years when trying to write about Dobson's dinghy, as a weapon against my bafflement, but it never quite works, and those pages are turned into scrap or made into paper aeroplanes or paper hovercraft or paper Hindenburg airships, depending on my mood of the moment. It can be very relaxing to fold one's abandoned manuscripts into toy forms of transport. Once, I was so thoroughly relaxed after folding half a hopeless novella into a paper fleet of milk floats that I fell into a coma. Other

writers find different uses for their discarded scribblings. The poet Dennis Beerpint, I learned, tears his disjecta into thousands of pieces, with untold savagery, cursing and fuming as he does so, while Pebblehead, the bestselling paperbackist, binds all his up into a bundle with butchers' string and carries it down to the beach and throws it into the sea. Frankly, I am surprised that a writer as successful and prolific as Pebblehead ever has aborted works to so dispose of, but I am told that he is seen upon the sands at least once a week, casting his bundles upon the briny. Dobson never launched his dinghy into the sea. On very rare occasions, when the fancy took him, he would push it into a pond and clamber in and paddle it across, alarming any ducks, such as teal and coots, who got in his way. The dinghy was yellow, and made of rubber, and Dobson bought it at a closing-down sale from a ruined ship chandler's. There. There is the essence of my bafflement and my plaintiveness. I have just told you everything I know about Dobson's dinghy. Every time I have a mind to write about it, I reach the same impasse. I have exhausted the topic, and have nothing else to say. Give me a week, or a month, and no doubt I will wake up one morning and feel impelled, yet again, to try to write dozens of pages of vigorous and impassioned prose about Dobson's dinghy. I will mention the pond, the yellow colour, the rubber fabric, and the ruined ship's chandler, and that will be that.

Meetings With Remarkable Owls

DOBSON'S PAMPHLET *MEETINGS With Remarkable Owls* (out of print) is a curious work. Ostensibly, it is a simple account of a walk he took through the owl sanctuary at Scroonhoonpooge, and of the owls he came across there. Given the unfathomable depth of his ornithological ignorance, one is tempted to suggest that the pamphleteer only knew the birds he 'met' were owls because of the big neon signage at the gate of the sanctuary.

More remarkable than the owls themselves, surely, is the fact that Dobson was able to get anywhere near them in the first place. Ever since the so-called Inexplicably Spooky Events that centred on Scroonhoonpooge Farmyard, the entire area had been cordoned off by a massive security fence patrolled by wolves and wild hogs. There had always been talk of the eerie barn and the mutant albino hens and the disturbing well, to say nothing of the farmyard itself, but after what happened on that wild and windy October weekend, so great was the terror in the surrounding villages that the fence was erected overnight, and the wolves and wild hogs let loose around the perimeter.

Dobson says nothing of this. We are asked to believe that he was out and about pounding the countryside one day when he found himself at the gate of the owl sanctuary and decided to investigate. This cannot be right. To get to the gate, he would first have had to find a way through the security fence without being savaged by wolves or wild hogs, then have had to cross the perilous bogs, avoid the piano wire strung across the pathways, clamber up the impossibly steep sludge banks, find his way through the mist-enshrouded field riddled with concealed pits in which killer spiders lay in wait, and pass through the notorious spinney of poisonous trees. Even had he accomplished all that, he would somehow have had to persuade the sentries at the owl sanctuary

gate that he was a bona fide visitor, or they would have shot him on the spot and buried his corpse where it would never, ever be found. The sentries were hand-picked, undergoing rigorous psychological testing to flush out any who had a less than fanatical protective instinct towards owls.

Dobson was not a particularly boastful man, but he did have an operatic diva's sense of drama, and it seems scarcely credible that he would let pass the opportunity to prattle on about so death-defying a journey. So we must be grateful for the research done by indefatigable Dobsonist Ted Cack, whose recently published paper suggests that some weird properties in the atmosphere around Scroonhoonpooe Farmyard may have actually modified Dobson's brain, one such modification being a complete wiping clean of his memory between eating a choc ice at the ramshackle kiosk adjacent to Sawdust Bridge and arrival at the gate of the owl sanctuary three days later.

Some traditionalists have had harsh words to say about Ted Cack. After all, he made his name as a young firebrand with a deliberately provocative book arguing that Dobson was not the true author of the *Bilgewater Elegies* and that the pamphleteer had never set foot in Winnipeg, let alone worked there as a janitor in an evaporated milk factory. These were, and are, preposterous theories, and Cack did himself no favours with his shoddy scholarship, cavalier approach to source material, and pomposity. Yet with his Anthony Burgess hairstyle, hornrim glasses, and barking voice he was a natural for television chatshows, and even the crustiest Dobsonists still speak in awe of his legendary appearance on *Russell Harty Plus*. TV critic Loopy Sebag wrote at the time that 'Ted Cack, with his Anthony Burgess hairstyle, hornrim glasses, and barking voice, is the best thing I have ever seen on television, apart from *It's A Knockout*'.

In his attempt to unravel what happened to Dobson on the day of his visit to the owl sanctuary, Ted Cack put himself in the pamphleteer's sturdy Hungarian Flying Officer's boots, and recreated the journey. Of course, Scroonhoonpooe is much changed. The whole area around the farmyard has been flattened, and there is no longer any sign of the eerie barn or the disturbing well or the albino hens or indeed of the owl sanctuary. In their place stands a derelict and abandoned shopping precinct in which feral beasts and teenpersons cavort and carouse. Only a branch of the plumbing chain Spigots R Us remains open, and its stock is covered in dust and breadcrumbs. Characteristically, Ted Cack was undeterred. He had read a lot of books about psychogeography, and though he

did not really understand what he read, he was determined to pretend to be the pamphleteer in that place at that time on that day so many years ago, so much so that he prepared by eating a breakfast of bloaters and wearing a grubby pair of trousers. And, just as the painter Oskar Kokoschka had a life-size rag doll made to replace his lost love Alma Mahler, Ted Cack created a simulacrum of Marigold Chew using string and wool and scrunched-up dishcloths, and waved it goodbye as he crashed out of the door on his way to Sawdust Bridge.

The crucial paragraph in his research paper is this:

There I stood, he wrote, in a puddle outside a boarded-up milk bar where once had stood the gate of the Scroonhoonpooe Owl Sanctuary. I had absolutely no idea how I got here. It was as if my brain had been modified in some sinister way and my memory wiped clean. This leads me to the irrefutable conclusion that exactly the same thing happened to Dobson, and that is why he never wrote about his perilous journey in his pamphlet Meetings With Remarkable Owls (out of print). What I do not yet know is how permanent this brain modification will prove to be. God help me.

I cannot see any holes in this argument whatsoever, so I am prepared to state that Ted Cack, pompous and irritating as he may be, has solved one of the enduring mysteries of the pamphleteer's career.

As for the pamphlet itself, as I said, it is a curious work. Trudging through the owl sanctuary, Dobson from time to time comes across an owl perched upon the branch of a tree. He attempts, first, to describe it, and this is where his lack of ornithological knowledge lets him down. Each description consists almost entirely of the words *head, beak, wings, big round eyes, talons, and hooting sound* in various combinations. But it is the second part of each 'meeting' to which we turn, wherein Dobson tries to, as he puts it, 'commune with the owls'. He hoots at them. He flaps his arms as if they are wings. He pounces upon a squirrel or a fieldmouse and savages it and swallows it. He hoots again.

I am Dobson, he writes, and for today at least, I am become an owl.

It is, I think, not the owls which are remarkable in this instance, but Dobson himself.

A Memoir Of Stick Insect Island

I HAD SEVERAL reasons to sail across the Sound to Stick Insect Island. There were rumours of murder and mayhem and pagan sacrifice. My brother had made the crossing a fortnight before, and no word had come from him. My own homecoming was long overdue. And I wondered if the tiny post office still sold those amusing wax dolls of Captain Tod and Cadet Jarvis. The poking of them with pins was a delightful memory of my childhood, and I wanted my own nippers to share the experience, even though it would never be quite the same on the mainland.

I had been too long gone, I realised, as the skipper brought the boat into harbour. The stone walls were greatly weathered, the fishermen's huts were dilapidated, the ice cream kiosk was a burned-out shell. Gulls swooped and rampaged.

'You're quite sure you want me to leave you here?' asked the skipper, as I disembarked. I nodded, slipping some coins into his hairy hand. They were counterfeit, of course, but he would be dead before he could spend them.

I walked up the slope, past the notary's office and the chapel, and sat on the old familiar bench by the fountain. There was nobody about at this hour. In the square, the stone statue of Cadet Jarvis, much becrumbled, gazed sightlessly towards the woods, as it had done for a century or more. I hoped my business would not take me into the woods.

It was in the woods we found my brother. I was six years old, out with my father for a moonlit walk. Usually, when he went out at night to lay poisoned bait for wolves, he went alone, but on this occasion, apparently, I had been fractious and keening all day, and he thought the moonlight might becalm me. My brother was wrapped in a filthy blanket and wedged in the branches of a

tree, a sycamore I think, at about my father's head height. He was about six months old, and fast asleep. My father placed him gently in the poison bag and carried him home. We never did discover who had abandoned him there. When his hair grew, it was lank and straight and tarry black.

The town, if you could call it a town, began to stir. The butcher came marching up the street, bearing his bloody meat cleaver proudly, like a soldier on parade. The beadle poked his head out of the bailey and sniffed the air. The lantern extinguisher rolled along in his wheelchair, extinguishing the lanterns one by one. Shutters were raised and bells clanged. When the duckman approached the fountain with his ducks in tow, it was time for me to move.

I could not help glancing back at the woods as I made my way, as inconspicuously as possible, towards the stationery shop. The flat above it was where my brother told me he was going to stay. When we parted, on the quayside, two weeks ago, I did not tell him of the knot in the pit of my stomach, wrenched so tight I thought I might die. I did not warn him about the flat over the stationery shop. I did not warn him at all.

The shop was not yet open. I pretended an interest in the window display, of typewriter ribbons set in a riot of stanhopeas, with their pale tiger flowers which exhale from afar a strong and acrid breath, as from the putrid mouths of convalescent invalids. I could smell it through the vents in the window. Eventually I heard bolts drawn back and a latch lifted. Before the door was opened, I gave it a shove, knocking the stationer to the floor. Looking down at his puffy piggy face, I felt both rage and nausea rising within me. But I left him there and, without a word, barged through to the back of the shop and took the staircase two steps at a time and flung open the door of the flat. I knew at a glance it was unoccupied. Popping a Sigsby pill to steady my nerves, I began a search that the most diligent bloodhound would envy. I was careful to leave the place looking untouched, but in a quarter of an hour I had examined every inch of the flat and found not a trace of my brother. The single anomaly was a black and white photograph of the balletomane Nan Kew propped on the mantelpiece. It was singed in one corner. My brother was deaf and blind to the ballet, as he was to all the performing arts.

I returned downstairs to find the stationer in the company of three ruffians. The shop door was locked and bolted again, and so thick was the pungent foliage in the window that the view of the street was completely obscured. I

could not see out, and, of course, no passers-by could see in. Two Tilly lamps had been lit to light the interior.

'Well, well, well,' I said, 'The old gang's back together. Or have you never been apart? Still ironing each others' trousers?'

I sounded more confident than I felt. It was many a long year since I had been face to face with the Weltschmerz Boys. They had terrorised my brother and me as children, they had terrorised the island, and it seemed they did so still.

'You're going to come with us to the woods,' said one of the gits, his head even puffier and piggier than the stationer's. His ears looked as if they had been stuck on the wrong way round.

I was about to laugh - or shriek - but one of the others suddenly lunged forward and thumped me in the stomach.

'We're going to take you to the badger setts,' he said, thumping me a second time. Those were the words I had hoped never to hear again.

There is one dream, or nightmare, that has recurred throughout my nights. My brother and I, sometimes as children, sometimes as adults, are being driven, relentlessly, towards the badger setts in the woods, pursued by the Weltschmerz Boys, the four of them, or sometimes many, many more, more than ever existed in the waking world. They are armed with sticks or bludgeons, and they are roaring. We trip and stumble on twigs or tendrils, the wind howls through the swaying trees, an uncanny, terrible swaying, our clothing is torn to rags, and we are pressed ever closer to the badger setts. I always awake before we reach them. For that I am thankful. Once, sitting in a canteen on the mainland, fiddling with a croissant, my brother, usually so self-possessed, so brusque, confessed to me that he had the same dream, at least once a week. Often, it had incapacitated him for days afterwards.

The stationer unbolted his door and we stepped out into the milky morning light. The duckman was sitting on the bench, smoking, while his ducks plashed in the fountain. All the lanterns had been extinguished, and the lantern extinguisher had parked his wheelchair outside the tavern, waiting for it to open. From the butcher's shop came the sound of savage cleaving, and a steady stream of blood trickled out of the doorway into the gutter where it was lapped up by dogs. Cadet Jarvis' eyes of stone continued their eternal gaze towards the woods.

I was too winded from the thumps to make a run for it. And where would I run to? None of the islanders would help me, not even Mistress Pym in the post office. Nobody even looked at me as we made our way along the street, across the green, and on to the lane. There were dozens of people out and about now, some like sleepwalkers, some hailing each other or stopping to exchange a few words, words I knew, bitterly, would be incomprehensible to me now. I was a stranger here, become invisible. They all knew better than to meet my eye, to register my presence. I was too much changed for any of the older folk to recognise in me the boy I'd been, and the plastic surgeons on the mainland were too skilled to leave telltale scars.

I did not even recognise my brother, the first time I saw him after I'd fled the island. They had changed his height and posture and gait as well as his face. It was only when the unfamiliar figure, in the kit of a goatman, a doxy on his arm, leaning on a post in the shadows of the harbour, took from his pochette the filthy ragged blanket he'd been wrapped in as a foundling, and shyly waved it at me, that I knew him. I ran then, tumbling towards him, and kissed him.

Would he be there at the badger setts, changed once again, transformed, made into something awful and strange and grotesque, with paws or flippers, and a gigantic, twisted head, and no eyes, or one eye golden and the other of ruby, gibbering a mad litany? I had never been able to forget the names of all those who, year after year, on the feast day, were taken into the woods and never seen again. Oh, I tried to forget. We all tried to forget. But we never forgot a single name. Captain Tod, Cadet Jarvis, Nan Kew... the names we grew up with, whispered, muttered, barely breathed. When we were children, they sent delicious tingles of terror down our spines. We cherished our fearful shudders, gathered by the ice cream kiosk under the moonlight, each slosh of seawater against the harbour walls prompting another name, counting them off, one by one, year by year.

We were never told what happened to them, once they'd been taken deep into the woods, where the badger setts were. Now, my brother knew. And soon, very soon, as the Weltschmerz Boys steered me away from the lane into the woods, I would know too.

My Winch

I ALWAYS WANTED a winch of my own, something I could use to haul things up and then to lower them again. Winching is splendid exercise, for one thing, and for another thing, it is often very useful to winch things off the ground. Think of a flood, or an infestation of ferocious ants with powerful biting jaws, or even both at the same time! You might think the floodwater would drown the ants, but that is not necessarily so, for they might be swimming ants. My brother Raoul tells me that his barn was almost swept away in a mighty flood, and that there was a swarm of fierce ants bobbing about in the water, biting anything that came into their path, such as my brother Raoul's goose. Raoul has a licence for only one goose, otherwise I am sure he would have more. His goose was bitten by the ants, but he was able to rescue it before the ants' venom coursed through its veins. He does not have a winch, so he had to slosh through the floodwater in the barn and pluck his goose from it with his bare hands. Well, they were not bare, for Raoul was wearing farmers' gloves. But if he had had a winch, he could have winched the goose, if not the entire barn, out of danger. That is the kind of thing you can do if you have a winch. It is not always easy to hire one at short notice, as I know to my cost. The winchless circumstances in which I learned that cost are too recent, and too upsetting, for me to talk about without bursting into tears. I have not even told Raoul. After all, as the old saying has it, 'Never sob in front of a farmer'.

The Bell And The Toads Etcetera

IN ONE CORNER of the room a huge church bell lies on its side. It is battered and dented but its clapper remains intact.

Next to the bell is a crate of toads. The toads have been counted, and re-counted, at least three times, by the toad counting person, whose coat and cap are hung on a hook on the back wall between the bell and the crate. The toad counting person himself is no longer present. We are to understand, later, that he has been called away to an urgent toad count elsewhere, one for which he is permitted to dispense with his coat and cap, hence their presence on the hook. The toads have all been injected with a narcotic drug. They are still. Some of them are toxic toads, but it is not immediately apparent which ones, and this will prove significant, later on.

Alongside the crate of toads is an occasional table on which has been placed a fiendishly embroidered tablecloth. It is a bit tatty around the edges, which overhang the table almost to the floor. The tattiness, we will learn, is the result of it having been gnawed by wild beasts. Arrayed atop the table, upon the cloth, are a whisk and a jar of unidentified paste and a Bible and a squirting utensil moulded from bright plastic. Later, we will learn that an accompanying funnel has been stolen from this tabletop arrangement, by person or persons unknown, as the legal parlance has it. Detectives will become involved.

Then there is a gap. There is a trapdoor in the gap, but it has been secured with fastening pins to prevent accidents.

Beyond the gap is a sofa, plumply upholstered. BAXTER is reclining on the sofa, wearing a cardigan and slacks and plimsolls. He is smoking a pipe, and, between puffs, is whistling *Oh Danny Boy*. He is an inexperienced whistler, and the

sound he makes is grating upon the ears. His hair is absolutely caked with brilliantine.

Behind the sofa looms a piece of classical statuary. It is a representation of a generic Greek or Roman God. Later, there will be a brouhaha over the identity of the God, which will remain unresolved, even after blood has been shed and a terrible vendetta sparked. The head of the God is out of proportion to the body, and the legs are ill-made and of a Wordsworthian lack of ornament, although they are for the most part hidden by the sofa.

Past the sofa there is another toad, this time solo and uncanted, although like the other toads it has been anaesthetised and is still. This toad may have escaped the earlier toad counting, and it may be toxic. Or the converse may be the case, on both counts, that is, the counting and the toxicity. The toad may have been counted, and it may be a non-toxic toad. BAXTER will be compelled to address these issues later, leading to the irretrievable loss of his wits.

Finally, at the opposite end from the battered and dented bell, there is an iron spigot. By dint of a faulty washer it is leaking, and drops of water are falling into a pan placed at its foot. It is quite a big pan, tin, and pristine, as if it has come directly from the manufacturer's production line. Lights are cleverly directed to shine upon it, making it gleam brightly, almost as brightly as the sun.

Enter, stage right, THE ANTI-BAXTER

These are the opening stage directions for Istvan Scrimgeour's drawing-room tragicomedy *The Bell And The Toads, Etcetera*. Its 1951 production at the Festival of Britain closed twenty minutes in to Act I. It has never been revived.

The Roads To Jaywick

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S TRILOGY *The Roads To Freedom* has fallen out of fashion somewhat - as if that mattered - yet it remains a classic. But for a book with a bit more existentialist heft, I recommend Pebblehead's bestselling paperback *The Roads To Jaywick*. That blighted, benighted, dilapidated seaside town, has of course, provided fodder for any number of potboilers, including *Jaywick - West Of Clacton* and *The Sordid Sands Of Squalor*, but Pebblehead's is a fundamentally serious work, and there is a lot about cows in it, which is always a good thing.

In an interview with *The Literary Dunderpate*, the author explained the genesis of his novel. 'One morning as I was eating marmalade straight from the jar with a spoon,' he said, 'It occurred to me, in a flash of insight, that, if one is so minded, all roads lead eventually to Jaywick. Once you approach the shabby resort itself there is but the one road, pitted and unlovely and dismal, but to reach that road one must travel along many other roads, depending on where you start from. You might be in Gore Pit or Fingringhoe or Vange, or even in Messing or Fobbing or Dengie: it doesn't much matter, for there will be a road wherever you are that will lead you inexorably to the windswept collapsing hovels of Jaywick. Lord knows, even from Mambeg and Clynder, if you have Jaywick in your soul you will find a road to take you there.'

That last phrase is telling. Pebblehead originally planned to call his titanic masterpiece *A Jaywick Of The Soul*, but decided against it. 'It is true enough,' he explained, 'that there is a sort of psychoJaywick that lurks within the mind of every man and woman on the planet, but I wanted to insist upon the real, physical Jaywick, that place where the sickened traveller can come to a halt and go for a pint in the Never Say Die and get their head kicked in by feral Jaywick youths.' Pebblehead goes on to describe the transfixing sense of Weltschmerz

he felt when peering over the sea wall and seeing, on the gruesome beach, a big sign warning him of 'Danger - Keep Off'.

As a bestselling paperbackist, Pebblehead has sometimes been criticised for being shackled to realism, and in the process of writing *The Roads To Jaywick* he did indeed test out his thesis by travelling by road to those glum coastal shacks from a variety of starting points. He proved that roads from Threekingham and Scratby and Snodland, from Coffinswell and Mugdock and Crundale, from Hoo and Swillington and Catbrain and Widdop and Slack and Splat, from each of these, in a cart pulled by inelegant horses, he could, eventually, reach Jaywick. And that, he suggests, is what makes us human, arguing his case with a vivid account - taking up more than two-thirds of the book - of the famous incident known in Jaywick lore as The Day The Cows Came Visiting. The cows, of course, came not by road but, being cows, across fields, across flat hopeless fields on a misty morning. It is a haunting tale, and one to which Pebblehead's gorgeous prose does justice.

I believe it is a great scandal that *The Roads To Jaywick* is not a set text to be read by tinies in all the community education hubs in the land. It is all very well filling their heads with the likes of Sartre and De Beauvoir and Norman Spinrad, but those who devise the curriculum will reap a whirlwind. Better by far, surely, to envision a nation in which our urchins sit enraptured in their study pods, lapping up the timeless words of Pebblehead? Pebblehead who, for the sake of literature, lay drunkenly sprawled in the gutter outside the Never Say Die in a wretched seaside hellhole in the spooky mist, at risk of being trampled by roaming cows whose roaming brought them, as if by some uncanny cow-controlling propulsive force, across the fields to Jaywick, west of Clacton.

Other Glubbs

MAUD GLUBB, THE aviatrix and author of *The Book Of Gnats*, is just one among a number of Glubbs of note. This ought not surprise us. After all, as H P Lovecraft wrote in *The Thing On The Doorstep*, *It began with a telephone call just before midnight. I was the only one up, and sleepily took down the receiver in the library. No one seemed to be on the wire, and I was about to hang up and go to bed when my ear caught a very faint suspicion of sound at the other end. Was someone trying under great difficulties to talk? As I listened I thought I heard a sort of half-liquid bubbling noise 'glub...glub...glub...' which had an odd suggestion of inarticulate, unintelligible word and syllable divisions. I called 'Who is it?' But the only answer was 'glub...glub...glub-glub.'* (The one-B Glub is a common American variant of the more standard two-B Glubb.) It can be argued that Lovecraft's 'glub' is a repetition of a single Glubb, much as we accept that Edgar Allan Poe was referring to only one person when he shouted the name 'Reynolds!' repeatedly as he lay dying in the Washington College Hospital in Baltimore. Yet Lovecraft clearly indicates 'unintelligible word and syllable divisions', which sensible people who have their wits about them will take as hard evidence of multiple Glubbs.

One such other Glubb, if we use that term to distinguish our subjects from the aviatrix, was Old Mother Glubb. This fine upstanding dowager was not the mother of Maud Glubb, by the way. In fact as far as we can ascertain, Old Mother Glubb had no children. She was dubbed 'Old Mother' because she was very aged, at the time we learn of her existence, and because she bred moths. It is easy to see how people assumed that 'Mother', to rhyme with 'Hiawatha', should be pronounced to rhyme instead with 'brother'. From such tiny presumptions can titanic historical errors occur. Several bright and

promising genealogists saw their careers ruined, their health destroyed, and their lives wasted as they tried and failed to track down Old Mother Glubb's non-existent progeny. Had they known about her revolutionary moth-breeding programme, and the attention it gained from moth experts on two or three continents, things may have been very different indeed. Or perhaps not. Perhaps each of these genealogists had a fatal flaw which sent them chasing phantoms, and had they not driven themselves mad with Old Mother Glubb, they would have alighted upon some other hopeless pursuit. There are many, in the groves of academe.

There is, for example, the case of another Glubb, Binnie Glubb, the man who became Professor of Futile Studies at a large important university. Sometimes called the senile grandparent of postmodernism, Binnie Glubb spent years and years writing incomprehensible twaddle, in unreadable prose, about - well, about god knows what. If we knew what he was writing about it would suggest that occasionally he was both comprehensible and readable, and he was neither, ever. And yet his screeds were typeset and bound and published and sold and stuck upon shelves in libraries across the land, and he had his photograph taken, smoking a pipe, shoulder to shoulder with a French intellectual or a Maoist psychopath, and airheads wrote fawning profiles of him for the Sunday supplements.

No such plaudits for the next Glubb in our set, the one-legged bobsleigh competitor Digby Glubb. He was a sports-mad youth who was nonetheless completely useless at everything he tried. Failing at pétanque, he took up pingpong. Failing at pingpong, he tried vinkensport. Savaged by finches, he turned to curling, and failed again, failed better, as Beckett might say. All this time he had two legs. On his thirtieth birthday, still utterly useless in all sporting events, he toppled into a ditch full of fierce biting ants, which ate most of one of his legs before he was rescued by an ant-killing patrol. Recovering in a superbly sterile clinic, Digby Glubb researched sports he could take part in while sitting down, and decided to devote his life to bobsleigh, in spite of the fact that he did not quite understand the point of it. For two decades he continually crashed any bobsleigh he sat in, whether solo or as part of a team. What drove him on, from one calamity to another? Was it perhaps revenge against the fierce biting ants which had hobbled him? There are those who can

be spurred on by often harmful derangements, be they vengeance or jealousy or preening vanity.

Consider the *cravattiste* Shelvington Glubb. Convinced that, when he wore one of his cravats, he might be mistaken for a young Apollo, this Glubb pranced about the boulevards of Pointy Town watching Pointy Towners gasp and swoon at his beauty. Some of them were blinded, he was so like the sun.

There, you have some Glubbs to be going on with.

Bubbles Surge From Froth

BUBBLES SURGE FROM froth. Hot pan, hot pan. Do the bubbles carry infection, disease, bad vapour, the sickness unto death? We shall find out. We coax some bubbles into a bubble-container box, and cart it to the bench. We have apparatus on the bench, with which we can apply all sorts of tests to the bubbles. Testing is overseen by our captain. He deters the sort of larking about to which we are tempted when we get to test things with the apparatus on the bench. Our captain has a Bjorn Borgish air. He is glacial in the midst of pandaemonium.

When we complete the bubble tests it is clear that infection is present. And not just present, virulent. Thank heaven for our suits and serums! Our captain raises one Roger Moore eyebrow, a signal, we know, to cool the pan and diminish the bubbling. This is duly done, but done ineptly, and there is an escape of gas. The gas is more toxic than the bubbles. Hooters are activated.

We gather in the field as per our drill. There are cows in the field, munching vegetation. We have already tested the vegetation and passed it with bright flags, as we do, and so we know the cows are safe. Our captain counts us. He counts the cows, too, for no apparent reason. It is the same number of cows as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Surely our captain knows that?

Perhaps he does not, anymore. This may be the first sign. Diligent in his duty, our captain was the last one out. We were all gathered in the field, in our designated rectangular patch, while he was still inside. He must have breathed in some of the gas. And those cufflinks he sports. So elegant, so chic, yet so sharp at the edges! Could a chance swipe of cufflink have rent a rip in the bubble box? Might our captain have swallowed an escaped bubble, or even the whole sample?

He has counted us, and he has counted the cows, and now he is counting the clouds. Poor captain! The gas and the bubbles are ravaging his cranial innards. Synapses are snapping in all the wrong ways, or snapping at the wrong time, or not snapping at all. He flaps his arms as he carries on his imbecilic counting. And now we can see bubbles coming out of his ears!

We round upon the nitwit who muffed the pan-cooling. We berate him for the catastrophe he has caused. He is infuriatingly insouciant, leaning against a cow and lighting a cigarette. It is like berating Noel Coward. But what is that poking out of his breast pocket? It looks very much like a green cardboard triangle as carried by the Communists in at least one Mickey Spillane novel. Could it be there is a traitor in our midst?

Our captain is now counting the birds in the sky. Somehow he has managed to get them to keep still for him, in mid-flight or -swoop or -dive, as he counts. At least his derangement has not atrophied his captaincy of the elements! We can take advantage of the stillness to subjugate the Bolshevik. And we do.

Later, in the canteen, our captain congratulates us on our quick wits. He still has bubbles pouring out of his ears, but he has stopped counting things for the time being and seems more like his usual self. He has suggested we lay him out on the bench and test him with the apparatus, so we will do that after teatime.

The most curious thing about the whole episode is that the number of cows in the field seems to be getting progressively fewer. I have counted them over and over again, in fact I am still counting them, but each time I count, there is one less cow to be counted. And yet the birds are once again in motion in the sky above, the Commie is bound and chained and tethered, and the bubbles are pouring out of my ears, too, just as they are from our captain's, and I am flapping my arms, huge energetic flapping movements, flap, flap, flap.

New Beerpint Book

IT'S ALWAYS AN exciting moment when Dennis Beerpint publishes a new opus. The poet of the beatnik and the twee has a new book out next week, and what a very fat book it is! Those of you expecting a magisterial collection of epic Beerpintian versifying are likely to be disappointed, however. There is but a single poem nestled within its six hundred pages, and it is a very short poem. One might even call it gnomic. The rest of the book is given over to what Beerpint's long-suffering publishers dub 'hefty apparatus'. This sounds like something you might find in a well-appointed gymnasium, but is in fact a collection of what we literary types prefer to call 'weird hot-headed ravings from Dennis Beerpint'.

There is an 'introductory essay', of over two hundred pages, which is neither introductory of anything nor, really, an essay as such. If one were to be kind, one might say it was an example of surrealist 'automatic writing'. If one were to be unkind, but honest, one would say it resembles the disjointed drivellings of an untethered brain gone to seed. This farrago of nonsense is accompanied by so many footnotes that, taken together, they are longer than the 'essay' itself. If we are to believe the preface (forty-nine pages in total), the footnotes were penned not by the poet, but by his all-too-real Doppelgänger, a sort of shadow Beerpint who dogs his every step, like the familiar in the story by J Sheridan Le Fanu.

Now listen. I have been following Dennis Beerpint's career from its foetal stages, and this is the first I have heard tell of a Doppelgänger. I am assuming the poet is not referring to one of those fanatical acolytes who express their devotion by dressing like him, adopting the same hairstyles, eating and drinking an identical diet, and languishing upon municipal park benches clutching one

of his flimsy poetry pamphlets to their bosoms, pretending to be morbidly ill. It pains me to say it, but I used to be one of their number. My bench was situated near the duckpond in the park, and I feigned tuberculosis. The point is that we were akin to the bodyguards employed by the film director George Lucas, who all look alarmingly like him, but we never pretended to *be* him, and we would certainly never have threatened Beerpint's immortal, and poetic, soul. Yet these are the charges laid at the Doppelgänger's door in the preface, and, indeed, by its own admission, in those interminable and frankly ill-written footnotes.

I have actually read the footnotes, in my review copy, with the aid of a magnifying glass. They are printed in very, very tiny type, in a font called Uber-Ornate Near-Illegible High German Blunkett Gothic. I have needed daily eye-drops ever since, and spend much of my time lying down in a darkened room. All I am willing to say is that the footnotes, far from casting any light on the imbecilic ravings of Beerpint's essay, are themselves bereft of any sense whatsoever. It is like reading the prose of the more impenetrable Gallic postmodernists while being repeatedly beaten about the ears with a farmer's shovel - an experience, by the way, I have undergone on more than one occasion, after accepting an offer to write a critique of Lacan or Derrida or one of those old frauds for the weekly magazine *Farmers With Shovels Consider The Left Bank Intellectual Ferment*. Despite my suffering, I recommend this publication, a sort of *Reader's Digest* for the shovelling farmers community, and one which contains in each issue a goodly number of illustrations by the noted hyperrealist linocutter Rex Hyper.

But we are getting away from Beerpint, which will never do. In addition to the preface and the introductory essay with its voluminous footnotes, there is a lengthy section entitled 'Mental Pudding'. I have read this half a dozen times and still have no idea what it is meant to be about, or what connection it has to the poem. Then there is a bibliography, supposedly of books consulted by the poet during the writing of his new work. This actually has some interest, giving us a valuable insight into Beerpint's preoccupations and influences. He has read widely, if haphazardly, in almost as many languages as Anthony Burgess could babble in. No doubt the preposterous Mancunian polymath will be rolling in his grave that not a single one of his works appears in this bibliography. But Ayn Rand is there (*Why I Like Stamp Collecting*), and Pebblehead, and Robert Ludlum, and Dick Van Dyke (*Faith, Hope and Hilarity*:

A Child's Eye View of Religion). Beerpint seems also to know his onions when it comes to books about onions, birdseed, the Boxer Rising, lobsters, Futurist boy scouts, dirigibles and hot air balloons, fish entrails, Ruby and Oswald, the Scharnhorst, inexplicable flapping noises, the life and death of Karen Carpenter, bobsleigh, flumes, pigeons, gutta percha, tectonic plates, anteaters, William Betty 'the Young Roscius', tarpaulin, the Symmesian Hollow Earth Theory, gloves, infections of the pituitary gland, Bird's custard (but, oddly, no other custard), greenfly, hobnails, spiders, vinegar, Chumpot patent soap, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, various paps and slops and gruels, gaslight, heists, H L Mencken, fruit, pips, sledgehammer wit, the Cottingley Fairies, other fairies, non-fairy life-forms, Geoff Hurst, Belshazzar's Feast, oil rigs, Shoeburyness, herons, space travel, chrestomathies, car jacking, toilet tissue, bales of hay, bales of straw, bales, bales, Baxter's Invigorating Fluid, and other bales.

It is important to acknowledge the breadth of knowledge Beerpint is bringing to the table, as it were, when one reads the poem. In the past, he has been accused - not least by me - of treating his readers with contempt and knocking out verses willy nilly, without care or thought, or even a proper pencil. I was particularly harsh in my review of his collection *The Assassination Of Andrew Motion*, which I described as 'vindictive, contemptuous, and written without care or thought or even a proper pencil'. Beerpint has not spoken to me since, but I retain my superbly aloof critical detachment, and can therefore, with a foppish wave of my hand, announce, with due objectivity, that in spite of the ridiculous 'apparatus' with which this new book is padded out, the poem itself is a masterpiece. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it guarantees his place in the pantheon, for all time. I am so damned impressed with it that I am going to thumb my nose at the copyright laws and publish the poem here. That will save you from having to buy the book, and if as a result Beerpint or his publishers get upset then I am perfectly willing to meet them in a field, at dawn, with pistols.

So here it is then, the new poem from Dennis Beerpint, in its entirety:

Where oh where

Is the troglodyte Voltaire?

Groovy

DEAR FRANK, WRITES Tim Thurn, It has long been apparent to me that Hooting Yard is by far the grooviest website on the planet. But how do I actually get down with its groove? Any tips would be most welcome.

Tim is not the only person to ask this, or a similar, question. Boffins in a groovelab high in the Swiss mountains have spent years - or is it mere days? - trying to isolate the Hooting Yard Groove, for the betterment of humanity, while Mrs Gubbins has been indefatigable in her attempts to express the essence of the groove in the form of knitted tea-cosies. Every single time she picks up her needles she fails, fails better, but she goes on, she must go on, she can't go on, she goes on. We will soon have to build a new depot for all those groovy tea-cosies, unless we can find a charitable foundation prepared to accept them.

But are Tim Thurn and Mrs Gubbins and those Swiss boffins asking the wrong questions? Is there, in fact, a groove to be found? For the true horror may be that the grooviness is entirely superficial, and there is nothing behind it.

Some would have it that such absence of groove is unthinkable. The boffins, for example, having invested a huge amount of Swiss currency in retorts and alembics and bunsen burners and rubber tubing and bakelite knick-knacks and Coddington lenses, not to speak of elbow grease and sweat and pipe tobacco, would be unmoored, cast adrift upon a sea of cognitive anguish, were they to entertain the idea of there not being a groove. I am less fretful on behalf of Tim and Mrs Gubbins, for I know that both of them have other resources, the one a button fetish and the other a predilection for criminal mayhem. If they could but accept they will never get with the putative groove, Tim would be happy

as a pig in muck with his buttons, and Mrs Gubbins could round up the old gang and embark upon a series of armed robberies.

Conversely, of course, there *is* a Hooting Yard Groove, a groove so groovy it outgrooves every other groove ever dreamed up by the grooviest of groovers. Surely I would know about it?, you ask. Well, not necessarily. Take as an example Dennis Beerpint. Ever since the incorrigibly twee versifier transformed himself into a beatnik, he has been, unarguably, the grooviest poet who ever lived. I say 'unarguably' because there is not a soul who doubts this, not even Michael Horovitz. And yet Beerpint prances about the streets and coffee bars and milk bars and jazz clubs and happenings of his adopted world blithely unaware of his own irrefrangible grooviness. It is true that he makes much of his goatee beard, polo neck sweater, and hornrims, and that his trousers of choice are of the drainpipe variety, yet he remains free of affectation, almost childishly innocent, and reassuringly inept. But if anybody is down with the groove, daddy-o, it is Dennis Beerpint.

If it is the case that a Hooting Yard Groove truly exists, it is of a different order of grooviness to the Beerpint Groove. The two do not quite cancel each other out, but they cannot happily coexist in the same grooveosphere. Mrs Gubbins demonstrated this when she tried to knit a dual-groove tea-cosy and became so thoroughly entangled in stray skeins of wool that she had to be carted off to a clinic.

And on that cautionary note, I think I will leave it. Tim Thurn may remain in the dark about the groove he seeks, but that is the way with a groove. Once you stop looking, you might just find it. Or, if not, you can go and sprawl in a ditch and stare at the sky. It is immense, and blue, and spattered with clouds.

Chuckling Out Time At The Cow And Pins

THE COW & PINS was a singularly squalid tavern, much frequented by human scum. Once, long ago, it had been a coaching inn, but the construction of an efficient canal system destroyed the coach trade, and bargees passing by aboard their barges upon the canal were a salubrious lot who drank tea from flasks and read improving literature. The Cow & Pins stood crumbling and forlorn on the lane parallel to the towpath of the canal, and soon only the crumbling and forlorn, the indigent and misbegotten, the violent and the psychopathic ever set foot upon its rotten sawdust-covered floor.

One psychopath who became a tavern regular, the ferocious Babinsky, took over as the landlord after chopping up the existing incumbent with an axe and feeding him to the pigs. The pigs, who lived happily in a pig sty a little way down the lane from the tavern, did not of course know their swill that day contained the ground-up remains of their pal from the Cow & Pins, who used to commune with them, in a hearty man-to-pig way, whenever he got the chance. With Babinsky at the helm, things changed. Babinsky hated pigs, and after that first feeding, he shunned the sty, some said in fear that the spectre of the man he had chopped up and then ground up and then stirred in with the pigswill lay in wait for him there, to wreak revenge from the realm of death. It is more likely, however, that Babinsky was too busy being mad and bad and dangerous in the tavern where he now held sway.

He tore down from the walls the showbiz memorabilia that had most recently adorned them. Gone were the photographs of the previous landlord arm in arm with Rolf Harris and Val Doonican and Edith Sitwell. Gone were the

autographed portraits of Ken Hom and Tammy Wynette. Gone were the posters advertising pantos with Keith Chegwin as Buttons and George Galloway as Pol Pot. In their place, Babinsky pinned up his weird, hand-written screeds, pages and pages ripped from the exercise books which he filled with gibberish. Out went the barrels of ale and the bottles of champagne and liqueurs and rare expensive brandies, out went the soft drinks and the mineral waters, and in their place was installed a single vast trough, into which was poured, and out of which was ladled into dented tin beakers, disgusting bilge made of god knows what. Its taste was foul, but it was cheap, and just a beakerful or two sufficed to ravage the drinker's brain to zombiedom. Babinsky himself allowed no other fluid into his body, which probably accounted for what one might charitably call his eccentricities.

Under his predecessor, there had been a jukebox in the Cow & Pins, well-stocked with the gems of prog rock. Babinsky smashed it up with his axe and sharpened the edges of the discs inside so he could use them as missiles, slicing through the air to hit and sever a jugular or other important vein through which the blood relentlessly pumps. Then he dug a deep, deep pit and fed wires down it, wires at the end of which were microphones that picked up the constant agonised howling and screaming of sinners being tormented for eternity in the pits of Hell, amplified and blaring at ear-splitting volume from speakers placed all around the tavern. It was a rough and raucous place, perilous for the weedy toper who might once have sat in the snug watching coaches rattle by. The snug itself had been demolished by Babinsky and the space it had occupied was now a charnel-ground stacked with the bleached bones of those he slew, when he was in the mood for slaying, which was most days. Sometimes the villain would pole-vault across the canal, like Spring-Heeled Jack, for the sole purpose of setting upon a poor innocent orphan or cripple plucking flowers for a nosegay from the canalside shrub beds. Babinsky carried out his killings with impunity, for a type of amnesia stalked the land, and even the police officers blundered about in a hypnagogic daze.

The one law that was rigorously enforced in this land of efficient canals was that which regulated the licensing hours of taverns. Even Babinsky, yes, Babinsky himself, was terrified of the Tavern Time Trio, three brutes who patrolled on horseback to ensure that every tavern was locked and bolted and dark and silent as the clocks struck the witching hour. Their horses were as

brutish as the trio themselves, gigantic fierce beasts with repulsive fetlocks and manes matted with muck, whose merest whinny was a thousand times more hideous than the infernal muzak of the Cow & Pins. Freeman, Hardy, and Willis, the horses were called, but nobody knew the names of their riders, for nobody ever dared to ask, just as no taverner ever dared to let his tavern stay open for one second past closing time. Nobody could even remember when the law had been broken, so nobody knew what punishment would be meted out by the Tavern Time Trio. The sheer size of the horses, and their rank stink, and the thunder of their hooves as they galloped from tavern to tavern, and the brutishness of the trio themselves, in their gold lamè tuxedos and snow white spats, and the piercing whistles they blew as they rode, and the official documents poking out of their pockets, these things were enough to cow each and every tavern keeper, Babinsky included.

So it was that in spite of the clamour and uproar of the Cow & Pins, easily the most exciting part of the day was chucking-out time. Human scum, their brains and bodies jangled by whatever it was they'd been gulping down from Babinsky's trough, would be startled by the sudden cessation of the amplified agonies of the netherworld, their ears assailed instead by Babinsky's hooter. Those of you familiar with this contraption will know that it was the most powerful hooter that ever existed on earth, or on any other planet in any other universe, a hooter par excellence, the ne plus ultra of hooters, a hooter the like of which we shall never hear again, for which, in truth, we should be thankful. Babinsky parped his hooter just once, to signal that the Cow & Pins was closing for the night, and once was all that was needed. To imagine hearing that hooter hoot twice in succession is more than the mind can bear, whether the mind is sane and sober or blasted to fuddlement by dented tin beakerfuls of disgusting bilge. Not that the sane or the sober would be found among the human wreckage who, hearing the hooter, drained the last drops of bilge from their beakers and tossed the beakers into the trough. Then out of the tavern they tumbled, a jumble of chaos, many of them toppling into the canal, others falling and lying flat on their backs where they fell, in the mud, where they would remain insensible until the Cow & Pins opened its doors the next morning.

And inside the tavern, Babinsky, who never slept, filled with bilge all the beakers that had been tossed into the trough and lined them up on the counter.

He put on his superloud Bang & Bangbangbang quadrophonic headphones and switched his subterranean microphones back on. As he listened to the shrieks of the sinful, he worked his way through the line of beakers one after another, and when he was done he wrote one of his weird screeds and pinned it to the wall, and then he lumbered out into the dead of night in search of something to slaughter.

The Cow & Pins was, of course, Dobson's preferred tavern, but by the time the out of print pamphleteer came to patronise it Babinsky was long dead, and it was once again the kind of place where a weedy toper could sit in the snug and scribble a pamphlet. Not that Dobson was weedy, exactly. He occasionally got into fights, and acquitted himself with aplomb. As for Babinsky's hooter, when the new landlord took over the tavern he had it dismantled by specialists from a hooter dismantling squadron. To be on the safe side, they buried the parts separately, in deep lead-lined wells, unmarked, and scattered across six continents. Foolishly, though, the captain of the squadron made a map pinpointing the locations, to keep as a souvenir, and last week it was reported in *The Daily Hooter* that the map had been stolen. Yes, friends, it is a horrible possibility that even now, somewhere out there, a madcap genius is hard at work putting Babinsky's hooter back in one piece! You may well say 'Eek!' I know I did.

From The Diary Of Heliogabalus

MONDAY. I CELEBRATED the rite of the taurobolium, tossing my head to and fro among the castrated devotees of the Great Mother Goddess. I infibulated myself, and did all that the eunuch-priests are wont to do. Also decided to celebrate the rite of Salambo, with all the wailing and frenzy of the Syrian cult.

Tuesday. I set aside a room in the palace and there committed my indecencies, always standing nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do, and shaking the curtain which hung from gold rings, while in a soft and melting voice I solicited the passers-by.

Wednesday. I made a public bath in the imperial palace and at the same time threw open the bath of Plautinus to the populace, that by this means I might get a supply of men with unusually large organs. I also took care to have the whole city and the wharves searched for onobeli, as those are called who seemed particularly lusty.

Thursday. Had a banquet. I used silver urns and casseroles, and vessels of chased silver, one hundred pounds in weight, some of them decorated with the lewdest designs. I concocted wine seasoned with mastich and with pennyroyal and I had rose-wine made more fragrant by adding pulverized pine-cone. I made force-meat of fish, and of oysters of various kinds or similar shell-fish, and of lobsters, crayfish and squills. I strewed roses and all manner of flowers, such as lilies, violets, hyacinths, and narcissus, over my banqueting-rooms, couches and porticoes, and then strolled about in them. I refused to swim in a pool that was not perfumed with saffron or some other well-known essence. And I could not rest easily on cushions that were not stuffed with rabbit-fur or feathers from under the wings of partridges, and I changed the pillows frequently. In imitation of Apicius I ate camels-heels and also cocks-combs

taken from the living birds, and the tongues of peacocks and nightingales, because I was told that one who ate them was immune from the plague. I served to the palace-attendants huge platters heaped up with the viscera of mullets, and flamingo-brains, partridge-eggs, thrush-brains, and the heads of parrots, pheasants, and peacocks. And the beards of the mullets that I ordered to be served were so large that they were brought on, in place of cress or parsley or pickled beans or fenugreek, in well-filled bowls and disk-shaped platters - a particularly amazing performance, I thought.

Friday. I finished building the reversible ceiling-panels. Once I have packed sufficient violets and rose-petals into the space above, I will invite my rivals and parasites to another banquet, and then have a factotum pull a lever to release the panels, and thus will I smother to death my guests under the cascade of violets and rose-petals.

Saturday. I drove a chariot drawn by four elephants on the Vatican Hill, destroying the tombs which obstructed the way, and I harnessed four camels to a chariot at a private spectacle in the Circus. Then I collected serpents with the aid of priests of the Marsic nation and suddenly let them loose before dawn, when the populace assembled for the more frequented games, and many people were injured by their fangs.

Sunday. I shut up a vast number of flies in a jar and called them tamed bees.

Monday. I am confident my name will be branded in history above all others, because of my unspeakably disgusting life.

Hoistings

I HAVE BEEN thinking a lot recently about hoistings. Well, when I say recently, I mean this afternoon, and when I say hoistings I mean more particularly Dobson's hoisting and Blodgett's hoistings.

The pamphleteer, as is well known, was once hoist by his own petard, an incident which is the subject of an illuminating essay by Aloysius Nestingbird. Blodgett, on the other hand, was repeatedly hoist by a variety of petards, none of which he could call his own. This says much, I think, about the difference between Dobson and Blodgett, not just in terms of hoistings and petards but in all sorts of other ways.

If only I could be as illuminating as Nestingbird! But alas, you will have to be content with something which, if it can be said to illumine at all, is the prose equivalent of a sputtering Toc H lamp hanging on a hook in an immensity of darkness, compared to the incandescence which Nestingbird sheds whenever he puts pen to paper.

Indeed, I am so cowed by the sheer damned splendour of Nestingbird's essay that I have considered abandoning this puny attempt to address those hoistings myself. And abandon it I would, as decisively as a decisive sea captain maroons a mutinous mutineer on an arid sea-girt rock girt by the sea and wholly arid, were it not that Nestingbird concerns himself solely with Dobson's hoisting by his own petard, and has not a word to say about Blodgett. So it may be that, in spite of the weediness of my own scribbles, they can yet fill a gap in the record.

Or, to be more precise, gaps, for as I have said, in Blodgett's case we are dealing with repeated and innumerable hoistings. The puzzle, of course, is that each and every one of these hoistings was upon someone, or something,

else's petard, and the question that cries to high heaven for an answer is: how did Blodgett manage to get himself into so many scrapes, and each scrape so similar?

One would have thought that, after being hoist upon the petard of an undertaker's mute at an impressionable age, he might have learned something. At the very least, he might have learned to avoid undertakers' mutes with petards. But it was not so. Barely a fortnight after that first hoisting, we find the young Blodgett once again hanging around in the vicinity of a funeral parlour, idly tugging at his incipient goatee, and dressed flamboyantly in cerise and dandelion yellow. He is lurking, inasmuch as one can lurk in cerise and dandelion yellow, in a fetid alleyway at the back of the funeral parlour, a parlour owned by an old family firm of funeral directors founded by Ferenc Faffleoff in the eighteen-fifties. And it was upon the petard of a Faffleoffian mute that Blodgett was hoist at two o' clock on that September afternoon, an afternoon of squalls and drizzle and abnormal bird phenomena. Not until three-fifteen did he manage to clamber from the petard and descend to the pavement, a picture of befuddlement and the laughing-stock of a gang of Faffleoff employees, mute and otherwise, who had gathered to witness his hoisting.

Over the next several years, Blodgett was to be hoist on the petards of Dutchmen, tugboat captains, spinettists, mezzotintists, old cloth of gold dustup panpot men, squirrel stranglers, shove ha'penny maestros, indentured and goitred peasants, shifty knaves, chunky pockers, Marina Warner readers, fudgers, beanpoles, harum scarum tidewater mappers, dishcloth makers, farmyard freaks and sundry other petardists. Time and again, the hapless Blodgett made the same mistakes, fell into the same traps, blundered into the same emblunderments. The only person who seemed to see anything odd about this was Blodgett's mother, a ghostly white speck of a woman, who by turns remonstrated with him, sobbed, laughed, hid away from him in crannies, prodded his head with surgical implements, sent him into the mountains, and tried to marry him off to a foreign contessa. Blodgett himself just continued with his hoistings, on an almost daily basis.

Things levelled off eventually, with no more than one or two hoistings a year, particularly after his mother's death. Blodgett did not attend her funeral, which was organised by the Faffleoffs, with many ribbons and a horse, but without an undertaker's mute. Tim, the Mute of the Day, was due to lead the

procession through the hopeless rain-soaked streets of Blodgett's mother's horrible home town, but an hour before the coffin was shoved on to the funeral cart he was hoist, not by his own petard, but by Blodgett's. As far as we know, this is the only evidence we have that Blodgett had a petard of his own, and it remains an inexplicable mystery why he was never hoist upon it himself. Such are the perplexities of the human comedy.

The Lost Lozenge

I FELT PANGS when I lost my lozenge. I was in a bricked-up brutalist bricky building when I noticed it was missing. I'd mislaid it before, once on a Thursday and once outside a tent on a campsite of many gusts. It's a yellow lozenge, a small cake or tablet of medicine and sugar meant to be held in the mouth and dissolved, but I have never put it in my mouth. I carry it in the pocket of my trousers, whichever pair of trousers I am wearing, and it is from my pocket it must have fallen, earlier, without my noticing. On the Thursday I found my lozenge within minutes, it had dropped on to the floor, and the floor was covered in bright red linoleum, so the yellow of my lozenge was easily visible. Outside the tent I was perplexed, but a passing widow woman approached me holding my lozenge in her black-gloved hand and said she had seen it tumble on to the grass when I was doing calisthenics a few minutes before. Usually when I do my jumping about and somersaulting and so on I wedge my lozenge deep into my pocket and push a scrunched-up rag or dry dishcloth in on top of it, but at the campsite I neglected to do so, for I was distracted by the millions of starlings swooping in the sky. In the bricky building, however, there was no red linoleum and nor was there a helpful widow woman. Also, it was bricked-up, so there was little light for me to see by, and soon it would be dusk and the bricky building would be darker still. I did not know if I had lost my lozenge here or elsewhere. No wonder I felt pangs.

The pangs began in the pit of my stomach, as pangs often do, and slowly moved upwards until I felt a constriction in my throat. Pangs like those, that interfere with one's breathing, can be lethal. To think that I might perish through pangs for something as tiny as a lost lozenge! And it was a very tiny lozenge. When manufactured, in, I supposed, a lozengery, it had been

somewhat bigger, but before it came into my possession it had been partially sucked upon and some of the outer coating had thus dissolved. The semi-sucked state of the lozenge was the reason it was so precious to me, and why I kept it in the pocket of my trousers, and felt pangs when it was lost. To be more precise, it was the identity of the sucker that was important, for this lozenge had been sucked by my all-time hero, the wrestling champion Bruno La Poubelle. He choked on it, and spat it out, and it landed at my feet, for I happened to be standing next to my hero on the balcony of a plush hotel. He was a guest, of course, whereas I was a mere employee of the hotel, a mopper of balcony tiles, with my mop and bucket. Bruno La Poubelle stopped choking as soon as he expelled the lozenge, turned around and swept back into his suite, and I picked up the lozenge and popped it into my pocket. That was years ago, and I have treasured the lozenge ever since, and kept it safe, except for the Thursday and the gusty campsite and, now, today, when for the third time I have mislaid it.

I had other La Poubelle memorabilia: a milk tooth, a discarded cochlear implant, a battery from his wrestling training machine. These were displayed in a small votive shrine I had made in my kitchenette, but the lozenge I preferred to keep on my person. Now, leaning against a wall in the bricked-up building, I mentally retraced the steps on my journey here, trying to recall where I might have been when last I was sure that the lozenge was in my pocket. There were many, many steps to remember, for I had come from afar, on foot. I knew that I had the lozenge at Sawdust Bridge, because I had to turn out my pockets at the customs post. I distinctly recalled putting it back in my pocket after the frantically-eyebrowed customs man gave me the tap with his tappy stick, clearing me to carry on across the bridge and down through the subterranean car park, past the gated Hazchem compound and up again on to the path alongside the allotments. From there I hurried past the haunted zoo and slowed my pace as I forded the river at Shallow Sludge, crossed the football pitch and the park and the airfield, then rolled down the slope towards the puddles and ponds and the hermitage. There was another customs post hereabouts, but it was deserted, watched over by a solitary mordant heron. I struggled through bindweed and brambles and then followed for a few miles the line of the Great Celestial Pneumatic Railway until I reached the engine house, where I turned off past the crushers and hooters and thumpers and clunkers and

carried on past the swan hospice and the post office and the ear clinic, where Bruno La Poubelle had discarded that cochlear implant and had a second one fitted, and the glue factory and the paper mill and the lunatic asylum and the terracotta army parade ground and the canoe maker's and the clown shop and the windmill and the newsagent and the Aztec fundamentalist temple and the trendy so-called 'suet pudding skyscraper' and the bordello and the ironworks and the futuristic plasma ray gun repair shop and the guide dog enclosure and the bell foundry and the cave full of vampire bats and the other cave and the country club and the patch of muck and the bowling alley and Rolf Harris's house and the pit of fire and the pit of doom and the buttercup fields and the sinister laboratory and I ended up here at the bricked-up brutalist bricky building and discovered that I had lost my lozenge.

When I arrived, of course, the bricky building was not fully bricked-up. I was able to make my entrance through an unlocked side door which led into the gloomy vestibule, on the walls of which hung the stuffed heads of otters and badgers and giraffes. I lay down on the floor to take a nap, and when I awoke I found that, while I slept, the remaining unbricked-up bits of the building had been bricked-up. I was so beset with pangs about my lost lozenge that it did not immediately occur to me that I was trapped. Now I have realised that is the case, I am going to have to do something about it. I am a shape-shifter, so I will shimmer ethereally for a few seconds and become like a beetle, and scuttle out of the bricky building through pipes and ducts. It will take much longer to retrace my steps in beetle-form, but it will be another fortnight before I can shape-shift again, and I will search diligently for my lozenge, and hope I am not trampled underfoot by the crowds making their way to the wrestling stadium for Bruno La Poubelle's final bout.

Twelfth Night

ON THE FIRST night, the man with the hammers came a-crashing through my door. I immediately identified him as Babinsky.

On the second night, the man with the hammers, who was not Babinsky after all, summoned men with whisks and men with tongs. I tried to reason with them.

On the third night, all of them, the man with the hammers included, went off on what they called 'night-time manoeuvres', and left me alone. I smoked my pipe and listened to the rain.

On the fourth night, Babinsky himself appeared. This time I think it really was him. He showed me some very, very convincing documentation.

On the fifth night, the kitchenette was flooded with dishwater. Luckily I had plenty of cloths and rags to mop it up.

On the sixth night, Babinsky and the man with the hammers and the men with whisks and the men with tongs sang Christmas carols. Their voices were surprisingly dulcet.

On the seventh night there was a pox upon my house.

On the eighth night I tossed and turned and could not sleep. Downstairs, Babinsky & co were plotting an enormity.

On the ninth night they all went off to commit the enormity. I hid in a cubby so they would not take me with them. It was a tiny cubby and I became cramped.

On the tenth night, there was an important hockey match on television. I have never understood the rules of hockey, so I could not understand what Babinsky and the man with the hammers were so het up about.

On the eleventh night, I suddenly realised that the men with whisks and the men with tongs had never returned after committing the enormity. It also occurred to me that I had not read a word about the enormity in the *Daily Shovel*.

On twelfth night I took stock, and I peeled potatoes. I peeled potatoes and I peeled potatoes. By the light of the silvery moon I peeled potatoes, and then I peeled potatoes.

Buttonmaker's Doldrums

HEPCAT BUTTONMAKERS GRAVELRENCHÉ are, I am sorry to say, in the doldrums. For decades, as fashions came and went, Gravelrenché buttons remained impossibly with-it and groovy, favoured by everyone from beatniks to dowager duchesses. Wander as one might from establishment drawing rooms to counterculture flophouses, the sharp-eyed buttonist would spot a Gravelrenché everywhere, on cardigans and greatcoats and weskits and spats. For this reason alone, banks and hedge funds and venture capitalists were willing to advance untold sums of cash to the company, without asking any questions or, indeed, specifying a date upon which they wanted their money back.

Well, the crunch de la credit has put paid to that jolly state of affairs, and over the past six months Gravelrenché has been unable to secure any funding at all, just at the point where button sales have dried up. In the last quarter, the company sold just three buttons, to a demented oligarch, and there is not a single order on the books. Grim-looking envoys from the banks have been seen loitering in the vicinity of the Gravelrenché buttonarium, armed no doubt with terrifying legal papers. The buttonmaking executives, however, are nowhere to be found. But those seeking them are asking the wrong question. Instead of wondering 'Where on earth are they?', they should be asking 'Who the hell are they anyway?'

Because the company purports to have been founded by brothers Pierre and Claude Gravelrenché, and operates in the sickly world of fashion, there is an assumption that, when located, its managers will be found to be stylish Eurosophisticates, the Jose Mourinhos of the world o' buttons. Well, 'boff!', as the French say. The presiding genius of Gravelrenché is in fact a toothless,

evil-smelling lumberbones who lurks in a battered seaside boardinghouse and keeps all that cash he has eked over the years under his mattress. It is an enormous mattress. His name is neither Pierre nor Claude, nor even Gravelrenche, but something unpronounceable, the sort of chewy polysyllabic name that demands guttural improbabilities and an excess of phlegm if one wishes to speak it aloud properly. In the unlikely event that this man ever found himself in the boardroom of a bank, he would be turfed out on his grubby ear, mistaken for a vagrant.

What path did so unprepossessing a figure take to become the world's fabbest buttonmaker? Before answering that question, I want to digress for a moment to take a look at that word 'unprepossessing'. What's that all about? 'Possessing' means having, or owning. 'Prepossessing' would mean already having or owning, being in possession before the fact. The 'un-' prefix suggests that, far from already owning or having, one has not nor owns not. It is all a bit of a muddle as far as I am concerned, but that does not stop me from deploying the word as and when I want to, without a care in the world. If I wish to be verbose, then verbose I shall be, and a pox upon your strictures!

As for the path of the buttonmaker, that is a fairly straightforward matter. In spite of the unprepossessing figure he presented, and his unpronounceable name, and the stainage upon his clothing, and the vermin creeping in his bouffant, and his curd-like pallor, and his toothlessness, and his frayed elbow patches, and his stink, and his lasciviousness, and his grubby ears, and his filthy neck, and his gullet like a pelican's, and his squalid patrimony, and his lack of scruples, and his horrible head, and his one eye bigger than the other, and his unfamiliarity with soap, he had an almost eldritch talent for button design. He learned as much early, when he bumped into King Zog I, Skanderbeg III of the Albanians in the street, and the monarch was so smitten with the homemade buttons on the buttonmaker's homemade cardigan that he emptied his pockets of Albanian and other currencies' banknotes and coins, pressed them into the buttonmaker's mucky paws, and begged to be given the buttons in exchange. That very same evening, the King sported the buttons upon his fantastic kingly garb at a palace reception for wealthy Eurogits, and the buttonmaker's future was assured. Over the ensuing decades, clients such as Ringo Starr and Pat Nixon and Christopher Plummer and Krishnan Guru-Murthy and Monica Vitti and the brothers Miliband and Kathy Kirby bought hundreds and thousands

of Gravelrenche buttons, even millions in the case of Mick Jagger, all of them under the impression that they were dealing with swish, effortlessly stylish Pierre and Claude.

Now we know those two dashing Gallic fashion titans never actually existed, and it seems the banks and hedge funds and venture capitalists may have caught on too, for ever since the crunch came, very little cash has been shoved under that enormous mattress in that fetid boardinghouse room on that windswept seafront where the buttonmaker lurks, chewing fish-heads and still, still, making his magnificent groovy buttons.

In The Lab At Midnight

THERE WAS AN foolish man and an hairy man and they were in the lab at midnight. They were mucking about with magnets and retorts and galvanometers and Coddington lenses. Neither the foolish man nor the hairy man was authorised to be in the lab. They had broken in using a jemmy. 'No Unauthorised Personnel' read a sign on the door they snapped the bolts of. The foolish man could not read standard lettering, and the hairy man was a rebellious curmudgeon who spat in the face of the law, even when it was a by-law. They were in the lab to build a robot.

Their robot was to be large and pneumatic and lumbering and foolish and hairy. Its brain would be an exact replica of the brain of the foolish man, made from bakelite and rubber, and its hairiness would match that of the hairy man, for he had plucked out half his hairs and used gum to stick them to sheets of corrugated cardboard which would form the outer shell of the robot. They had already prepared both the brain and the shell and hidden them, days ago, in a bag under a sink in the lab. Only the lab janitor could stop them now! But if he came rattling his keys and flashing his torch into the lab at midnight, the foolish man and the hairy man had a plan. They would pelt him with caraway seeds, making him drop his keys and his torch, and then they would muffle him with a blanket. The foolish man had brought the blanket, and the hairy man had brought a big bag of caraway seeds.

The purpose of the robot was manifold. Neither the foolish man nor the hairy man clearly understood what this meant, but they were acting on the orders of the Grunty Man, in whom they had absolute trust and whom they durst not question, ever. They had seen what happened to the pernicky man.

He ended up tethered to a post in an abandoned quarry, pecked by scavenger birds.

There was a haplessness about their mucking about with the magnets and retorts and galvanometers and Coddington lenses which did the foolish man and the hairy man no credit. Both of them had butterfingers. At one o' clock in the morning they were no nearer to completing the robot's innards than they had been an hour before. And then one of them, either the foolish man or the hairy man, discovered that the piping connected to the sink under which they had stowed the bag with the brain and the shell was cracked and leaking. It was a paper bag, and it was soaked through, and the rubber and bakelite and corrugated cardboard and hair were all ruined. There was some sort of corrosive chemical compound in the water. It was that kind of lab.

So terrified were the foolish man and the hairy man at the prospect of having to confess their ineptitude to the Grunty Man that they ran away into the night, leaving the makings of their robot scattered in the lab. When the janitor came along at dawn, rattling his keys, he took one glance and saw what only a janitor with a well-trained eye could see. He pushed a knob on his walkie-talkie and made his report.

'There has been an incursion into the lab by one of the Grunty Man's manifold robots,' he said, 'Fortunately, it appears to have been as unstable as all his other robots, and has destroyed itself. The mopping up will begin now.'

Binder's Fogwife

SHORTLY AFTER COMPLETING his twelfth symphony, Binder decided to take himself a wife. He had been distressed at the critical reception given to his latest work, which was considered to be extremely sordid. Binder felt that perhaps some feminine influence might temper his moral grubbiness. But he knew no women, at least, no women who would consent to wed him in a million years. Though he was a successful composer, he lacked a certain vital human pith. This, at least, was the judgement of his confidante, the dwarf Crepusco, who told Binder that he seemed more like a cardboard cut-out or a man of cellophane, rather than a person of flesh and blood. Poor Binder!, we might think, yet there was truth in the charge. Ever since his days at the Academy For Tiny Musical Magnificos, he had lived in a sort of rarefied ear-world. If he were to bag a wife, that would have to change.

The composer was living at the time in a godforsaken estuarine village surrounded by marshes and mud flats. So one foul misty Thursday evening he hied himself down to the tavern, where he thought he might meet a bride. But upon clumping through the door, he found only men, coastal peasantry and invalid sailors for the most part. He fell in with a couple of sharkers and swaggerers who caroused and quaffed in large silver cans to his health. Fellows they were that had good big pop mouths to cry Port a helm Saint George, and knew as well as the best what belongs to haling of boilings yare. By chance, this pair, whose names were Vermig and Beamish, were themselves both due to be married. Binder, sipping from his mug of brewer's fudgemuck, congratulated his new pals, and asked if perchance their brides-to-be had a friend to whom he might be introduced. He had already, before leaving for the tavern, taken some tips from Crepusco regarding vivacity, dash, and élan, and was eager to

practise his skills. To his surprise, Vermig and Beamish fell about in hysterical fits, spitting and sloshing and slapping their sides. Binder blushed. Eventually his companions becalmed themselves, and Vermig spoke.

'We know not yet who our brides will be,' he said, 'Tomorrow, we are heading up into the great purple hills yonder, where we will find ourselves a pair of fogwives. Come with us, dear chap, and there will be a fogwife for you too!'

Binder had no idea what Vermig was talking about, but he reasoned that a fogwife was better than no wife at all. He arranged to meet the ruined sailors next morning at the crossroads, all toggled up and kitted out for a-roaming in the purple hills.

And up in those hills, the next day, in mid-afternoon, Binder and Vermig and Beamish chanced upon a trio of hill-women tending their pigs on a vertiginous slope. Both the women and the pigs were lopsided, for they spent all their lives on steep gradients. The would-be bridegrooms learned that their would-be inamoratas were known as the Ellipses, for there were three of them and they were each named Dot. Vermig did most of the talking.

'Oh cherishable if lopsided girlies,' he declared, after they had broken the ice by talking pig lore, 'Come with us down from the hills to our misty marshy estuary paradiso, where thick fog will swaddle you, and be our wives. You may bring your hill-pigs, for though we cannot promise them the sloping land they are used to, we have much mud and muck and it oozes with briny goodness.'

Dot and Dot and Dot repaired to a crevice in the hillside, where they discussed this proposal, and found it good.

The very next day, in the foul air of the village, the three couples were married in the dilapidated church, and bells would have rung out had sound been able to travel through the enshrouding mist, the mist from the marshes that smothered and muffled and swirled sluggishly around, through night and day, until it penetrated the limbs and the lungs and brought Dot and Dot and Dot, so unused to it, surely to their sickbeds within a twelvemonth.

Dot Vermig and Dot Beamish were true fogwives, and before another year was out both lay entombed in the fogbound churchyard, and their widowers sat in the tavern gathering their wits for another foray into the hills. But Dot Binder, though she suffered much, from agues and gnawing of the vitals, was nursed back to vigour by the wondrous passing manoeuvres of the dwarf

Crepusco, and she lived happily with Binder for many decades, and took two of her lopsided pigs to the premiere of his forty-ninth and final symphony, and she survived him, and set up home with Crepusco, far from the estuary, in a mountain chalet, with a balcony for tubercular guests, and an eyrie adapted for the pigs, and mezzotints of her long departed friends Dot and Dot framed upon her mantel.

Lugubrious Fool

PRINCE FULGENCIO HAD a heart of stone and his palace was a palace exceeding glum. No, no, it was not a palace, it was a castle, turreted and towered, with many flags and banners flying, every one of them showing blasphemous heraldic devices. All sorts of abominations featured on those flags, from unicorns with five legs to many-headed hydra, from fiery basilisks to crows whose heads were back to front.

The Prince's henchmen patrolled the castle battlements through every hour of day and night, armed with swords and daggers and blunderbusses and glue guns and pipes from which to blow poisoned darts. Woe betide any interloper who made an unauthorised landing on the helipad! They would be immediately surrounded, overpowered, and delivered to Prince Fulgencio's deepest dungeons, and their 'copter smashed to smithereens. The Prince was proud of his guards, who were the most devoted and violent in the land, as well as the fittest. They were each given regular breaks from duty to take part in bio-ching sessions. In addition, the Prince ensured they were all given a copy of his book *Henchmen Are From Mars, Damsels Are From A Girly Planet*, which they were expected to memorise. No one could argue that the henchmen did not have a martial bearing, clanking around in their armour, shouting their heads off, and generally being intimidating.

What they lacked, however, was entertainment. Prince Fulgencio himself did not understand fun, humour, nor high jinks, for his time on earth was spent exclusively in plotting dark and terrible deeds. He was alert, however, to unrest among his myrmidons, and it was clear that something would have to be done to appease them. He had a spy, or creature, like Bosola in *The Duchess Of Malfi*, who mingled incognito among the henchmen to discover what secrets

lurked in their foul and treacherous hearts. The spy was called George Kaplan (a name later borrowed by screenwriter Ernest Lehman for the non-existent agent in Hitchcock's *North By Northwest*), and he reported to the Prince as follows:

Kaplan - The henchmen are becoming restive, O Prince.

Fulgencio - Then I shall have each of them put to death and replaced by other henchmen.

Kaplan - If I might say so, an unwise decision, O Prince, for though restive, your henchmen are fanatically loyal to you and I know not where you might find their like elsewhere.

Fulgencio - From Mars, of course! Have you not read my book?

Kaplan - I have indeed, O Prince, many a time, but - and I tread delicately here - though you are omnipotent and wise and princely, your helicopter is not equipped to journey through space as far as other planetoids, much as you might wish it.

Fulgencio - God blast the stars!

Kaplan - I am sure He will, O Prince. Meanwhile, I think that if you bring to the castle a fool or jester, an entertainer in cap and bells, the henchmen will be placated.

Prince Fulgencio's face assumed a curdled cast, but he was pragmatic. Dismissing George Kaplan with a wave of his fat and pasty hand, he sat down at his metal tapping machine and sent an advert to the classified section of the *Daily Manacle*.

Wanted. Fool for amusement of henchmen, it read, You will be responsible for devising, implementing and evaluating a core strategy for tomfoolery and japes, consulting with stakeholders, and demonstrating a proactive approach. The successful candidate will have a proven track record in delivering merrymaking within a goal-oriented environment. The Prince is working towards a castle which reflects the diversity of his earthly domain.

On the day of the interviews, Prince Fulgencio was sick with an attack of the seeds and bindings, so he delegated George Kaplan to weed out the chaff. Being a duplicitous knave, the spy appointed as jester a man named Selwyn Pob, a lugubrious cripple of downcast air and abject gloom. And thus it

was that, upon hearing Pob's dirges and threnodies, delivered while dragging himself around the castle on his worm-eaten crutches, the henchmen's unrest turned to open rebellion, and they hacked Prince Fulgencio to pieces with their hatchets as he lay groaning in his sickbed, and his blood and gore were splattered upon the walls, and there, in the shadows, George Kaplan smiled, and went creeping down to the pantries, where he gorged himself on cake and buns and pies and pastries and custard, until he was replete.

Municipal Monkey Vampires

THE OTHER DAY I popped in to the Town Hall to find out a bit about bins, park benches, signage, flowerbeds and civic statuary. I think it is time to engage more fully with the maintenance of my bailiwick and the municipal doings therein. This impulse was prompted when, sitting on a park bench next to a civic statue of the much-missed Alderman Spandau, alongside which was a bin in which weeds hoed from a flowerbed had been chucked, I read a sign, placed there by the council, which implored me, and, I suppose, anybody else who read it, to refrain from smoking within the precincts of the park, to tidy up after my dog, though I did not have a dog as such, to ensure I paid my council tax promptly, and to place any litter I wished to discard in the bin provided. Each of these instructions, or pieces of advice, or commands, or whatever we might call them, was translated into several languages. It was a bloody big piece of signage. Incidentally, for those of you attuned to the resonances of the colour spectrum, the bench was brown, the statue was grey with patches of green, the bin was black, and the weeds were, weirdly, gash gold-vermilion. I wouldn't have put them in the bin, I'd have taken them home and arranged them in a vase and placed it on my mantelpiece, if I had a mantelpiece. The sign itself was beige, with the writing in red. If I had to be more precise, I would say it was blood red. I did not at the time understand why this might be significant.

If I had either a dog or a mantelpiece, I might not have been so quick to visit the Town Hall. Both would have claims on my attention. I would have to take the dog for walkies, and shop for biscuits, and give it baths, and possibly take it to the vet for injections from time to time. As for a mantelpiece, that would need dusting, I suppose, and minor upkeep, such as the patching up of crumbly

bits, if it was rotting, and also much time spent in judicious contemplation of items to display upon it, and the arrangement thereof. Those too would have to be dusted, in addition to the mantelpiece itself, if I were to avoid becoming engulfed by dust and thus have trouble with my breathing apparatus, one day. But unencumbered as I was by both dog and mantelpiece, when I hurled myself out of bed that morning, I was free to go along to the Town Hall without other duties to distract me.

I know nothing of architecture, but by God I recognise municipal pride expressed in brick and concrete when I see it. I must have walked past the Town Hall numberless times without paying it any attention. Now, I stopped on the steps to take in its majestic frontage. Gosh. Feeling somewhat belittled, I entered through the grand doorway. I did not have an appointment with anybody, so when I presented myself at the reception desk I was treated with a certain disdain. Perhaps I was mistaken for a mendicant. I suppose I ought to have washed my hair and worn a less grubby cravat for what I considered a pretty momentous visit. I was pointed towards a row of plastic chairs and told to sit and wait. Before taking my seat, I browsed through a rack of leaflets affixed to the wall, and took a few of them to pass the time.

Coincidentally, the very first one I read concerned Alderman Spandau, whose statue I had sat beside in the park. I learned that his title of Alderman had no civic significance, but that he had been so called because he was an expert, albeit an amateur one, on the subject of alder trees, with which the park was riddled. I learned too that an enthusiasm for trees ran in the family, and that he had a cousin, who also bore the name of a German prison, who was known as Sycamoreman. Fascinating as all this was, it had nothing to tell me of bins and park benches and signage and flowerbeds, or of civic statuary in general, so I tucked the leaflet into an inner pocket for safekeeping, and turned my attention to the next one in my clutch. It was all about food poisoning. Again, not my immediate concern, though I noted it managed to work in a mention of Alderman Spandau, claiming his death had been due to the unwise ingestion of several contaminated eggs on toast. There was no reference to his cousin, although yet another German prison was alluded to, for reasons which I could not quite pin down. I replaced this leaflet in the rack. As I was doing so, a council person emerged from behind a panel and approached me, his hand held out in greeting.

Seldom have I beheld such glistening buttons!

This council person gave off a powerful reek of spam and hair oil, but I was impressed by his politesse. As he led me up staircases and along corridors towards his office, he explained that, following a rash of complaints about surliness and the grumps, the municipal authorities had trained their entire workforce in the manners and mores of the imperial court of Austria-Hungary circa 1844. This had worked wonders in what he nevertheless termed the 'public interface skillset'. I couldn't help thinking what Alderman Spandau would have made of it all, but then I remembered that he was merely a tree enthusiast rather than a civic dignitary.

I have not looked into the matter, but I assume that the word dignitary comes from the same root as dignity. This was a quality singularly lacking, I am afraid to say, among the members of the current council administration, a framed photograph of whom was prominently displayed on the wall of the office into which I was led. They were pictured together in a field, lined up as if they were a sports team, and each had a glassy-eyed stare. Each wore an unfortunate kagoul. I noticed there was a dog - mercifully unkagouled - in the front row, and asked, joshingly, if it, too, was a councillor, or just a mascot. To my surprise, the council person replied that the dog, Skippy by name, was actually the Mayor of our bailiwick. It had won more votes than all the other councillors put together.

'The rest of them are a complete shower,' he said, brightly, 'but needs must when the devil drives.'

I observed that, Skippy apart, they all looked as if they had had their brains removed.

'Let us say... *modified*,' he replied.

Intriguing as this revelation was, I did not want to waste time talking about the councillors. I put it to the council person that I was ready and willing to contribute, manfully and with gusto, to all matters pertaining to bins and park benches and signage and flowerbeds and civic statuary, but that before I could do so I needed to know more about them all. He made a great show of buffing his buttons with a silken kerchief, and said:

'Oh, I wouldn't worry your little potato-shaped head about such things. Skippy has everything under control.'

Though reassured in terms of the maintenance of civic order, I was somewhat deflated. Was there no way, I protested, that I could play the part of an active citizen? I passed over the comment about the shape of my head, for I did not think it had been meant unkindly, and, after all, my head is on the small side, and it resembles a potato. This is often remarked upon by people, but usually at times when conversation has fallen flat and they are desperately trying to think of something to say. The council person had no such problem. Indeed, he began babbling a stream of what I took to be boilerplate municipal jargon. It was unremittingly opaque, and he must have noticed my eyes glazing over, for suddenly he grabbed me by the elbow and ushered me towards the window.

'There!', he shouted, pointing, 'That is what I'm talking about! The municipal monkey pound!'

I looked, and sure enough, just past the car park and a clump of alder trees, there was a pound, and it was full of monkeys. At ground level you would never have recognised it, but from a high window up here in the civic empyrean there was no mistaking it. I was rapt.

'Explain it to me again, this time without the jargon,' I said.

This, it seemed, was too much to ask. He insisted I would get the hang of things, plopped a cap on my head and pinned a badge to my lapel. Five minutes later, we were outside, at the electronic gate of the monkey pound, and he was pressing a buzzer.

'Ah, Chevenix!' he said, as a civic functionary emerged from a hut to open the gate, 'Here is our new volunteer.'

And I was in. I was doing my bit for the council. Not as I had hoped to, in the realm of bins and park benches and signage and flowerbeds and civic statuary, but nonetheless I had my foot in the door. I was an active, civically-minded citizen.

Chevenix, the monkey pound supervisor, proved to be the most unfailingly helpful person I have ever met, in any capacity. He gave me a brush to rid my volunteer's cap of accumulated filth, and a rag to polish my volunteer's badge, and he took me on a guided tour of the monkey pound, and told me more about it than any sane person could wish to know.

Quite unbeknown to me, our bailiwick had been plagued for some years by monkeys, and not just any monkeys, but monkey vampires. These were

qualitatively different from vampire monkeys, I was given to understand, but I am hazy on the details, and Chevenix soon passed on to other matters. The monkey vampires had all been rounded up, from their nests and hiding places in ginnels and air-vents and pavilions, and were impounded here in the pound behind the car park and the clump of alder trees pending a decision on whether or not they should be subject to extraordinary rendition. Skippy was mulling it over, but it was low on his list of priorities. Some of those in the know wanted all the monkey vampires to be put in a sealed train, like Lenin, and taken to the Carpathians. Others preferred the idea of ferrying the monkey vampires, one by one, to havens. There was even a body of opinion suggesting they be kept in the municipal monkey pound in perpetuity. Chevenix did not divulge to me which, if any, of these options had his backing. I supposed that, as a functionary, he had to remain neutral.

The monkey vampires themselves were fascinating, at least when visible. The pound was constructed with many *tromple l'oeil* gardenia bushes, mazes, baffles and cubbies, and it was possible to walk round and round for hours without seeing a single 'customer', as the council insisted on calling the impounded monkey vampires. Some, I was told, were velveteen, and thrashed about in the darkness. Others threw pickle jars over the fence. When the moon was full, there was keening. The smell was a mixture of gnats' blood and marzipan and bilgewater. Crocuses, real ones, grew in patches here and there, and sometimes very tiny, almost transparent, monkey vampires could be seen sucking moisture from the buds. Chevenix had a sack stuffed with aerosol sprays which he made judicious use of. Several of the monkey vampires had learned to count, and were reportedly devising their own calendar. It had been noticed that no birds ever flew over the pound with the exception of startled chaffinches. On a log, a pot of paint with a much-dented lid acted as a lure. One of my fellow-volunteers, a bedraggled harpy of advancing years, was in charge of brazil nuts.

I hope to be given my own little sphere of influence one day. I have not been home since I got here. I sleep in a hammock in the corner of one of the mazes, and do my ablutions in the paddling pool. I feed on brazil nuts left unattended by the harpy, and suck moisture from crocuses.

One thing Chevenix did not tell me was that the municipal monkey pound was built on the site of a paupers' graveyard. I discovered this for myself, by a

combination of sharp wits and cemetery erudition. I have noticed unseemly traffic between the monkey vampires and the spirits of long-dead paupers. It is going on all the time, at a lopsided angle to common perception. My quandary is whether to tell Chevenix, or the council person, or even Skippy the mayor, what I know.

Kiss Of The Woohoohoodiwoo Woman

LEND ME YOUR ear while I call you a fool. You were kissed by a witch one night in the wood. Well, you thought it was a witch, but actually it was the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman, broadly similar to, but not exactly, a witch. She kissed you, there in the wood, in the night, and then she turned into a crow and flew away, you did not see where to, for it was so dark in the wood. What were you doing there, so late? You ought to have been tucked up in bed in your crumbling chamber on the topmost floor of Sludge Hall. But for reasons known only to yourself, you had set your pig-shaped alarm clock for half past two in the morning, and you woke and dressed in gaudy raiment and stalked down the servants' staircase and out of the pantry door and along the lane, and when you reached the edge of the wood you pressed on, not stopping, though the trees grew denser and denser, until you met with the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman. She kissed you, and turned into a crow, but you were not transformed, you stayed just as you were, a fool, in the middle of the wood, in the middle of the night.

Did you expect that you too would become a crow, or some other bird, a linnet or a partridge? And had you done so, what then? Did you think you could beat your wings and fly, and follow what you thought was a witch to where she perched, in the form of a crow, upon the sturdy branch of an oak tree? Remember that many of the trees in the wood are smeared with birdlime, and you might have become stuck, waiting helplessly for dawn to break and for the hunting men to come and break your neck and stuff you into a sack. You need have no fear that such a fate will befall the Woohoohoodiwoo Woman,

for long before morning she will transform herself again, from a crow into a squirrel, or a gnat, and she will have no trouble unsticking herself from the birdlime for she will use her powers. Perhaps you thought that, with one kiss from her, you would be granted those powers? Fool, fool! That is not how it works, and never has been, and you would know that if you had read your storybooks carefully.

As it is, you were left alone in the wood, in the dark, kissed but untransformed, if anything more foolish than you had been before. What then, you wondered, did the kiss portend? And why had the witch, in truth the Woohoo-hoodiwoo Woman, turned into a crow and flown away from you? Did she want you to seek her, to blunder about in the dark wood trying to find her perch, to clamber up the trunk of the oak and join her there in your foolish, still human form? Or did she intend that you turn back, once kissed, turn back and trudge all along the lane back to Sludge Hall, to climb back up the stairs and into your upper chamber and into your bed, and fall asleep, and remember nothing?

Being a fool, you do not know which choice to make, so you simply stand there, in the middle of the wood. Suddenly, above, shifting clouds reveal the moon, the cold-hearted orb that rules the night. Through a gap in the dense leafage of oaks and sycamores and pines, a shaft of silver light beams down upon you. It lights up the mark on your forehead, the crimson mark where you were kissed by the Woohoo-hoodiwoo Woman. You will not see it until morning when, hearing the boots of the hunting men crunching through the duff, you gather what poor wits you have, and walk out of the wood, not back to Sludge Hall, but out the other side, towards the pond. At the pond, you stoop to see your reflection in the water. You see the head of a fool, bearing the mark of the Woohoo-hoodiwoo Woman. It is ineradicable. And swans paddle across the pond towards you, dozens of swans. The mark on your forehead begins to glow. It grows hot, until it is burning bright, and you see it reflected in the eyes of the swans. They surround you now, white and silent, as you slump to your knees at the edge of the pond. They will never let you leave them. You belong to them now. They worship you, with the fanaticism only swans are capable of. You are still a fool, but of a new, uncanny type. And as the swans gaze at you, unblinking, you hear the cawing of a crow, somewhere in the sky above, and feel a sharp pang in your forehead, where you were kissed by the Woohoo-hoodiwoo Woman at night in the wood.

Brains In Bags

IT IS, I think, common knowledge that by eating the brains of certain animals we can boost our own mental powers. Granted, this is not a practice which has won the backing of the greatest living Maestro of the Mind, Tony Buzan, but the results can only be described as buzantastic. The difficulty, of course, has always been obtaining brains in the first place, and making them edible. Few of us are so ruthless that we would consider tearing the brains out of the heads of our domestic pets, our cats and dogs and budgerigars, and in any case, those are not the kinds of brains that will do much to supercharge our mental abilities. I know a poor soul who lived on a diet of budgerigar brains for a week, and he is now fit for little else but dribbling and writing features for the *Guardian* weekend magazine. Similarly, although your local zoo will provide a far greater range of animal brains, some of them particularly mind-enhancing such as the brains of giraffes and of exotic birds, zoos tend to have security guards who will Taser you without compunction should you creep towards the enclosures at dead of night armed with a jemmy, a skull-slicer, and a spoon. Being Tasered does not improve your mental prowess, despite what you may have read in the *Guardian*. That article was written by budgerigar-brains man.

It is a very welcome development, then, that there is a new section on the delicatessen counter at Hubermann's where lucky shoppers can buy a huge variety of boil-in-the-bag animal brains at ridiculously low prices. The selection seems to have been made with human mental agility boosting as the basic criterion, for we can find the brains of weasels and pigs and crows and cows and giraffes and hoopoe birds and jellyfish and starlings and wolves and locusts and okapi and trout and flamingos and bears and monitor lizards and

corncrakes and carp and badgers and hornets and lobsters and ducks and gazelles and dozens of others, all conveniently packaged and ready to boil.

Faced with such a cornucopia there is an obvious temptation to go overboard and stuff your gob with particularly toothsome brains, such as those of the rooting hog. This is why the staff at Hubermann's are fully trained to advise on the government's five-a-day guidelines, and hand out free leaflets with every purchase. To maximise your brain potential, it is important to follow certain tips:

Your daily intake should include the brains of five different animals

Make sure you boil the brains in the bag until they are piping hot

Do not eat the bag

Best accompanied with a side dish of suet pudding

Having said that, there may be occasions when, in order to boost a particular area of your mental apparatus, a judiciously limited diet can be helpful. For example, you may wish to improve your ability to interpret the scores of the more complex madrigals of Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623), in which case you might want to eat a couple of boil-in-the-bag conger eel brains for breakfast and supper each day. Studies have shown that there are substances in the brains of all eels, but especially the conger, which stimulate those parts of the human mind receptive to madrigal score complexities. Admittedly, these studies are very much in their early stages, and have yet to be given the imprimatur of any recognised academic institute, but the experiments conducted so far have been more than promising. Separate research is being done by historians of both eels as food and of choral music on whether Thomas Weelkes himself ate the brains of conger eels during his time as a Gentleman Extraordinary at the Chapel Royal.

Generally speaking, however, unless you have a specific mind empowerment scheme you wish to propel forward, it is best to stick to those five-a-day guidelines. Make sure you pick up one of the leaflets from Hubermann's delicatessen counter, and study carefully the many diagrams in the fold-out section so you can learn to tell the difference between the various animal brains available, as it must be said that they all look quite similar when packed into bags.

Chauncey

IT'S NOT OFTEN that you come upon the chieftain of a barbarian horde whose name is Chauncey. So I was pleased to learn about such a chap this morning, when I popped into my local Andy Burnham Chat 'n' Snack Zone, fought my way through a gaggle of feral hoodies, and sought refuge in the cupboard where a few reference books had been stashed. Soon, I am sure, they will end up in a lime-pit to join the quarter of a million books wilfully destroyed by Waltham Forest Council in the last couple of years, but for now, at least, I had a chance to browse through them for anything which might catch my eye.

And it was an article about Chauncey that I lighted upon, in a big fat book called *A Biographical Dictionary Of Barbarian Chieftains Who Swept Across The Plains With Their Hordes On Horseback Wreaking Mayhem And Leaving Ruination In Their Wake; With Six Maps And Twenty-Six Mezzotints*. Most of the entries were for barbarian chieftains with names like Hengist and Blegvad and Hagblod, so it was quite a surprise to find one called Chauncey. His full name was given as Chauncey Kittenridge III, and to me that sounded more like a blue-blooded Boston Brahmin than a barbarian chieftain, but what do I know?

Actually, it turned out that Chauncey was indeed the spawn of a wealthy New England family, destined for a career in the banking sector, but that, once astride a horse, some sort of atavistic impulse impelled him to barbarism and sweeping across the plains at the head of a horde. Throughout history, the plains favoured by barbarian hordes for sweeping across, from east to west, have been those that stretch from Asia into Europe, so Chauncey was miffed to find himself on an inappropriate continent. Thus it was that he bid farewell to the living members of the Kittenridge dynasty and made his way to Asia, picking up ruffians as he travelled whom he impressed into the ranks of his

horde. He was careful to choose only bloodthirsty thugs who sat well upon horses, for he intended, when the time came for sweeping across the plains, to be fearsome in the extreme, and it would not do to have among his horde the feckless or the merciful or the weedy.

Chauncey himself, however, never lost the impeccable manners that had been drummed into him from childhood, and even at the height of his barbaric career was as much at home in the dining room of a grand hotel as he was setting fire to a barn in some godforsaken village that had the misfortune to be in his path as his horde swept across the plains. As a chieftain, Chauncey had a natural air of authority, and he added to it by sprouting a magnificently hairy beard and by festooning his person with big battered bits of jewellery and raiment. These were not the sorts of adornments that could be mistaken for girly fripperies, for they were heavy and chunky and some were not even of precious metals, but were fashioned from the bones and pelts of slaughtered animals, usually those that charged, terrified, out of the barns the horde set fire to as they wrought mayhem in their sweeping progress from east to west leaving ruination in their wake. Chauncey was particularly fond of a necklace made from the ribcages of goats and chickens, and he liked to polish this with a rag as his horde encamped for the night, warmed by the blaze of a burning barn.

It has been argued that, had Chauncey not been so keen on barbarism, he would have made a fine military commander in the conventional sense. He certainly knew how to keep his horde loyal to him, and suffered no mutinies. He had the knack of instilling camaraderie among his vicious ruffians by encouraging rousing sing-songs as they laid waste to villages and hamlets, songs often of his own composition, usually taking for their subject matter episodes of violence and havoc and chaos close to his heart. Sprightly numbers such as *Ho! Boys! Let Us Burn Down The Barn!*, *Hey! Ho! Boys! Let Us Pillage The Village!* and *Hidey Hey! Ho! Boys! Let Us Cast The Library Books Into A Lime-Pit!* might have topped the pop charts had such things been on the radar of a barbarian horde, but of course they were not, and the very idea that they could have been is simply a foolish fancy, diverting as it may be to imagine a Eurovision or Asiatic Song Contest in which the winners are a tangle of bloodsoaked barbarians festooned with goat-and-chicken-bone necklaces.

According to the *Biographical Dictionary*, Chauncey eventually succumbed to ennui. His barbarian horde had swept across the plains from east to west, doubled back, swept across them again, headed back and swept across them yet again, dozens of times, wreaking ruination, and it appears there came a point when Chauncey felt that the urges within his soul had been placated. At night, he began to have dreams of lawns in New England upon which he would sprawl, wearing a boater and sharing a picnic with a socialite. When giving orders to his horde, his voice turned to a drawl, as if he were Gore Vidal reminiscing about the Bouviers and the Kennedys and the Auchinclosses. He yearned to attend a weekend party at a Chappaquiddick marina. And so, one vile morning on the outskirts of a destroyed village somewhere on the plains across which he was sweeping, he announced that he was disbanding the horde. He paid off his thugs with hogsheads of bitter grog and distributed among them his baubles of bones and jewellery, and then he galloped upon his horse to a city with a swish hotel, where he booked in and shaved off his mighty beard.

Some weeks later, his barbaric bloodlust decisively a thing of the past, Chauncey boarded a transatlantic liner, ready to return home and to exchange a mess of pottage for his birthright. He had not written ahead to the Kittenridges, but he was confident that he would meet with a warm welcome, and if he did not, was prepared to slip back temporarily into barbarism and unleash pitiless violence, even without his horde to back him up. In the event, it was not a choice he was forced to make, for the transatlantic liner on which he embarked was the jewel of the White Star Line, the *Titanic*, and he went down with it in the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

My Pellets

YOU ASKED ME to tell you about my pellets, so here goes. Some of the pellets were regurgitated by cats, some were gobbled up by owls, and some are made of metal, to be fired from a shotgun. All my pellets fall into one of those three categories, I think. If I think some more, which I am not going to do, it might occur to me that some of my pellets have a provenance other than those three, but I can always issue a corrective at a later date, after I have thought some more. Even if I recall some other type of pellet, it remains the case that the vast majority of my pellets are either those vomited up by cats or owls or those made of metal meant to be shot at something, such as a crow or a scarecrow or an irritating person.

Yes, I have been known to fire metal pellets from a shotgun at persons who irritate me. I am sure that is lamentable, even criminal, behaviour, but we all have our breaking points, and if you start to moralise with me and suggest that I flip my lid a little too readily, I might well agree with you. But you and I have not sat on the same buses nor traipsed the same retail facility aisles, so you would be better off holding your tongue.

Of more interest than my metal pellets are my cat and owl pellets, which are of course organic, and often contain the barely recognisable remains of small mammals such as mice and fieldmice, or of the tinier birds. Some of these pellets have been dropped in my doorway, as gifts, and some I have collected, on trawling expeditions in the forest. It is an extensive forest and home to many owls. They perch on the branches of trees and hoot as night falls, and in the darkness they swoop upon mice and fieldmice, and in the morning they gob up pellets, and there is me, with my sack, wandering the forest at dawn, on the

lookout. I wear a charm bracelet when I wander in the forest, to keep me safe from kelpies.

It is unfortunate that my charm bracelet does not protect me from irritating persons. I did try to modify it, by adding hawked-up pellets from a bird of prey, from a hawk in fact, but still I was beset, on buses and in retail facilities, by the rude and the gormless. Thus it was that I added to my collection of metal pellets, for the firing of them, from a shotgun, as necessity demanded.

Watching a cat hawk up a pellet from its innards is an educative experience. There often appears to be much undigested grass from lawns impacted in the pellet, and yet I can never recall seeing a cat feeding upon grass, much as if it were a cow, which we are used to seeing eat grass. At least, I am used to such a sight, for I often watch cows, it is my hobby. If I have been put somewhere where cows are scarce or non-existent, I will travel to find them, so I can watch them, of an afternoon, or of a morning, or even all bloody day if I am in a cow-watching mood. Cows becalm the soul. And yet as far as I know they do not regurgitate pellets, as cats and owls do.

I do not watch owls, I simply trace their presence in the forest, armed with my sack, and collect the pellets they have gobbled up. I do not think it would becalm me to watch owls, while wearing night-vision goggles, in the depths of the forest. I would always be on my guard against kelpies, even when wearing my charm bracelet. My heart would be hammering.

Irritating persons are, of course, the opposite of becalming, and impervious to the magick of my charm bracelet. That is why they have to be dealt with by metal pellets from a shotgun. Peppered with pellets, they run away screeching. Before I wore my charm bracelet, I used to run away screeching from kelpies. I would hoist my sack upon my back and go wandering into the forest, at night, to collect pellets hawked up by owls, and very often I would be pursued or set upon or threatened or menaced by kelpies, and, with an empty sack, run screeching until I was safely back in whatever hut I had been put, by the authorities. My cat and metal pellets outnumbered my owl pellets to a great degree, there was a terrible imbalance, and it was my recognition of this that led me to make the charm bracelet. I followed instructions from a pamphlet written by a man whose life had been blighted by kelpies but who had been able to deter them by wearing a bracelet of beads and baubles and pellets and bones and teeth and feathers and sugarcubes. It was, for me, always an awful

temptation to suck upon and crunch the sugarcubes on my charm bracelet, for I have a very sweet tooth, but I enrolled in a twelve-step programme run by Sugarcube Suckers And Crunchers Anonymous and that sorted out my head.

You have to sort out your head, sooner or later, wherever the authorities have put you, be it a hut or a shed or an outbuilding. I found that developing an interest in my pellet collection was the thing that rescued me from a hopeless, pelletless existence. See them, my pellets, all aligned and catalogued, in my cabinets, the cat and the owl and the metal, and not a kelpie within a hundred yards of my hut. I am a happy man.

Plums

ONE WINDY MORNING in the late 1950s, Dobson became fixated with the desire to have a type of plum named after him.

'Imagine the thrill,' he said to Marigold Chew, over breakfast, 'going to the fruiterer's and asking for a half pound bag of Dobsons!'

Marigold Chew said nothing in reply, merely casting her eye over Dobson in precisely the way a compositor might look at a pamphleteer.

Dobson had a very flimsy grasp of matters botanical, and had never grown any fruit in his life. He was ready to acknowledge that these were distinct disadvantages. If the world was ever to be enhanced by a plum called Dobson, drastic activity was required. After breakfast, putting on a pair of secondhand winklepickers, he pranced off to the kiosk by the pylon on the patch of waste ground by the sewage plant, over which loomed the immensity of Pilgarlic Tor and, above it, a sky blue and clear and without any sign of an imminent hailstorm. Unaccountably, the kiosk was shut, and not simply shut but boarded up, covered over with large rectangular panels of reinforced hardboard hammered into place with dozens of big fat nails. No signage had been pasted on to any of the panels to explain this startling state of affairs. Whenever anything changed within his familiar bailiwick, however slightly, Dobson was avid to be told about it, greedy for details, and ever on the lookout for signs and announcements and bulletins, in the absence of which he was liable to have a neurasthenic attack, and emit little cries, just like Edgar Allan Poe when he got the jitters, or the Wild Boy of Aveyron when deprived of potatoes.

On this day, however, so consumed was the out of print pamphleteer with his plum plan that he sailed on past the boarded-up kiosk, fleet in his winklepickers, and carried on along the lane abutting the sewage plant annexe,

past the clown hospital and the vinegar distillery and the bottomless viper-pit, until, crossing Sawdust Bridge, he approached a tobacconist's. Here, thought Dobson, he might find the publication he was seeking, for in addition to a range of pungent cigarettes and cigarillos and pipe tobaccos from the more benighted regions of the earth, the shop stocked a few magazines and penny dreadfuls and hastily-pasted-together prog rock fanzines, alongside the complete works of John Ruskin in pirated editions. It was quite a tobacconist's.

As he pranced closer to its gaudy doorway, however, the pamphleteer's path was blocked by a peasant leading an improbably numerous herd of goats to pasture. Dobson had no option but to stand and wait while goat after goat after goat after goat after goat passed slowly by. Just as our pamphleteer knew little of botany, it may be that the reader is ignorant of the goat world. Briefly, then, goats are cloven-hooved and Satanic and their milk has a peculiarly goaty flavour and they come in a number of varieties including the Nubian and the Toggenburg and the Anatolian Black and the Booted and the Fainting and the Finnish Landrace. Some such goats were among the flock that passed in front of Dobson, who sat down on a tuffet and ate some curds and whey, cartons of which he kept in his pockets as emergency snack solutions.

By the time the last of the goats clacked past, and the way to the tobacconist's was cleared, it was lunchtime, and the shop's shutters had been pulled down, and the tobacconist himself was fast asleep in a sort of man-cot behind his counter. Undaunted, for there were still fires in his head regarding the plum project, Dobson pressed on, beyond the swimming pool and across Yoko Ono Boulevard, skirting the Miasma of Grubbiness, past two brooks, one babbling and the other unbabbling, past a bear colony and a bee sanctuary, past a second shut tobacconist's, until he reached Old Ma Purgative's Newsagent & Hazardous Chemical Waste Compound. To his relief, he found it neither boarded up nor closed for lunch, and skipping past the life-sized cardboard cut-out of Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson playing his flute while standing on one leg which Old Ma Purgative kept in the porch, Dobson entered.

'How now, Mistress P!' cried Dobson, in an unnervingly cheery tone.

'Are you a mystery shopper?' snapped back the ancient proprietress, both her face and her voice curdled with spite. She was a proper caution, and had long ago lost whatever marbles her god had given her, her god being a household one, hung on a nail at the back of the shop, wooden, with savage

talons, in the shape of a crow, with vermilion plasticine blobs for eyes. It held her in thrall.

Though he was a fairly regular customer, Dobson was used to Old Ma Purgative's forgetfulness, and he did not take umbrage at being unrecognised.

'No mystery shopper I!', he shouted, in the foolish syntax he tended to deploy when speaking to shopkeepers, 'I am but an humble wight who seeks a copy of the current issue of *So You Want To Buy Or Rent An Orchard?*, the weekly magazine packed with much advertising of a fruity orchard nature.'

Old Ma Purgative gawped at Dobson, waved a wand in the air, said something in rhyming couplets about frogs and toads and pies and sparrows, and essayed a little hop and skip. Her burning desire was to become a character in a fairy tale or nursery rhyme, and to frighten children. But the pamphleteer was a grown man, and he had seen these shenanigans before, so he ignored Old Ma Purgative and stepped over to the magazine rack. Various titles were shoved none too tidily into the battered wire slots of the stand, mostly publications in foreign languages or those invented by teenage science fiction enthusiasts, such as Zigbog, as spoken by the superignorant Zigbog-ra in the long-running radio serial *Pie Shop Deep Space Nine*.

By the time Dobson had finished rummaging, fruitlessly, through the tat, his hands were filthy, so he bought a jumbo tube of disinfectant goo before bidding Old Ma Purgative farewell. Outside the sky was black and the air was thick with pinging hailstones. Dobson scampered to a cow byre for shelter. It was empty of cows, for this was a Thursday, the day when cows in these parts were taken on excursions.

Six hours later, when the hailstorm ceased, Dobson trudged home, taking a different route, along the canal towpath, past the duckpond and the dirigible hangar and the Museum o' Whisks, past Pang Hill Orphanage and the disgusting pit, past large imponderables and smaller enigmas, and finally up the lovely lane lined with hail-drenched foxgloves and toadflax. Marigold Chew was out, supervising some cows on a cow excursion. Dobson did not even pause to remove his winklepickers, but sat straight down at his escritoire and wrote, at one sitting, the untitled and unpublished piece which scholars have dubbed *Notes Pursuant To The Unravelling Of The Pamphleteer's Plum Plan*.

One windy morning in the late 1950s, he wrote, I became fixated with the desire to have a type of plum named after me. Knowing nothing of plums, and not much

about fruit in general, I hit upon the idea that by buying or renting my own orchard, I would have the leisure to experiment. In my mind's eye, I saw myself leaping out of bed every morning, and, come rain or shine, sprinting off to my orchard, there to propagate plum trees, to study them with such rigour that before long I would know all there was to know about plums, both the minutiae and the big picture. I would have a shed in my orchard which would become the world's finest plum library. I would spend entire afternoons peering at seeds, at first in ignorance, but gradually with ever greater perspicacity. I would dig and mulch and prune and cut. I would erect bird scarifiers and familiarise myself with the workings of a shotgun. And then one day, years hence, when so close was the resemblance between a plum and my brain that it would baffle the most expert of fruitmen, I would grow an entirely new type of plum, and I would call it the Dobson, and thus my name would be immortal.

*Such was my dream. The very first step to realising it was to obtain a copy of the current issue of that most excellent magazine *So You Want To Buy Or Rent An Orchard?* I strode out of doors with the vigour of a man sixty years younger, plum-bedizened. As I walked, I hummed the *Four Last Songs* by Richard Strauss, one after another, in the wrong, but to me preferred, order. The sky was blue and clear, with no hint of hail.*

*Alas, my efforts to find a copy of the magazine came to naught. Then came the hail, such teeming hail as I have never seen. I sheltered for hours in a deserted cow byre, and with every ping of a hailstone upon its corrugated iron roof, the more dejected I became. Crushed by misery, I was almost tempted to the stupidity of pleading with Old Ma Purgative's wooden household crow god. Was I such a weed that I would fall at the first hurdle? Would I abandon my plum plan simply because, unbeknownst to me, *So You Want To Buy Or Rent An Orchard?* had ceased publication seven years ago, around the time of, and because of, the Korean War? It pains me to say that the answer to both these questions is 'Yes'. I sit here, in my squelching secondhand winklepickers, gripping my pencil like a dying man's straw, and I peer into the future, and I know the shattering truth, that there never, ever will be a plum called Dobson.*

Human weakness. The puddle of a million dreams.

Swans On A Towpath

CLUTCHING A BAG of feathers in his sweaty fist, the nameless miscreant stalked along the towpath of the canal. It was a paper bag. It was a stinking canal, into which thoughtless gits dumped such debris as toffee apple wrappers and cartons and bent bits of metal. The feathers in the miscreant's bag were the feathers of swans. He had not plucked them himself, but stumbled upon them, a pile of swan feathers swept into a heap by the side of the canal a mile or so south, where there had been a short-lived swan war earlier in the day. The feathers had been scattered, and swept together by a broom wielded by the lock keeper. The lock keeper was the father of the miscreant, the long lost father. He did not know the miscreant was his son, nor did the miscreant know the lock keeper was his father. In physical appearance, there was nothing to connect them. The one was improbably tall, and loose-jointed, and lantern-jawed, like a giant, the other chubby and squat. Morally, too, a chasm lay between them, for the lock keeper was civic-minded and held down a steady job and used his broom to sweep up that which was scattered alongside the canal, be it the feathers of swans or the discarded wrappings of toffee apples and other confectionery. The miscreant, by contrast, was a miscreant, who would, if given a broom, use it not to sweep up rubbish but to beat about the head of someone weaker than he whom he could rob.

The miscreant had not stuffed the feathers into a paper bag for any motive of beautifying the canalside. He had simply taken them, as miscreants will take, opportunistically, anything they can take. He saw the swan feathers in a pile and thought to himself that he could sell them to a dishonest milliner of his acquaintance. This milliner, he knew, would decorate his hats with all sorts of gaudies of dubious provenance. His customers never asked questions,

not even when their heads grew boils and sores because their hat harboured toxic elements the milliner was too careless to decontaminate. A ruffian might sell him a box of beads for cash, and the milliner would stitch the beads into a hat, and sell the hat, and neither know nor care that the box of beads had been robbed from a hazardous waste compound.

So the miscreant was confident he could sell the bag of feathers to the dishonest milliner, even though the swan war was occasioned by disturbance in the brains of the swans caused by weird turquoise sludge through which they had glided, so gracefully, some hours earlier. The sludge was almost unbelievably poisonous. It had been dumped in the canal and in nearby ponds by boffins, bad boffins, who were engaged in secret and fiendish experiments in their lab. One of these boffins was the cousin of the lock keeper. There had been much interbreeding, over the course of untallied generations, in this part of the land. The milliner shared a bloodline with the boffin too, and thus with the lock keeper, and thus with the miscreant.

There was even talk, in the tavern, of squalid couplings with swans, in the past, when people knew no better. 'There's been traffic with beings aquatic,' an oldster might mutter, staring gloomily into his tankard. Only the most observant might note the feathers visible when he hitched up his trousers, or the way he waddled slightly as he left the tavern, later, heading into the night to none knew where. And was that a faint splash that could be heard, not so distant, within minutes of his leaving?

It is tempting, when writing of swans and boffins and canals, to regurgitate great chunks of prose written on these topics by the acknowledged masters, men like Dobson and Definzi and women like Hattie Meldrum. It is a temptation which must be fought and defeated, partly in respect for the copyright laws and partly from sheer pomposity. One must breathe through one's nose, in an actorly way, and make a world with words of one's own. The fact that that last sentence is a direct quotation from Definzi is neither here nor there.

The toxic sludge dumped by the boffin was a by-product of the experiments going on in the lab. The purpose of those experiments was monstrous, and related in some wise to the matter muttered by the oldster in the tavern. Not all boffins are miscreants, by any means, but some are, and the bad boffin whose daily duty it was to roam the canalside and the ponds pumping hazardous sludge into the waters was one such. He was impudent in his criminality, not

caring a jot if it was witnessed by innocents. He was of the view that all souls are besmirched, that guilt gnaws away at the innards of everybody. In this part of the land, with its history of sordid breeding, he may have been correct.

Just as not all boffins are miscreants, nor are all miscreants boffins. For example, the nameless miscreant with his paper bag of feathers was no boffin. He had a tiny brain, and one which did not always work properly, not due to contact with toxic sludge, but rather because of repeated blows to the head received from other miscreants, once upon a time, in his fighting days. Had he been a boffin of any kind, he might have devised a way of resolving the dilemma that faced him now, as he stalked along the canal towpath. For his way was blocked by a gaggle of swans. Recently at war, the swans were peppy with adrenalin, their aggression by no means diminished. A truce with each other struck, they turned their cold horrifying eyes on the miscreant, whose approach was impertinent.

How one wishes it were meet to copy out a screed by Hattie Meldrum here. In her magnificent compendium of violent swan anecdotage, she relates dozens of instances not unlike this confrontation. Some of her tales even take place alongside canals, albeit that in her world the canals are clean and well tended, the lock keepers need not go brooming about, and miscreants are few and far between. It is true that more than one bad boffin hoves into view in her five hundred pages, but their sins are not of a sludge-dumping character. The badness of Hattie's boffins is limited to swan cruelty, or one should say attempted swan cruelty, with one exception, and in that case the boffin is a blasphemer.

Had our paper bag-clutching miscreant known that, deep in his past, there had been several occurrences of congress with swans and other waterfowl, he might have burrowed into the nooks and crevices of his tiny brain to deploy some atavistic sound or gesture with the effect of placating the swans blocking his path. But he knew nothing of his past. He did not even know his own father, who at that very moment was coming towards the swans from the rear, having swept up, with his broom, a couple of tin cans and stray toggles torn from a duffel coat. The lock keeper was returning to his lock keeper's hut for tea and toast, his broom over his shoulder, his lips pursed in the whistling of a happy, happy tune.

So. We have a gang of swans, rancorous swans, their innate savagery compounded by the effects of the traces of toxic sludge still present in their systems, their malevolence focused upon a hapless miscreant carrying a paper bag of swan feathers destined for a dishonest milliner. Unseen by the swans, because behind them, and not one of them looks back, comes a lanky man with a broom. That there will be violence, pecking, bashing, blood, screeching, laceration, splashing, all in the dapple of sunlight by the side of the canal, along its towpath, is, it would appear, inevitable. We expect the swans to attack the miscreant, the lock keeper to attack the swans, the outcome of course being beyond our wit to foresee. Oblivious to their parts, the boffin is siphoning sludge into a pannier, the milliner is sewing infected buttons on to a cap. For make no mistake, these two cannot be forgotten in the telling of the tale. Hattie Meldrum, for one, would have done more than sketch them in. You would get potted biographies as likely as not.

There is a moment, in all anecdotage, where we can stop, as if freezing a frame in a motion picture. Some say events are foretold in the stars. Even if we disparage such twaddle, it remains the case that sometimes circumstances are such that we are convinced we know what is about to happen. Ah, but we forget. We forget, in the present instance, that there is another fellow who plays a part. At the very moment the swans are about to launch their attack on the miscreant, the same moment the lock keeper takes his broom from his shoulder ready to attack the swans. . . there is a gurgling in the canal. Bubbles disturb the filthy surface. And with a mighty splash, emerging from the depths comes the oldster, the mutter-man from the tavern, now transformed, half man, half swan, gigantic, and he, it, enwraps the lock keeper and the miscreant and all the swans within the folds of its enormous beating wings. It holds them close, close enough almost to suffocate them. But it does not suffocate them. It holds them whole.

Conquistador

CONQUISTADOR, YOUR STALLION stands in need of company. For an adventurer and conqueror, especially one who led the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century, this is a lapse on your part. You should never leave your horse alone and abandoned, for it is likely to become fractious, and the last thing you want to have to deal with, either in the jungles or the mountains, is a fractious horse. You might argue that a native Peruvian firing poisonous darts at you through a blowpipe would cause you more concern than a horse in a bad mood, but there you would be wrong.

Let's say that the native Peruvian's aim is impeccable, and his poisoned dart plunges into your neck. It is true that you would be surprised, and have only minutes to live as the toxins ravaged your innards, but it is a simple enough matter to pluck the dart out of your flesh and have one of your fellow conquistadors immediately suck on the puncture, drawing every last drop of poison into his mouth before spitting it out. Apply a medicinal poultice to the tiny hole in your neck and job done. You will be as right as rain and ready to carry on adventuring and conquering.

By contrast, if, after abandoning your stallion while you clanked off on foot on an errand of death, you return to it to find it lonely, fractious and temperamental, you may have some difficulty getting back into your saddle. Your horse may rear up on its hind legs and make terrifying bellowing noises. If you are not careful you could end up being crushed under its mighty hooves. A fleck of horse-spittle might land in your eye, blurring your vision. The rest of your conquistador troop may have ridden on ahead, leaving you behind, without food or water, or a compass. You will know, from your training back in Toledo, that it can take hours to becalm a fractious horse, by which time

your chances of catching up with your fellow adventuring conquerors before nightfall are remote.

Unless the conquistador who sucked the poison out of your neck has stayed with you, you will now be all alone in a strange exotic landscape, famished. You do not know which fruits and berries are safe to eat, and in any case there will only be fruits and berries available to you if you are in the jungle. As I pointed out earlier, you might be up in the mountains, and there will be little to eat but impacted snow, which you will have to melt and soften before trying to shovel it down your throat. Bear in mind that the air is very thin up in the higher reaches of the Andes, and you will become exhausted quite rapidly, especially if you are expending energy hacking at a patch of snow to make it more easily meltable. Added to these imperilments, your horse will be hungry too, and its fractiousness may return, with a vengeance. You will have to find a way to placate it a second time, and by now it will be wise to your tricks, if it is a clever horse, which it probably is, having been chosen out of so many other horses to go on a conquistadorial campaign. It is also much more difficult to becalm a frightened horse in the dark, and the Peruvian night is far more eerie than the night in Toledo, with which both you and your stallion are familiar.

A further problem will present itself if a nocturnal Peruvian native fires a second poisonous dart into your neck through a blowpipe. Yes, it is simple enough for you to remove the dart, but without a fellow conquistador to suck out the venom, you will have to instruct your horse to do the deed. Not many horses are skilled in such an art. Apart from anything else, their mouths are much bigger than the average conquistador's mouth, and their teeth are huge, so it is exceedingly difficult for them to get sufficient purchase on your neck to suck with any conviction. Of course, if you have a vampire horse, it will suck away quite happily, but after draining the poison it will continue to suck your blood, until you topple over, pale and dead.

All things considered, conquistador, you are advised never to leave your stallion in need of company. No horse is an island entire of itself. Further tips on looking after your horse when adventuring and conquering in Mexico and Peru are available in the government pamphlet *50 Tips For Conquistadors On Looking After Your Horse When Adventuring And Conquering In Mexico And Peru* (Crown Copyright) (out of print).

I Had A Hammer

I HAD A hammer. I hammered in the morning. I hammered in the evening all over this land. I hammered out danger. I hammered out a warning. I hammered out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land. They should have seen that coming. As I said, before I hammered the love out of them, I hammered out a warning. It was hardly my fault if they thought I was just larking about. Personally, if I had seen one of my siblings roaring towards me at dusk, armed with a hammer, I'd have made a run for it, particularly when it was clear I had been hammering things all day all over this land. Anyway, I had a good night's sleep, and the next day I continued hammering. There was not much left to hammer in this land, so I crossed the border. I hammered the fence and the border guards, and then I had a happy day hammering everything that lay in my path in this new country. Bang bang bang, that was me, with the occasional dull thump if I hammered something soft and squishy. I didn't discriminate. If I saw it, I hammered it, it really was as simple as that. But then I was fortunate to have such a good hammer. When my hammering was still in the planning stages, it was suggested to me that I should obtain a silver hammer from Maxwell's. 'Pshaw!' I said. I actually said 'Pshaw!', like a character in a bad stage play from the interwar years. But I was right to do so. Maxwell's silver hammer was fashionable enough, in its time, but the kind of hammering I intended to do required something sturdier, a real thumper. So I got my hammer from Hubermann's. I was so pleased with it that I hammered my way out of the shop, and didn't stop hammering until I got home. It was the following day that I started to hammer all over this land. Then, the day after that, I hammered my way half way across the neighbouring land. It was much bigger, and much more densely packed with people and things, so I had

a lot more hammering to do than in my own land. But eventually I got to the frontier, having hammered pretty much everything in sight. As I nestled down for the night in a border chalet, I inspected my hammer, and was pleased to see that it was almost as good as new. There were a couple of scuff-marks, and quite a lot of blood, but otherwise it looked as if it would serve me well for as long as I continued hammering, all over as many lands as I descended upon, like an angel of death, with my hammer.

A Celebration Of The Bufflehead In Prose And Song

EVERYONE HAS THEIR favourite type of duck, and for Prudence Foxglove it was the bufflehead. In the summer of 1894, the unsung Victorian genius took a break from writing her daringly modernist plays and compiled a fat volume entitled *A Celebration Of The Bufflehead In Prose And Song*. It was illustrated with her own cack-handed pencil drawings which, it has to be said, look much more like teal or mergansers than buffleheads. The dramatist had thousands of copies of the book printed at her own expense, a cost she could easily afford after the astonishing success of her plays such as *See How The Intoxicated Brute Wallows In A Swamp Of Moral Turpitude Until His Ravaged Soul Is Uplifted By Muscular Christianity In The Personage Of A Pugilist Vicar* (1894). The closing scene in that fine play, in which the Reverend 'Nobby' Attenborough rains his beboxinggloved fists down upon the head of the intoxicated brute, is unforgettable.

Prudence Foxglove had been collecting snippets about buffleheads from books, periodicals and food packaging since childhood. Most girls of that era would have pasted their cuttings into a scrapbook, but Prudence disliked both paste and scrapbooks, and instead she stuffed her snippings into an ever-burgeoning accumulation of burlap gunny sacks. When a sack was plump and full, she stitched it up using exemplary needlework skills, and entrusted it to the keeping of one of her many gardeners for use as a pillow.

The Foxglove family estate had extensive grounds, grown wild over generations of neglect, and it was Prudence's mother Hepzibah, improbably green-fingered, who determined to tame them, employing hundreds of snag-toothed

peasants from the surrounding hovels to dig and prune and hoe and harrow. Under the spell of the social reformer Rufus Crank, Hepzibah Foxglove built a model village for her gardeners to live in. Each had their own hut, with guttering and drainage and a spigot and a sink and a pallet with a mattress and a shelf of improving tracts and prayerbooks and a picture nailed to the wall of Christ commanding the woman to throw the sack full of beetles and locusts and flies and snakes and hornets and wasps into the sea. It was unusual in those days for gardeners and other servants to have pillows, so Prudence's gunny sacks were particularly welcome. At her mother's insistence, she had taken the precaution of seeking approval from Rufus Crank himself. By then over ninety, the reformer wrote back to her in the famous 'pillows for gardeners' letter, in which he laid out a set of principles we would do well to abide by today, if, that is, we still had gardeners in huts in the grounds of our estates.

Be warned, he wrote, that a gardener plucked from his hovel and given a hut with modern appurtenances such as a sink and a spigot may get hoity-toity if allowed to rest his oddly-shaped head on a pillow. Yet Christian compassion tells us he must be given the chance so to do. The risk of hoity-toityness can be tempered, if not wholly eradicated, by observing some general principles.

- 1. Rent the pillow to your gardener rather than giving it to him outright.*
- 2. Stuff it not with kapok nor duck feathers nor soft downy empadment, but with gravel or pebbles or sand.*
- 3. Paper and cardboard cuttings on the subject of buffleheads, or of birds that look roughly like teal or mergansers if drawn cack-handedly are an acceptable stuffing, in extremis.*
- 4. Use burlap gunny sacks or other rough fabric.*
- 5. Forbid pillow-cases.*

Young Prudence got herself into a tizzy when trying to decide how to charge the gardeners for pillow rental, for they were unfamiliar with coinage, being peasants. Then, at one of her mother's regular soirées, she met the so-called 'potato economist' Hicks, an extraordinary man whose theories ought to have resounded down the ages, but did not, possibly because he expounded them in prose so dense and clotted and awash with spelling errors that it was, and still is, mistaken for gibberish. When he spoke, however, Hicks was a model of clarity, and as he stood next to a blazing hearth at the soirée, his massive Victorian beard at risk of catching fire, he told Prudence to accept payment

of pillow rent in potatoes. It was advice she took to heart, so much so that as the years passed, and she grew to adulthood, and found worldly success as a playwright, still she found time each week to potter from hut to hut in the grounds of the estate of which she was now the mistress, demanding - and receiving - a potato from each of the increasingly creaky gardeners who at night rested their heads on pillows stuffed with her collection of bafflehead clippings.

Many of these potatoes were destined for the grubby lodgings where Hicks lived in penury. Every Thursday morning, Prudence Foxglove emparcelled a potato and took a horse and cart down to the village post office, where a new-fangled pneumatic funnel system sent packages whizzing across the land. What Hicks did with all these potatoes is an enduring mystery, for his diary is, if anything, even less comprehensible than his published writings.

At one point it was thought a small clue was to be found in the startlingly fat book *Table Talk Of Bearded Victorian Intellectuals*, wherein nestles a report of a figure thought to be Hicks standing next to a blazing hearth making canny observations upon the dietary habits of impecunious bearded Victorian intellectuals, in which the potato features prominently. But Hicks, famously, viewed the potato as a currency, and he is unlikely ever to have eaten one. He was, in any case, an unrepentant carnivore, having trained his stomach to digest liver and gravy in huge quantities, as recommended by the nutritionist Bristow, another bearded Victorian intellectual but one who had never, so far as we know, been invited to one of Hepzibah Foxglove's soirées.

After her mother was killed as a result of an implausible yet all too real cartographic mishap, Prudence at first continued with the soirées. Hicks, Jet-sam, Baxter, Coughdrop, Fig, and Figby were all regular visitors, trudging across the filthy fields to the estate in all weathers, keen to propound their various nostrums and being plied with hibiscus syrup and water biscuits while Prudence's sister Drusilla tinkled sentimental songs at the piano. Drusilla's repertoire was small, but she compensated for it by devising hectic improvisational passages, so that a mournful dirge such as *Bring Me Your Winding Sheet, Oh Mother Of Mine*, which lasts about two minutes when played straight, could last up to sixteen or seventeen hours, by which time the assorted bearded Victorian intellectuals had often become so argumentative that shouting and fisticuffs were not uncommon. Prudence's drudge complained about forever

having to mop up bloodstains from the rug adjacent to the blazing hearth, and threatened to seek drudgery elsewhere. Petrified of losing so tireless a mopper, Prudence decided to call a halt to the soirées. This left Drusilla at a loose end, until she was persuaded to transcribe her piano pieces for a chorus of voices, and, on their afternoons off, she trained and rehearsed the gardeners, leading them on loud and lusty singsongs roaming across the fields and hills and alarming cows and pigs and ponies.

Without a drawing-room full of pontificating bearded Victorian intellectuals, Prudence Foxglove too may have found herself in want of anything to occupy her. But instead she relished the solitude, and took her first faltering steps towards writing.

The plays which would make her rich and famous lay in the future, and her early efforts were in verse and prose. She tried her hand at detective stories, ballads, non-fiction (*A History Of Eggs*), an epistolatory novel, and automatic writing dictated from the spirit world. For the latter, she had her arm hoist in a canvas sling, her hand grasping a steel pen, and stunned herself with laudanum. Publishers rejected everything she sent to them, with the single exception of the magazine *Mawkish Chaff*, which accepted her poem *The Hopeless Hollyhocks*. Her excitement was somewhat dimmed when it turned out that the editor was a Hicksite, and paid for her poem in potatoes.

Nevertheless inspired by her appearance in the public prints, albeit in a magazine with a tiny circulation, Prudence fired off a series of similar pieces, including *The Lugubrious Lupins*, *The Dismal Dahlias*, and *A Spinney Choked With Marshland Weeds*, and impressed the editor with her industry. He invited her to visit his office, in a grim northern mill town, and so it was that Prudence found herself taking her first ever railway journey. The trip itself was uneventful, but not so her arrival at the grim northern mill town railway station.

The editor of *Mawkish Chaff* came to meet her in person. He was a dashing cad with exquisite manners and the morals of the sewer, and as she disembarked from her train, he swept her into his arms, protested his undying passion for her, crossed the platform to bundle her on to a small branch line train and carried her away with him to a boarding house in a shabby seaside resort for a week of sinful debauch. Initially smitten, Prudence soon came to her senses. On the pretext of popping out of the boarding house to buy a couple of choc-ices from a sea-front kiosk, she went straight to the police

station and shopped her seducer. As the cad was carted off to clink by a team of rozzers, she took the train back to the grim northern mill town, let herself into the offices of *Mawkish Chaff* with a key she had secretly had cut, and set about running the magazine herself.

Prudence Foxglove proved to be an editrix of genius. Pages once filled with sentimental pap now played host to extraordinary talents, as she called on all those bearded Victorian intellectuals who had attended the soirées to pen essays and manifestos and epic poems and novellas and visionary burbling and, occasionally, automatic writing dictated from the spirit world while their arms were hoist in canvas slings. Hicks himself was given three entire issues to expound his theories of potato economics, and then a further three when he decided he had not quite finished, followed by a couple of supplementary issues to tie up a few loose ends, and a Christmas Special to repeat the more pertinent points. Prudence was the first to publish both Fig's hallucinatory ravings and Figby's twee nature notes. It was in *Mawkish Chaff* that Coughdrop predicted, in the coming century, the appearance upon the world stage of a pamphleteer he mistakenly identified as 'Bodson'.

Throughout this blizzard of editorial activity, Prudence continued to cut out clippings about buffleheads and to send them to Drusilla, who had been charged with stuffing them into burlap gunny sacks and collecting the pillow rent from the gardeners. It is curious that not a single cutting was ever taken from Prudence's own magazine. One can search through the bound volumes and never once find the word 'bufflehead', whereas the names of other types of ducks turn up frequently, particularly sheldrakes, which were an obsessional interest of Baxter's, no matter what he was meant to be writing about.

Although she did not wholly neglect her own work during these years, penning a so-called 'pneumatic romance' and a study of the beards of Victorian intellectuals, Prudence had yet to hit upon the formula that she would make her own. The germ of that first, ground-breaking play was a walk she took through a patch of broken ground in the shadow of a grim mill one Sunday. She chanced upon a derelict, sloshing a bottle of turps and babbling to himself, and approached him with a charitable tuppence in her outstretched hand. The human wreckage grabbed at her wrist and would not let go, and Prudence realised with an awful pang that it was her boarding house cad. His manners were no longer exquisite and his morals were no longer even of the sewer, for

they had been utterly blasted away through strong drink and turpentine. She had him carted off to an asylum in the hope that he would one day recover, and visited him there on subsequent Sundays, listening to his incoherent jabbering as he told her his story, from the despair of prison to the greater despair of the broken ground in the shadow of the grim mill. She felt impelled to share this terrible tale with the world, and it became the basis of her play *The Dashing But Debauched Cad And His Descent Into A Netherworld Of Turpentine-Fuelled Depravity* (1894). Writing it, she realised her inborn talent for dramatic dialogue, stage directions, interludes of knockabout comedy, emotionally wrenching climaxes, and daring modernist interventions, the latter owing something perhaps to Drusilla's piano and choral techniques. From the very first performance, in which the legendary actor-manager Sir Hector Bombast played the dashing but debauched cad, the play left its audience stunned. Prudence Foxglove had found her Muse, and her future was assured.

She returned the reins of the magazine to the now partially-recovered cad and headed back to her estate, where her many decrepit gardeners and her drudge welcomed her as a heroine. Drusilla, too, was overjoyed to have her sister back, for she had grown lame and the weekly traipsing from hut to hut to collect the pillow rent had become a sore trial to her. There was a folly next to a ha-ha in the grounds of the estate, and Prudence took it as her writing-room. The plays poured out of her, on an almost daily basis, and soon enough her dramas were being put on in every theatre in the land.

Thus it was that, come the summer, she decided to take a break. One fine Friday afternoon, she took delivery of a set of sandbags and wheeled them in a barrow around the gardeners' huts, retrieving each of her burlap gunny sacks and leaving a sandbag in its place. Then, holed up in her folly by the ha-ha, she emptied out the sacks and laboriously copied out each and every bafflehead-related clipping into a series of exercise books. When she was done, she took the horse and cart to the village post office and sent the embundled books to a printer. A month later, she received via the pneumatic funnel system thousands of copies of *A Celebration Of The Bufflehead In Prose And Song*.

Unlike her plays, it was not a success. The public had come to expect from her stern moral invective, drunken brutes, comedic japes, crippled orphans, vapid drivellings, pugilistic vicars, and daring modernism. None of these was to be found in what was, after all, just a forbiddingly fat anthology of miscellanea

about ducks. When Prudence Foxglove died in 1922, all but one of the copies was found rotting in packing cases in the cellar of her estate. And that single, presumably sold, copy? The story is told that its owner, a grand-nephew of Hicks, had it in his luggage when he stepped aboard the airship Hindenburg in Frankfurt on the third of May 1937.

Blodgett In The Sewers

HAVING HEARD RUMOURS that the sewers of Pointy Town were teeming with strange huge bulbous blind albino beings with tentacles and suckers, Blodgett decided he would like to capture a pair and keep them as pets. Encased from head to toe in patent sewerwear, without a guide, our hero clambered down a metal ladder into the vast subterranean network of tunnels and passageways and channels and chambers. If you have seen *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), you will grasp the essential seweriness.

The sewers of Pointy Town were the least pointy part of the town. Indeed, for whole stretches they were completely unpointy. Blodgett found this disorientating, and soon became lost. So used was he, in these latter days, to locating himself in relation to various pointy bits above ground, that their absence made his head swim, inside its big exciting helmet, and he toppled over. He had only been down in the sewers for a couple of minutes.

Although he had gone down without a guide, Blodgett was not entirely witless, and he carried with him, strung to a loop on the hip of his sewerwear, a hooter, which he could hoot to alert any members of the Pointy Town Sewer System Rescue Patrol who might be faffing about in the vicinity. He had been told about these tireless public servants by a man in a tavern, the same tavern where he had heard the rumours about the strange huge bulbous blind albino beings with tentacles and suckers. One tavern, two rumour-mongers. Unfortunately for Blodgett, the chap who told him about the rescue patrol was a chronic fabulist with a skewed brain, and he was peddling a fiction. Even more unfortunately, the hooter which this same scamp sold to Blodgett for forty panes mimicked the mating call of the strange huge bulbous blind albino

beings with tentacles and suckers. And, as misfortune piled on misfortune, there was nothing remotely fictional about them!

So Blodgett, though as yet he did not realise it, was in something of a pickle. Unable to hoist himself back on to his feet, he lay sprawled on dank stone slabs, filth gushing past inches from his face. The lantern torch attached to his helmet gave him enough light to read by, so, having hooted the hooter a few times, he lit a cigarette and took from one of his pockets a pamphlet to pass the time. It was a curious piece of work by Dobson, a sort of potted biography of Hungarian football ace Ferenc Puskas intertwined with a muddle-headed meditation upon the unpopularity of certain card games. Not surprisingly, it is now out of print.

Blodgett was so engrossed in Dobson's description of the card game *My Lady's Bonnet*, interspersed as it was with vivid passages about the 1959 European Cup Final, that he only became aware of the pair of strange huge bulbous blind albino beings with tentacles and suckers slithering towards him when he felt their fetid breath on the back of his neck.

I know this is a particularly exciting point in the narrative, and I do not wish unduly to keep readers in suspense, but I can hear objections being raised by members of the pernicky community. How, they ask, does Blodgett feel breath on the back of his neck when he is encased in sewerwear, including a big gorgeous helmet? The answer of course is that a patch of muslin, punctured with many holes, is sewn into the sewerwear precisely at the back of the neck, just below the rim of the helmet, for reasons too obvious to elucidate.

Blodgett had just lit a second cigarette. With great presence of mind, and a rapidity of action learned in the testing ground of the Hideous Unlikely Swamp Of Scroonhoonpooge, he overpowered the two squelching horrors by poking one in the sucker with his burning cigarette and thwacking the other one on the tentacles with the Dobson pamphlet. He was then able to use the support of their huge bulbous bodies to lever himself upright.

Still puzzled at the non-appearance of the rescue patrol, Blodgett used his inhuman strength to drag the two strange huge bulbous blind albino beings with tentacles and suckers behind him as he trudged through the sewers seeking an exit. For the first time he was thankful for the unpointiness of his surroundings, for it made his dragging much easier than if he had had to negotiate pointy bits. That was a problem he would have to face when he was

back on the surface, but he was consoled by the thought that he had enough coinage in his pockets to pay for the hire of a cart to carry the captured beings back to his decisively moderne chalet at the edge of town.

Later, much later, in fact three days later, Blodgett finally found his way out of the Pointy Town sewers. He hired a cart and carried his prizes back to his decisively moderne chalet at the edge of town. 'They proved,' he wrote, 'to be quite splendid pets, although I was a little upset when they ate my Toggenburgs.'

The highly amusing story of Blodgett and his goats will, alas, have to wait for another time.

Songs My Mother Taught Me

MY MOTHER HAD a tin ear and a voice like a corncrake. In spite of these shortcomings, she saw it as her maternal duty to teach me a number of songs. I do not think she hoped that one day I might have bouquets thrown at me as I took a bow upon the opera house stage, it was merely that she felt the ability to sing songs was a necessary social accomplishment, like having good table manners or making small talk with riffraff.

It was on the day after my sixth birthday that Ma announced her intention. I was happily sprawled on the floor playing with a stick and a lump of coal when she swished into my nursery through the butchers' drapes, grabbed me by the wrist, and hauled me off to what she henceforth called 'the music room'. This was actually one of the pantries in which she had cleared space for her spinet.

She began, inappropriately, by teaching me the *Four Last Songs* of Richard Strauss. These were quite a challenge for a six-year-old who spoke no German and was accompanied, not by an orchestra, but by a cack-handedly tinkled spinet, and much aggression.

'For Christ's sake, Arpad!', Ma would shout, 'Try harder or I will set the Grunty Man on you!'

The precise nature of the Grunty Man had never been explained to me, but, like all six-year-olds, I was terrified of him. Ma did let slip that his awful rages could be soothed by song, and I believed her. Indeed, I still do, so many years later. Ma has long been in her grave, and her little Arpad has grown old and frail, but I never crawl into my bed at night without putting out a saucer of suet and marzipan to placate the Grunty Man should he smash his way into my chalet as midnight strikes. When he removes the treats from the saucer, the

pressure knob concealed beneath it will click up and activate a gramophone player, and the fearsome creature will be lulled by the dulcet tones of Dame Nellie Melba crackling from a 78.

When I had mastered the *Four Last Songs* to Ma's satisfaction, we moved on to *Dr Bogenbroom*. This is a 1971 song by Jethro Tull, not one of their better-known pieces, and one which, curiously, I found far harder to learn than the Strauss. Much of the difficulty was due to the fact that Ma was now accompanying me on a wheezy and motheaten sackbut, an instrument with which she showed even less proficiency than the spinet. Our family factotum, Mungo, of Carpathian peasant stock, had grown fearful of the sound of the spinet after a series of nightmares, and had thrown it down a well. Ma resolved to change the locks on all the pantry doors, and to banish Mungo to the garden. He made himself a yurt as shelter against the snow, for this was a time of great howling blizzards. In the evenings, from my nursery window, I would hear Mungo singing away. He had a deep and booming voice and sang the Carpathian ditties remembered from his childhood, but Ma said they were abominations and nailed fast the shutters on my windows. Thereafter the silence was broken only by my own relentless practising, over and over again, of *Dr Bogenbroom*. It took me many months to crack it, but I did. As a reward, Ma gave me a new lump of coal to play with. The other one had crumbled, so I had been tapping my stick upon the floor, or upon the shell of Mungo's tortoise.

I did not have much playtime, though, because Ma insisted I next learn *Essay On Pigs* by Hans Werner Henze. Difficult, brutal, and shouty, these five settings of the poem by Gastón Salvatore suited me perfectly, and in a matter of days I had them down pat. In fact I learned them before Mungo had finished repairing the spinet. Ma had pushed him down the well and made him fetch the various broken fragments, then locked him in a linen cupboard with a hammer and pliers and nails until he put the instrument back in one piece. She hated the sackbut, as did I, and we both looked forward to the day she could bash out her witlessly-arranged accompaniments upon the spinet once more. But Mungo was a slow worker, and almost a year passed before he was done. During this time, it was my job to feed his tortoise, and I became very familiar with curly kale and lettuce, to my immeasurable benefit in later life.

I fear I must pass in silence over the next stage in my song-singing education, for it is too painful to recollect. Ma somehow got it into her head to teach me *Drink Ye Every One The Waters Of His Own Cistern, Until I Come And Take You Away*, the single - and singular - song written by the out of print pamphleteer Dobson. I learned it. I sang it. I can still sing it. But it gives me no pleasure to do so, and it frightens even the crickets in my hearth. I will write about them separately, by the way.

Her spinet now restored, Ma's pedagogic impulses were a-buzz. By the time St Bibblybibdib's Day swung round, she had taught me *Che gelida manina*, *Roll Along Covered Wagon*, all one hundred and fourteen songs in the collection published by Charles Ives in 1922, and *The Light Pours Out Of Me* by Magazine. Keen as I was to crack right on, it was on the eve of my patron saint's day that I was felled by an ague. I lost the use of my limbs, was rendered half-blind, and could only croak pitifully. Now, Ma had no truck with the medical profession, relying instead on Mungo's befuddled and, I suspect, inaccurate memories of Carpathian peasant nostrums. Most if not all of these seemed to involve gunk and fluid drained from the gall bladder of his tortoise, and the chanting of gibberish at my bedside. I cannot say if, or how, it contributed to my recovery from the ague, but the chanting certainly had a profound effect on Ma. I have said she had a voice like a corncrake; now she began to behave like one. After listening, rapt, to Mungo, she would lollop off across the fields to the edge of Scroonhoonpooage farm, and hide in the wheat, gobbling down insects and seeds and shoots and frogs. As I got better, and my sight returned, I noted that when sitting at my bedside she was furiously knitting herself a pair of woollen wings.

By the time of my seventh birthday I was fit as a fiddle. I jumped out of bed and scampered to the pantry, keen to begin work on *The Song Of Investment Capital Overseas* by the Art Bears and *More Than A Feeling* by Boston. Ma had given me to understand that these two songs would complete my repertoire, and with them under my belt I would never be at a loss to entertain sophisticated people at cocktail parties for the rest of my life. But when I pushed open the pantry door I was met with a sight so traumatic that it meant I would never become the sort of person, with easy manners and social dash, who receives invitations to cocktail parties. Mungo was keening his deafening Carpathian peasant chant, and applying a poultice made from his tortoise's

gall bladder goo to Ma, who was encased from head to toe in a corncrake suit made of wool. She, in her turn, was calling 'crex! crex! crex!' over and over again. Of the spinet, there was no sign.

I never did learn to sing those two songs. Over the following year, Ma tried all in her power to turn me into a corncrake chick. I was forbidden to sing anything at all, even the *Essay On Pigs*, my stick and my lump of coal were cast into a dustbin, and my time was split between hiding in the wheat and being chanted at by Mungo in the pantry.

God knows what would have happened had fate not intervened. Shortly before my eighth birthday, Mungo was called up by the Carpathian peasant army reserve, and returned to his homeland. We waved him off from the station. He left his tortoise with me for safekeeping. It lives with me still, and I feed it on curly kale and lettuce, but I have never drained a drop of fluid from its gall bladder. Ma eventually came to her senses and shed her corncrake ways, but she never taught me any more songs.

The Fainting Goat

YOU WOULD DO well to remember, if ever you are out walking in the vicinity of the farmyard at Scroonhoonpooage, that you may come face to face with the fainting goat. If you encounter it on the lane leading out of the farmyard towards the orchard, and as soon as it sees you it topples over in a swoon, you must not be alarmed. You must certainly not think that the goat has fainted because you have caused it fright, by dint of something alarming in your appearance. Even if there is something terrifying about you, such as a twisted-up face or a too-brightly coloured clinker jacket or your being armed with a mail order Mannlicher-Carcano sniper's rifle, none of these things will be what causes the goat to faint. The goat will faint for the reason it is known as the fainting goat, which is that it is constantly fainting, dozens of times a day, even dozens of times an hour.

This constant swooning is a mystery as far as the local vets are concerned. There are several vets with practices in walking or short bus journey distance of Scroonhoonpooage farmyard, and all of them at one time or another have been called to tend to the fainting goat. They have tried all sorts of treatments, from goat-friendly smelling salts to the deployment of Peruvian whistling vessels to simply shouting very loudly into the goat's ear, and though such techniques may revive the goat from its faint, none have served to stop it clattering over in a dead swoon again and again as the long countryside day draws on towards dusk and rainfall. When it is conscious, the goat seems hale and hearty, even frisky, and engages in all the normal activities one might expect of a farmyard goat. I would list these activities but I am sure you are thoroughly up to speed with the doings of goats, given the demographic of the Hooting Yard readership.

There has been a certain amount of bickering among the local vets, as each of them grows frustrated at their inability to stop the continual fainting of the fainting goat. When they passed out of their veterinary colleges, they were all brimming with confidence, armed, as they thought, with the knowledge and expertise to handle all sorts of bestial maladies, from the workaday to the exotic. Whether it be a cow with a pox or an ostrich beset by Von Straubenzee's Gruesomeness, these vets believed they could march into a farmyard or menagerie and win the undying gratitude of farmers and menagerists by weaving their vetty spells. An injection here, a siphoning off of fluid there, and to the gasps of their keepers the cow or ostrich or whatever beast it may be would leap up, restored to vigour, and there would be a round of applause and the discreet passing of banknotes into the pocket of the smug vet.

But the fainting goat goes on fainting, day in day out, and not one of the vets has a clue what to do about it. When they gather of an evening on the balcony of the Café Simon Schama, at first they boast of their breakthroughs, the splint affixed to the leg of the sparrow, the gunk drained from the badger's boils, the palsied pig unpalsied. But as they sip their fermented slops, tempers fray, and the talk soon turns to the fainting goat, that damned intractable fainting goat, and harsh words are said and there is spitting and chucking and fisticuffs, black eyes and bruises and the odd dagger slash. And so it goes on, night after night.

Now curiously enough, during the night the fainting goat never faints. It remains wide awake all night every night, either in its comfy pen or out in some field, doing goaty things, things other goats do in daylight. Apprised of this singular information, some have posited that the goat's swoons are not swoons so much as its repeatedly falling asleep from exhaustion. It is indeed a cogent case, but it is nevertheless mistaken, for reasons crystal clear to those, such as some among the vets, who have made studies of the goat's neurological peculiarities. It sleeps not, yet it faints. The one is understood, and explicable, the other not. There are more curious cases among the goat population, as among other farmyard beasts, but not many, sure enough. That is why the vets fret so.

But you will not fret, will you, as you wander past Scroonhoonpooge farmyard, on your way to the orchard, to pluck persimmons from the trees, illegally, and you come upon the fainting goat upon the path and it faints at

your feet? You will pat its little horns and lift it to its feet, and send it tottering off along the lane to its next collapse, for you are wiser than the vets, you are wiser than the farmer. The only thing wiser than you is the fainting goat itself. No goat was ever wiser, nor had so explosive a brain

Beset By Hobgoblins

BE IT KNOWN that I have, for the past week or so, been beset by hobgoblins that scampered out of the wainscot. They may well have been Vatican hobgoblins, for one of them let slip, while besetting me, that the cashpoint machine or ATM from which it had that morning withdrawn funds displayed its instructions in Latin. While I was aware that the Vatican City is the only state, or statelet, to have programmed its cashpoints thus, I had no idea that hobgoblins had need of banknotes, or indeed of money in any form. So intent was this particular hobgoblin on besetting me, however, that it took not a jot of notice of my politely shrieked queries regarding its financial affairs, so I am none the wiser.

Another thing I did not know was that for decades there had been hobgoblins skulking behind the wainscot, biding their time. This was a shocking revelation. So quietly had they been preparing to beset me, over all those years, that I did not have an inkling of their existence. Nor had they betrayed their presence when I was doing the odd bit of wainscot-related do-it-yourself handiwork in the dying days of the John Major government. Armed with a secondhand Barry Bucknell book, I had been keen to cut my chops on a simple project, though I must confess that I abandoned the work before the wainscot was fully rejigged, or whatever it was I was doing to it, and I have more or less neglected to follow up with any other home improvement jobs in the succeeding years. There have been other calls upon my time, which I will not go into here, except to point out, because it is pertinent, that during the first years of the Blair administration I learned much about he-man wrestling holds, though as an observer rather than as a practitioner. I had little opportunity to watch actual wrestling bouts where real wrestlers demonstrated the holds

I was learning about, and I relied for the most part on black-and-white diagrams sprinkled throughout a *Teach Yourself He-Man Wrestling Holds* book I had acquired at a rummage sale.

So when the hobgoblins came scampering from the wainscot, I thought to effect a citizen's arrest - or a series of citizen's arrests - by using the techniques I had taught myself through painstaking study of he-man wrestling hold diagrams, often by candlelight on stormy winter nights. Alas, through lack of practice I had grown rusty. This was stuff I had learned when Frank Dobson was the Health Secretary, it was that long ago. I was quite unable to gain any purchase on the limbs or necks of the besetting hobgoblins, and they slithered and squirmed from my grasp with quicksilver ease.

I wondered if I might persuade them to desist by poking them with a fork. Somewhere I had read that this was an effective deterrent with other types of goblin, so it seemed a reasonable assumption that it would work with hobgoblins, even ones which originated in the Vatican, if that was indeed the case. As I dashed into the kitchenette flapping my hands at my besetters, I recalled that the article I had read - in a magazine devoted either to forks or to goblins - recommended first poking one's fork into a pickled onion. Thus would the tines of the fork be coated with anti-goblin juices, including pickling brine. Now as it happened, only the day before, in a fit of peckishness, I had gorged myself stupid on pickled onions, and on other pickled items, and my cupboards were bare, at least in that foodstuff subsection. Poking my fork into a fairy cake or a munchy reconstituted fish slice would not be remotely helpful, nor, I surmised, would steeping the tines of the fork in a jug of goat's milk. Nevertheless, I opened my cutlery drawer and took out one of my treasured Margrave of Hohenhollernbadgasgothenengraff forks, from the dinner set presented to me all those years ago, around the time of Harold Wilson's shock resignation, by the Margrave's very own great-great-great-granddaughter. Her name, I recall, was Googie, the only Googie I have ever come across save for the esteemed star of stage and screen Googie Withers (born 1917). It is as fine a set of cutlery as human ingenuity has ever fashioned, and I felt that the intrinsic quality of the fork could outweigh the absence of pickled onion residue when it came time to poke it into one hobgoblin after another. That, of course, was the task now before me, and I had no idea it would prove

impossible. If you have ever tried to poke a hobgoblin with a fork, you will know why.

Later, as I sat hopeless and forlorn in my armchair dangling a bent Margrave of Hohenhollernbadgasgothengraff fork from my quivering hand, still beset by hobgoblins seemingly more energetic than before, I reflected upon the manifold miseries of existence in this vale of tears. I have only just recovered enough of my wits to write about those terrible days. This morning, for reasons I cannot explain, each and every hobgoblin suddenly ceased besetting me and scuttled back behind the wainscot. Perhaps they had run out of cash and had to go to their infernal Latin cashpoint machine to replenish their hobgoblinity wallets. But that would hardly take all day, and they show no sign of reappearing. I know, though, that they are lurking there, silent and still, biding their time, as hobgoblins do.

Potty Baron

ONCE UPON A time there was a baron who was completely potty. His head was roughly the same size and shape as most heads you'll come across, but the stuff that went on inside its spongiform crannies was deeply, deeply weird. To give one example, sometimes, when the baron looked in the mirror, he saw a swan staring back at him. Granted, in those days looking-glasses were rarely as smooth and as free of flaws as those that are manufactured by the great mirror-makers of modern times, but barons and swans were pretty much the same as they are now, so one can't really blame the looking-glass for the baron's visual delusion. It is not as if he had a particularly long or sinuous neck, either, which might have been some excuse. Like his head, his neck was unremarkable, and could have been mistaken for anybody else's neck at a glance, or in dim light. And the light was often dim in those days and in his baronial bailiwick, for they did not have electric lightbulbs or fluorescent strip lighting or Kleig lights or any of the other immensely illuminating benefits of our day. What they did have were candles, of tallow or blubber or occasionally beeswax, if the bees were happy at their work. So the artificial light the baron had in his castle was of a flickering and smoky nature, and much, so very much, of the castle was steeped in shadow and gloom, for candles could not be placed everywhere. That would have been too expensive, and too much of a fire risk. By the standards of the time, the baron was a wealthy baron, but even he couldn't afford to light up so enormous a castle. Perhaps he had gone nuts because the castle was so bloody big. There must have been times when he got lost, roaming around the place, looking for one of his toilets or pantries or dining halls or rumpus rooms. The thing about this baron was that he lived alone, shunning the company of courtiers and sycophants and hangers-on

and even of servants. It was unusual in those days for anyone to know such solitude, unless they were clapped in a dungeon somewhere for grain theft. In those circumstances, the villain could be chucked into an oubliette and chained to its wall and all but abandoned save for once a day having a mouldy loaf and a pig's bladder filled with brackish water thrown down to them. At least they got fed, whereas the potty baron had to fend for himself. Fortunately, his pantries were very well stocked. His uncle, the previous baron, had not been potty at all. He was a careful and calculating kind of baron, who made use of his reason, and laid up so many supplies to guard against famine and war and pestilence that he could have lived on the contents of his pantries for hundreds of years. But of course, not even in those days did people live so long, no matter what you might have read in stories. The potty baron's uncle was barely forty years old when he died after being kicked in the head by a rampaging hog. His head, too, had been of a standard size and shape, but it certainly wasn't after the hog had done with it. I'll spare you the details, because you might be sick. The baron vomited all over the shop when he was brought to view his uncle's hog-dented head. It looked unnatural and misshapen, like a Frankenstein experiment gone awry. The potty baron would not have put it in those words himself, of course, for this was hundreds of years before Mary Shelley was even born, but the idea of somebody, or something, creating artificial life was already present in the baron's potty head. He was ahead of his time in that sense, though it would be more accurate to say that he was out of his time, out of any time, existing as he did in a kind of weird and bonkers daze with little or no purchase on reality. Every so often, the notions sloshing around inside his head made sense, as was the case with his vow, upon inheriting the baronetcy, to expel all the hogs from the castle. What he might lose in future hog-meat banquets he would gain in not getting his head kicked in and an untimely demise. Thus he acquired the services of Skippy, a perky little dog which chased all the hogs away, petrified as they were by its yap. The baron gave Skippy a tabard to wear, made out of whole cloth, to advertise its official baronial status. But once the hogs were driven out the baron grew irritated by Skippy, and had him placed in kennels. Never again was any living thing to share the enormous castle with the potty baron, except for tiny, barely visible insects, and a great variety of bacteria. Where his uncle had maintained an army of drudges armed with mops and pails and the most up to date cleaning

substances available to a baron of long ago, his reclusive nephew seemed quite content to allow filth and muck to cake every castle surface. The pong was indescribable, but the potty baron was impervious to it, as he tended to wander his domain with plugs of fine linen stuffed up his nose. Like the rest of his head, there was nothing out of the ordinary about his nose. It had a somewhat corvine cast. He removed his linen plugs when out and about in the open air, striding along the battlements or taking a turn around the moat in a rowing boat. In his uncle's day the water in the moat had been channelled from a burbling spring in a neighbouring dell, and many fat and healthy fish swam within it, waiting all their lives to be yanked out by a baronial angler and taken to the kitchen and fried for the baron's breakfast. The potty baron had dismissed the anglers as he rid himself of everybody else, and he stopped up the channel from the burbling spring, and now the water in the moat was stagnant and all the fish had perished and only slimy green tendrils of weed were to be found there. In places the weed was so thick that the potty baron had to row with all his might to force his rowing boat through it. This proved to be splendid exercise, and was one of the reasons why the baron did not waste away in his germ-ridden solitude. He especially liked to row around the moat during cataclysmic storms, daring lightning to come strike him. He would even shout at the sky, as he rowed, struggling through the glut of moatweed, in the night, his cries louder than the thunder, but not once was he struck. The castle was, though, regularly, sometimes catching fire as a result, just as it would have done had the potty baron been able to fill every inch of it with candles. These fires never took hold. Invariably they burned themselves out, conquered perhaps by damp and mould and puddles. There were hundreds of puddles within the castle, for most of the roofs and ceilings had rotted away, and when the rain poured down, as it did most days, for this was a very wet country, it poured straight down into the toilets and pantries and dining halls and rumpus rooms, forming puddles. The potty baron splashed through them like a duck. Certainly his movements were more akin to those of a duck than to a swan such as the one which glared back at him from his looking-glass, occasionally. For he did not always see a swan in the mirror. Sometimes he saw himself, linen plugs in his corvine nose, eyes curiously resembling those of a coquettish courtesan, hair matted and adorned with berries and string. At other times, the most terrifying times, he saw nothing at all in the mirror. When

this happened the potty baron would tremble and shriek. Had he known of vampires, he might have thought himself one, for as we know these befanged and becaped Transylvanians are never visible in mirrors. But the baron's castle was very very far away from Transylvania, and he had never heard these tales, and not even within his demented cranium had the thought of a bloodsucking count of exclusively nocturnal habits who cast neither shadow nor reflection ever presented itself. As far as the potty baron was concerned, on those days when his mirror was blank he assumed he did not exist. It was the awful horror of mortal obliteration which caused his trembling and shrieking. He learned, albeit slowly, to overcome his mind-snapping fear by turning away from the looking-glass and heading straight for the nearest pantry, there to stuff himself with some of the foods preserved by his canny uncle. He would eat so much that he would eventually fall asleep and when, later, he awoke crumpled in a heap on the pantry floor, surrounded by crumbs and stalks and pips, he simply stood up and dusted himself off and went about his day, or night, whichever one it was, shoving the memory of his dreadful annihilation into a pocket of his potty brain. Then he would avoid mirrors for days, or weeks, keeping as much as possible to those parts of the castle where there were no looking-glasses, or where those that had existed in his uncle's day had been smashed, or just shattered by themselves, through neglect and hopelessness. One such place was the castle belfry. The old baron, and all the barons before him, had rung the castle bells for a purpose, to celebrate a victory in battle, to warn of plague, or to summon the peasantry to come and pay their tithes and taxes, under pain of being flung into dungeons. Not one of these things was of the remotest concern to the potty baron, whose baffling interior world was oblivious to them. When he set the bells pealing, it was to quite unfathomable ends. He may have been warding off sprites, or calling them unto him, or any of a thousand other incomprehensible reasons. And yet his bell-ringing was surprisingly melodious. We can surmise that it may have sounded not unlike a Shostakovich symphony, or a Gabriel Fauré sonata for cello and piano, done by bells. Afar, in the fields, the peasants hearing the potty baron's carillon would cease their hoeing and grubbing, and mop the sweat from their brows, and glance at each other, a thousand years of rustic wisdom shining from their eye sockets, and they might then form a ring in the field, mud-caked hands holding mud-caked hands, and they would bow their heads and regard the clogged soil they worked day in,

day out, all their lives, as the rain poured down upon their heads, heads for the most part of the same normal size and shape as that of the baron, save for a few peasants with microcephalic or macrocephalic or hydrocephalic heads, who despite their condition still tilled and ploughed and scrubbed with all the other peasants, tirelessly, muddily, soaked by rainfall, in their peasant rags, frayed and filthy, from dawn to dusk, and often throughout the night, beset by demons of the darkness, working the land with broken spades and blunted forks and desperately, with sticks and twigs, in icy winds, and stooped together in their fields, forming a circle, they snicked the wax out of their ears and listened, each one of them thinking 'The potty baron is clanging his bells, and all shall be well in this life and all shall be well in the life to come'.

Detective Story

BONES OF BIRDS buried in a ditch. Rain falls upon the ditch and great puddles are formed. A passing pig roots in the puddles for chewables. The pig uproots the bird bones. Detective Captain Cargpan is called in to investigate. He does not immediately recognise the bones as being bones of birds. His top forensics wallah is sick in bed. The rest of the team are on a seaside outing. Cargpan leaps to the conclusion that he has found the bones of a homunculus. He rounds up a few known criminals and roughs them up back at the station. Not a one of them confesses. Cargpan trawls through a logbook of missing homunculi. He tries to tally up locations and dates. He taps one of the bird bones against a saucer. From the sound it makes he guesses it to be twenty years old. But no homunculi went missing twenty years ago. He lights a cigarette and mooches about the deserted police station canteen in the middle of the night.

In a spinney a long way away a miscreant is up to something. The miscreant is surrounded by feathers. Blood is dribbling from his mouth.

In the morning the forensics wallah is worse. She is taken to a clinic by a fast loud ambulance. The rest of her team are trapped at the seaside. Detective Captain Cargpan wakes up on a bench in the canteen. He stumbles to the cells and roughs up a ne'er-do-well. Upstairs, he throws the missing homunculi logbook across his office. He returns to the canteen for many, many sausages. He kneels in the chapel and cries out to God. Cargpan is a Muggletonian. He lines up the tiny bones on his desk and counts them and tags them with tags. He returns to the ditch for a stakeout.

The miscreant hobbles out of the spinney. He has wiped the blood off his lips and chin with a rag. He is carrying a suspicious carrier bag. He waits at the bus stop.

Detective Captain Cargpan trains his night vision goggles on the ditch. He has commandeered a bird hide. He roughed up the birdists who were there when he arrived and sent them packing. The rain pours down, creating fresh puddles in the ditch. Cargpan slurps cocoa from a flask confiscated from the birdists. He wants more sausages, but there are none to be had.

The miscreant is aboard the bus. It is hurtling along the lanes towards the field where the ditch is. In the darkness, the driver loses control and the bus plunges down a chasm. It is swallowed up in the sopping wet mud at the bottom of the chasm.

When Detective Captain Cargpan returns to the station he sees a forensics locum. His wallah has taken a turn for the worse. The bigwigs have sent the locum to replace her for the time being. The locum tells Cargpan that the bones lined up on his desk are the bones of birds. Cargpan thumps his fist against his own forehead. A minion runs in to the room to tell Cargpan that a bus has inexplicably vanished. This will be his next case.

In the spinney, from underneath a pile of bloody feathers, a homunculus emerges. It blinks and cackles and scampers away, leaving a trail of weird gas.

Sponges Of The Lumpenproletariat

SPONGES OF THE Lumpenproletariat is a magnificent work of social history, a companion volume to *Blood Sausage Of The Petit Bourgeoisie*. As in the earlier work, the author has tracked down several representatives of the class and interviewed them in depth. Where before we learned so, so much about petit bourgeois blood sausage consumption, now we find out almost too much about the lumpenproletariat and its devotion to sponge, in both its cake and bathtime forms.

This is history turning the world topsy turvy, of course. We think of blood sausage as a workers' aliment, perhaps a snack to be eaten while tramping between factory and pigeon loft, or in the subterranean gloom of a mine, while canaries tweet in their cages as reassurance that no toxic gases are about to fell the pitmen where they huddle. It is interesting to note that birds feature in both those examples of lumpenprole snacktimes, yet the blood of birds is rarely to be found in blood sausage. Rare, yes, but not entirely unknown. One of the author's key findings in *Blood Sausage Of The Petit Bourgeoisie* is that a small subclass of shopkeepers and rent collection men developed a taste for sausages made from the blood of starlings, nuthatches, and whooper swans. Such a commingling of avian gore is against the laws of God, which is perhaps why it was a short-lived fad. Not so with the more common sausages made from the blood of pigs and hens and goats, which are shown to be decisively petit bourgeois rather than lumpenproletarian. Accepted wisdom is knocked on its head.

I wish I could remember the name of the author. I would be lying if I said it was on the tip of my tongue, because it isn't, chiefly because I no longer have a tongue. A year or so ago, much like accepted wisdom, I too was knocked on

the head, by a malefactor, who stole my wallet and my cardigan and, for good measure, broke both my arms and tore out my tongue. When I recovered, I was told I had been set upon by none other than the killer Babinsky, so I was lucky to be still alive. As far as I know, the maniac is still at large, so make sure you lock your doors and stick pins into your little wax Babinsky doll before you go to bed.

And just as we learned about the true social sphere in which blood sausage is prized, so in the new book by wotsisname we discover the importance of sponge to the lumpenproles. I had no idea, for example, that horny-handed sons of toil were quite so partial to dainties such as fairy cakes and sponge fingers. Equally surprising, given they are sometimes called the great unwashed, is the value placed upon bath sponges by the lumpenproletariat. Even those who use their bathtubs for coal storage treasure their sponges, often holding soap-sud squeezing contests on some patch of waste ground behind their noisome hovels. I have a dim memory of seeing some such event when I was tot, as the rag and bone man's cart clopped by pulled by a great grey drayhorse. My pa told me the horse's bright and battering sandal was fettled for him by Felix Randal, the farrier. As an agricultural worker rather than a lumpenprole, Felix Randal was probably not that big on sponges, either cakey or bathtubby, although had he lived long enough to build up his fettling business into a chain of franchises, he might have aspired to becoming a petit bourgeois, and then he could have stuffed himself with blood sausage. It is unlikely, though not impossible, that he would have developed a taste for the blood of horses.

All in all, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Quite apart from a text which bounds along in sprung rhythm, it has a mighty armature of footnotes, though they are printed in so tiny a font that I wish I had received my review copy before I was attacked by the killer Babinsky. So terrifying was his countenance, ever since that awful night I have had to wear shaded spectacles à la the Irish minstrel and tax evader Paul Hewson. Not only does this becloud my vision but, as you can imagine, it has shattered my reputation as a person of effortless swish and élan.

Oh, and not only footnotes but gorgeous, gorgeous illustrations, in vivid colour, of sponges and blood.

And not only footnotes and illustrations but a really terrific index.

And not only footnotes and illustrations and an index, but a tear-out coupon in the frontispiece of each copy which, when taken to your newsagent, can be exchanged for a blood-soaked sponge. The idea, I think, is that one squeezes the blood from the sponge much as a lumpenprole would have squeezed soapsuds from it, and then one forms the blood into a sausage, and eats it, perhaps with a side helping of sponge cake.

And thus is the clash of classes in the grand sweep of history quietly subverted by this author whose name I am at a loss to recall.

Unsung Victorian Genius

AFTER I MENTIONED Prudence Foxglove on my radio show, I was deluged with post from listeners avid for more information about her. I am currently working on a biography of the unsung Victorian genius which, though potted, will also be magisterial. Meanwhile, I have managed to dig out an excerpt from her play *May The Light Of Our Saviour Beam Down Upon The Cripples And Paupers Of Every Parish In The Land* (1894).

[Scene : A filthy hovel steeped in gloom.]

Drunken Brute : Go and get my bludgeon so I can bludgeon you about the head in a fit of intoxicated rage.

Urchin : Lumme, guvnor, you're as frightening a brute as ever bludgeoned a poor half-blind urchin about the head!

Drunken Brute : Yes I am, and if you don't get my bludgeon this instant I'll box your ears into the bargain, you urchin you.

Urchin : Oh! Did ever a poor half-blind urchin lead so squalid and unChristian a life as I am fated to do since my parents perished in an early railway accident and I was abducted from Kindly Old Ma Dropsy's Idyllic Cottage For Pallid Infants by the Drunken Brute?

[Urchin exits to fetch Drunken Brute's bludgeon. Drunken Brute does some comic business with a birdcage and a set of napkins. Enter Urchin, holding a prayer book.]

Drunken Brute : What now, Urchin? That looks to me suspiciously like a prayer book.

Urchin : It *is* a prayer book, Drunken Brute. While I was stumbling half-blind about the other part of the filthy hovel, trying to find the bludgeon, a proper posh lady dressed all in finery came and handed it to me, suggesting that I read some prayers to you.

Drunken Brute : Grrr. I've a good mind to give you a double boxing of the ears.

Urchin : Yes, that is quite understandable, given that you are a Drunken Brute. But perhaps the lady was right, and that if I read you some prayers you will be engulfed in the light of Our Saviour, and no longer be drunken and brutish but a reformed character of sober mien and a determination to devote your life to hard work and social advancement.

[Urchin begins to recite prayer. Drunken Brute is seized by pangs of remorse and self-loathing and collapses into his chair. Enter Prudence Foxglove.]

Prudence Foxglove : My name is Prudence Foxglove, and I am the proper posh lady who pounced upon this half-blind Urchin in the other part of the filthy hovel. And see what wonders I have wrought by bringing the word of Our Saviour into this benighted hellhole. Note, too, the daring modernism of my play, where I, the authoress, barge into the action and address you, the audience, directly. We shall leave the Urchin and the Drunken Brute bedazzled by the Lord's light, and in Act Two we shall cast our eyes upon another scene of moral depravity and high debauch. The scene is another, filthier, hovel, where a smallpox-scarred match-girl is at the mercy of a different drunken brute, until by chance they hear a thunderous sermon from an Oxford-educated preacher, a man of stern Protestant rectitude, and their lives are transformed.

Seven Stints

First Stint

1. Dragon: roars, opens its mouth; 2. Bird: twitters, a small door in the tower opens, the bird looks out, flaps its wings and opens its beak; 3. Stork: rapidly opens and closes its beak; 4. Prince: strikes the dragon with his sword; 5. Ghost: appears suddenly from behind the tower and wails; 6. Young Boy: strikes the bell with a hammer.

Second Stint

1. Dragon : turns into a ghost; 2. Bird : caws, revolves at a terrifying speed; 3. Albatross : emerges from beneath a bejewelled ermine cloak; 4. King : distributes alms to hobbledehoy; 5. Sedgwick : does Sedgwick things with a thimble and a balloon; 6. Myrmidon : strikes the bell with a towel.

Third Stint

1. King : has penny on tongue, lifts instep, fells wrongdoer; 2. Stork : disassembles; 3. Prince : falls through trap door; 4. Ghost : shakes its manacles; 5. Idiot : collects drool in a beaker; 6. Grunt Man : swipes at the bell with his big hairy paw.

Fourth Stint

1. Dragon : blasts metallic fire through a hoop; 2. Duck : peeps out from behind tower and clucks; 3. Nixon : parades dog in front of bell; 4. King : lollops about; 5. Bird : cries out, *erie, erie!*; 6. Ghost : makes bell resound with a blast of icy breath.

Fifth Stint

1. Prince : shovels coal into a brazier; 2. Potter : strains lettuce in riddle; 3. Stork : flaps wings at pig; 4. Pig : flaps ears at stork; 5. Baron : spreads butter on cracker; 6. Dragon : strikes bell with spoon.

Sixth Stint

1. Albatross : slumps in horror; 2. Yoko Ono : waves napkin; 3. Ghost : elicits Lovecraftian shudders from passers-by; 4. Prince : resembles the man with the twisted lip in the Conan Doyle story; 5. Has-Been : writhes, gibbers, bleeds on rug; 6. Pig : bashes bell with trotter.

Seventh Stint

1. Baron : engraves name on skylight; 2. Bird : suffers pangs; 3. Dragon : smothers Nixon with embroidered pillow; 4. Idiot : abandoned on platform of oil rig; 5. Ghost : all tucked up and fast asleep; 6. King : melts down bell and fashions it into a crown.

Swans In Thunderstorms

'There is a superstitious belief that swans cannot hatch their eggs unless a storm is raging, the sky mad with lightning bolts and thunderclaps. I suspect this is true, for on the countless occasions I have gone blundering into swans' nests, I have never seen eggs hatching, and the weather has invariably been balmy, for that is the kind of weather I prefer when blundering about among the nests of swans.'

– from *Quite A Few Things I Know About Swans* by Dobson (out of print)

WE HAVE ONLY Dobson's word that he blundered into 'countless' swans' nests during balmy-weather expeditions, and a number of commentators have cast doubt on this account. The out of print pamphleteer was probably lying through his teeth, just to make a point, though quite what the point is is one of those ineffable Dobsonian mysteries the like of which will keep students busy for the next thousand years.

One man who certainly did pay visits to swan habitats, in both balmy weather and thunderstorms, was Ah-Fang Van Der Houygendorp, the artist and mountaineer who perished in the Hindenburg disaster. Although his ornithological studies were decisively amateurish, even flawed, they were sincere, and he approached them with great gusto.

Ah-Fang first became interested in swans when he was asked to draw one by a manufacturer of matches. Incredibly, he had no idea what a swan was, and had to be shown engravings in a large and exhaustive encyclopaedia. It then had to be patiently explained to him that the swan was a type of bird,

fond of watery places. Ah-Fang was on his way to the seaside, ready to rent a sailing vessel and ply the oceans, when he received an urgent message on his portable metal tapping machine enlightening him as to the difference between the salt sea and the oceans on the one hand, and ponds, lakes, and rivers on the other. He kept a copy of this communiqué in his pocket until the end of his life, not out of any sentimentality, but simply as an aide memoire whenever he came upon a body of water.

Ah-Fang could of course have copied a swan from the illustrations in the encyclopaedia and earned his matchmakers'-money, but he prided himself on always drawing from life. Sometimes this could prove a considerable challenge, as when he was commissioned to provide a set of plates for an edition of H P Lovecraft's *At The Mountains Of Madness*. He never spoke of the circumstances in which he drew so vividly 'that nighted, penguin-fringed abyss', for example, and indeed, when questioned, Ah-Fang trembled with an authentically Lovecraftian shudder.

Once he was on the right track in terms of watery habitats, however, the depiction of swans was a much easier task. Ah-Fang saw his first swan on St Clothard's Day 1924. He had been told, by whom it is not clear, that there was a pond within hiking distance of his temporary quarters, a shack on a patch of waste ground somewhere in the foothills of a fantastic mountain. Taking a flask of aerated lettuce-water, some ready-toasted smokers' pop-tarts, a map, a pad and a pencil, Ah-Fang headed off towards the pond whistling an air by Hurlstone. When he got there, he sat on a municipal bench, spotted a swan, executed a quick sketch, ate and drank, and hurried home before becoming drenched by teeming rainfall. He worked up the sketch into a finished drawing with his customary élan, popped it in the post to the match manufacturer's agent, and sat back to await his payment.

Yet he found himself unable to relax, and in the following weeks was drawn back to the pond again and again, whatever the weather, to gape at swans, hardly bothering to sketch them. It was a stormy season, as it often is after St Clothard's Day, according to folk wisdom, and Ah-Fang had much opportunity to observe swans beset by thunder and lightning. He left no record of seeing eggs hatched during a storm, and it has to be said there was a profound, if endearing, ignorance in his gaping. Ah-Fang did not actually understand what he was looking at. Perhaps it was this pop-eyed, empty-headed stupidity that

made him the artist he was, one whose swan pictures now fetch preposterous sums.

One night by the pond, as storms blasted the sky and a gale howled, Ah-Fang was accosted by a mysterious figure who hove towards him from out of the darkness. Hoisting his lantern to see plainly who, or what, it was, Ah-Fang had only a moment to look before the light sputtered out. The figure wore a cloak, but her face was momentarily visible, and she bore a striking resemblance to, and may even have been the ghost of, Captivity Waite, the childhood sweetheart of Eugene Field, author of, among other works, the children's favourite *Wynken, Blynken, And Nod*. When she spoke, it was with a voice both sepulchral and sweet. She told Ah-Fang Van Der Houygendorp that there were in the world other ponds, and other swans, and there were lakes and meres and rivers and streams where yet other swans might be found, and that he should go to them, one by one, and gape, and sketch, and work up his sketches, and even paint, in great splodges of emulsion, upon sheets of hardboard, the swans he saw, all around the world, in watery places. And then Captivity Waite, if indeed it was she, made a delicate gesture of farewell, and walked away into the howling blackness of the night.

And so, next morning, began the five tremendous years of Ah-Fang Van Der Houygendorp's so-called 'world swan tour'. Without the guidance of Captivity Waite, or her phantom, however, there were false starts. Ah-Fang spent three months wandering in Arabia Deserta without seeing a single swan, and a further week in the jungles of Borneo. He returned, battered and sick in spirit, to his original pond, thinking he had been in some wise deceived. The sight of the swans he knew, in balmy weather and in storms, coddled him, and he revived. He realised that, if Captivity Waite had spoken the truth, and there were indeed swans elsewhere in the world, he would have to find a more reliable way of tracing them. He hit upon the method of hanging around in the sorts of taverns frequented by waterbird enthusiasts, listening in on conversations, picking up clues, gradually learning the whereabouts of hundreds, even thousands, of locations where the chances of finding swans were high. Sometimes, of course, his information was flawed, or he misheard a significant detail in the rowdiness of whatever tavern he was loitering in, and he would take a long and uncomfortable train journey to a particular pond only to discover it brackish and stagnant and home to nothing but weird, almost

Lovecraftian algae. But more often than not, Ah-Fang's unwitting informants sent him in the right direction, and that is why it is thought that he saw more swans in his five year tour than anyone had ever seen before.

He did not sketch them all, but those he did he worked up, as Captivity Waite had suggested, into huge paintings, swan after swan after swan, some in twilight, some in a blazing sun, some on ponds, some on lakes, some on meres, and some gliding with swanly grace down rivers and streams and even canals. Ah-Fang painted swans in balmy weather and in foul weather, and many a time in thunderstorms, brooding over a clutch of eggs. Many of the pictures look, to the untrained eye, almost identical, for Ah-Fang was never the most skilful of draughtsmen, and his skills lay in sloshing great daubs of emulsion on to his hardboard with haphazard zest, relying on a stencil to capture the basic swan-shape he sought. Curiously, the stencil was cut for him by a man named Bewick.

Potsdam Windbag

SO UNIVERSALLY IS the author of *Tales Told By An Idiot* known as the Potsdam Windbag that, in a new anthology of his work, his real name does not appear, even on the garish dust jacket. I have to confess that I do not know what that name is, and nor have I bothered to find out. I could have consulted an encyclopaedia, or a dictionary of nineteenth century Teutonic bloviators, but I am currently adopting an air of foppish lassitude, and I could barely bring myself to squelch across the sodden fields to the railway station to collect the copy of the book that had been left there for me, in a postal pouch, by a postal pouch person employed by the railway.

But bestir myself I did, during one of our recent thunderstorms, and thus for the past week I have been overjoyed to reacquaint myself with the prose of a true master. Admittedly, it is difficult to say of what precisely the Potsdam Windbag is a master. His stories are baffling, pointless, often idiotic, and grind on at pitiless length. One example included in the new book, *The Tale Of The Something Or Other, I Have Not Yet Worked Out What It Is Though*, prates on for over four hundred pages before stopping abruptly in the middle of an ungrammatical sentence. Perhaps that is not fair. There is a sort of grammar at work, but it is one unique to the Potsdam Windbag. He wrote exclusively in fractured English rather than in his native tongue, despite never leaving his beloved Potsdam nor ever, so far as we know, communicating with any English speakers. One of the most arresting facts about him is that, when he died, his extensive library was found to contain not a single work in English except those he had written himself.

And my! did he write. This new anthology is so hefty that I had to hire a peasant and his cart to carry it back across the fields. The thousands of pages of

dense, sometimes incomprehensible prose are a mere fraction of the Potsdam Windbag's outpourings, estimated to run to more millions of words than the combined works of hundreds of other windbags whose forgotten and unread books happily clog the bookshelves of our proper libraries.

Now, the surprising thing - surprising to me, at any rate - was that the peasant who hauled the tome home for me in his cart was steeped in the writings of the Potsdam Windbag. When he was growing up in a bare cabin in the forest, a paperback of the popular selection *Tales Told By An Idiot* was the only book his parents owned. His father, a woodcutter, had been an autodidact who had taught himself to read through persistent study of the texts, and thereafter read the *Tales* as bedtime stories to the peasant throughout, and indeed beyond, his childhood. This, I thought, might account for the strangulated vowel-sounds and guttural grunts which littered his speech-patterns. We were talking, the peasant and I, over a shared bowl of soup at my kitchen table, for having hired him for the carting and enjoyed his company I was loth to watch him vanish into the downpour. In fact, he has not left my hut since I invited him in a week ago, and has taken to sleeping on the floor of the pantry.

He told me of his favourite Potsdam Windbag story. Sadly, it is not one that has been collected in the new anthology, so I cannot reproduce it here. It is an early example of science fiction, in which the world becomes convinced that a character called 'Stephen Fry' is a super-intelligent being with an all-powerful brain. Characteristically, our author never makes a convincing case why so many should fall under the spell of this pandemic delusion. His tears dropping into our soup, the peasant wept as he recalled the terrific sadness of the story's end, where 'Fry' is revealed as merely an average man with a reasonably large vocabulary. I wondered if the Potsdam Windbag was trying to say something about himself in the tale he called *The Cleverest Man In The Universe*. His command of the language he chose to write in, if eccentric, is highly impressive, and, as I said, his work-rate was prodigious. But it is one of the later stories, and it could be that, looking back on his life's work, the Potsdam Windbag was seized by the thought that it was all a waste.

The biographical details are sparse. Born and died in Potsdam during the nineteenth century, wrote acres of clotted prose, may have hobnobbed with Potsdam's movers and shakers from time to time. Other than that we know little. Yet what does it matter? We have the work, and - in the form of this

bulging anthology, available to everyone with the physical strength to heave it home from bookshop or library - I hope a brand new readership, who will be well-rewarded in fighting their way through the coagulated morass of these teeming thousands of pages.

The peasant will awake soon. We shall share soup, and read to each other.

The Freezing Coachman

‘Tolstoy tells the story of an aristocratic woman at the theatre weeping at the imaginary tragedy enacted on the stage. At the same time, outside in the cold, a real tragedy is taking place: her old and faithful coachman, awaiting her in the bitter winter night, is freezing to death.’

– Raymond Tallis, ‘The Freezing Coachman : Some Reflections On Art & Morality’, in *Newton’s Sleep* (Macmillan, 1995), abridged version in *Theorrhoea And After* (Macmillan, 1999)

COUNTLESS READERS, COMING upon the words ‘the freezing coachman’, will think of neither Tolstoy nor Tallis, but of the indefatigable paperbackist Pebblehead. It is well nigh impossible to keep track of the short stories featuring the eponymous frozen hero he taps out on that battered old typewriter of his, pipe packed with scraggy Montenegrin tobacco clamped Simenon-like in his jaws. Unlike Tolstoy’s character, Pebblehead’s freezing coachman remains alive, a ghoulish figure covered in ice, with a reproachful gaze and a booming monotone. In many, but not all stories, he has a Dutch accent.

Pebblehead has been criticised, by the snooty and the hare-brained, for the wild inconsistency of his coachman. In *The Freezing Coachman And The Blunkett Cow Attack*, for example, he is a sort of mystic cow-whisperer, a gentle and benevolent soul with a heart of gold. Cold gold, but gold nonetheless. In *The Freezing Coachman And The Carpets Of Madness*, by contrast, he is evil personified, so evil that Beelzebub himself is reduced to a quivering gibbering wreck in his presence. And then of course there is the famous story *The Freezing Coachman Goes Rogue!*, and we all know what happens in that one!

But the variations in his character are as nothing when compared to the bewildering number of guises under which the 'coach' of which he has charge appears. It is described, in one Freezing Coachman story or another, as a coach or a carriage or a landau or a landalette or a britzka or a gig or a trap or a charabanc or a float or a buggy or a hansom or a shandrydan or a post chaise or a brougham or a droshky or a berlin or a wagon or a calash or a jitney or a pony cart or a minibus or a caboose or a caravan or a sleigh or a fiacre or a dray or a jeep or a lorry or a sulky or a cab or a van or a brake or a crate or a taxi or a rattletrap or a sedan chair or a bus or a tin lizzie or a carriage or a curricule or a dustcart or a stanhope or a quadriga or a phaeton or a trolley or a tumbrel or a troika or a saloon or a hearse or a diligence or a bubblecar or a fourgon or a flivver or a clarence or a growler or a conveyance or a roadster or a tilbury or a runabout or a jalopy or an oxcart or a hackney cab or a tarantass or a black maria or a barouche or a tractor or a tonga or a tank. This may be a case of Pebblehead being slapdash, or playful, or simply not having a clue what he is talking about, given that some of these vehicles can hardly be described as a 'coach' by any sensible person.

The moral of Tolstoy's tale, that an appreciation of great art does not necessarily make one a good person, is obvious. Equally, nearly all of Pebblehead's stories have a clear moral point to make. We are told that one should never bury a dog while it is still alive, never accept toffee apples from spooky strangers, always rain curses upon a cow that attacks a blind Member of Parliament, or upon a blind Member of Parliament who attacks a cow, depending on which version of the story you believe, never walk widdershins three times around a kirk, never push a boy scout into a crevasse, don't count your chickens, eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day according to government guidelines, never put all your eggs in one basket, always check the accuracy of George Orwell's daily egg count, always uphold the ineffable majesty of the tinpot king of the land of Gaar, never get too close to the edge of the bottomless viper pit of Shoeburyness, and don't ever, ever wave a towel in the face of an Ampleforth Jesuit. It is true that sometimes we put aside a Freezing Coachman story feeling that Pebblehead has lectured us rather than entertained us, and some of the lessons we are taught are fit only for five-year-olds, but at their best these tales can be both unforgettable and devastating.

I am thinking, for example, of *The Freezing Coachman Sorts The Abstract Expressionist Wheat From The Chaff*, a thinly-disguised and blistering attack upon the adolescent cod-mystic witterings of Barnett Newman, who tried to imbue his big flat boring daubs with universal and eternal significance. There is an irresistible urge to clap with glee when, in the final paragraph, the Freezing Coachman steps out of his cabriolet and upturns a pot of emulsion over the head of the ludicrous painter 'Bennett Nerman', before beating him with a spade, poking him with a stick, and tying him fast to railway tracks upon which the 4.45 non-stop express to Uttoxeter is due to thunder within the next couple of minutes.

It may well be the finest of all the Freezing Coachman stories, but do not take my word for it. Read every single one of them, the brilliant and the witless, and make up your own mind.

Channel Four News At Schubert's Grave

IT WAS THE day of the annual Channel Four newsreaders' outing, and this year it was Katie Razzall's turn to choose their destination. After much thought, peering out of a window of the studio annexe into the pouring rain, she had decided they should picnic next to Schubert's grave in the Central Cemetery in Vienna.

Between them, Jon Snow and Carl Dinnen both packed and carried the picnic basket.

'It is more of a hamper than a basket,' said Carl, as they lugged it along the path towards the imposing tombstone with its Karl Kundmann relief.

'I wonder how one would best define the difference between a basket and a hamper,' replied Jon.

Lindsey Hilsum, who was walking alongside them carrying a banjo in a banjo case, supplied them with just such a definition.

On this occasion, responsibility for the picnic blanket had been entrusted to Samira Ahmed. The previous year, Krishnan Guru-Murthy had carelessly tossed the blanket into the sea during what had been a startlingly rough crossing. As pro tem captain of the boat, Alex Thomson had tried to shoulder the blame, but there had been much muttering about Krishnan's cavalier tossage. The general feeling was that, just because the boat was being buffeted by extraordinary waves and seawater was sloshing about the deck was no reason for him to have been such a flibbertigibbet. Jonathan Rugman argued that, given his surname, and the similarity of a blanket to a rug, he ought to be

the one charged with bringing the picnic blanket safely to the picnic spot, but Samira overruled him.

'In any case,' she said, 'Your name is Rugman, not Blanketman, and there is a difference between a picnic rug and a picnic blanket, a difference which I am sure Lindsey can make crystal clear.'

'I'm not sure I could,' said Lindsay Taylor. It was pointed out to him that Samira meant Lindsey Hilsum.

Kylie Morris and Cathy Newman were lagging behind, grubbing for worms in the rich cemetery soil. They had been told by Gary Gibbon that Viennese worms made the best bait for anglers, though whether this was true or not was a moot point. Gary himself was trying to catch up with Lindsey Hilsum. He was cradling his cornet in his arms and wanted to have a quick chat with her about the duet they would play once the picnic was in full swing. Darshna Soni had suggested a medley of special picnic songs she had written with Sue Turton, but the parts were very complicated, and probably called for a bassoon and xylophone, neither of which instruments was to hand.

By now most of the newsreaders had reached the grave.

'Here music has buried a treasure, but even fairer hopes,' declaimed Faisal Islam, doing an impromptu translation of the epitaph inscribed on the tombstone.

'Who wrote that?' asked Nicholas Glass.

'I think you will find it was the poet Franz Grillparzer,' piped up Simon Israel, who, in spite of the chilly weather, was not wearing any socks. Earlier, he had explained to Victoria MacDonald that this was his small way of testing himself and pitting himself against nature.

Samira spread the blanket out with help from Julian Rush and Lucy Manning, and soon they were all picnicking happily in the shadow of Schubert's grave. The only thing that cast a pall on their outing was the looming presence in the sky of a flock of rare Viennese vultures. Emily Reuben threw pebbles at them, and Roz Upton shouted bird-scarifying imprecations, but neither tactic made the flock disperse. But it did not rain, as it had threatened to do, and they did not after all have to unroll the big tarpaulin that Nick Paton Walsh had brought along with him just in case.

One of the interesting things about Channel Four newsreader picnics was the way they distributed the food. So, Jon, Samira and Nicholas ate only the

cocktail sausages, Krishnan and Sue the celery sticks with a drizzle of gin, Victoria, Julian and Alex the individually-wrapped turnip pies, Kylie and Simon the cheeseballs, Cathy, Katie and Faisal the cheese triangles, Lindsey and Lindsay the potato peelings with suet, Darshna, Roz and Lucy the cuppasoup, Nick and Jonathan the Garibaldi biscuits, and Emily, Carl and Gary the lettuce tart. All of them, however, drank copious quantities of boiled Viennese beans 'n' cabbage water, sprinkled with icing sugar.

It was a grand outing, and this year's pro tem boat captain, Kylie, steered them skilfully and safely back across the channel so they were in the studio by five to seven, in time for the news.

Dobson's Cacodaemon

EVEN THE MOST learned of Dobson scholars has difficulty with his pamphlet *How I Thwarted My Cacodaemon With A Pointy Stick And Some Bleach* (out of print). For one thing, who knew Dobson had his own personal Cacodaemon? It is never mentioned elsewhere in the canon, nor does it make an appearance in his voluminous diaries. Occasionally, like other indefatigable diarists, Dobson had recourse to codes and symbols, but all of these have been deciphered after decades of study by Aloysius Nestingbird and their significance revealed in his magisterial survey *The Meanings Of Every Single One Of Those Enigmatic Symbols And Scribbles In The Journals Of The Out Of Print Pamphleteer Dobson*, itself, alas, now out of print too. Nestingbird realised that the childish drawing of a horned and hooved goaty devil figure brandishing a spit fork, usually done in red ink, which appears in the diaries from time to time without additional written comment, had nothing whatsoever to do with some putative Cacodaemon of Dobson's, but was simply the pamphleteer's idiosyncratic manner of noting that Hungarian football ace Ferenc Puskas had played a blinder in a match that day. Puskas was never known by a nickname aligning him with a devil of any kind, but Nestingbird shows convincingly that the inside of Dobson's head was rarely in accord with the wider world.

Nor do we find any reference to a Cacodaemon in any of the recorded utterances or memoirs of Marigold Chew. Surely the woman who knew Dobson better than anyone else would have known of it? There is a possibility, of course, that she did know, but kept a judicious silence for fear of exposing her inamorato to ridicule. But then, there was much else that was preposterous about Dobson, from his boots to his handwriting, and she seems to have happily acknowledged, even celebrated, his various absurdities.

What of the pamphlet itself? In its startling opening sentence, the pamphleteer announces that he is going to tell us all about how he thwarted his Cacodaemon with a pointy stick and some bleach, and that if his prose were paint, in this pamphlet it would be matt rather than gloss. The fact is, Dobson continues in some of the glossiest prose he ever wrote. Indeed certain passages are so glossy that Nestingbird, among others, has recommended reading it through a screen or veil to dull its unearthly sheen.

Dobson gives his Cacodaemon no 'back story'. He does not explain when it first began to haunt him, nor how terrible, or otherwise, has been its impact upon his life. It merely shimmers before him after breakfast one drizzly morning in April, and he reports this matter-of-factly, as if it is a familiar accompaniment to his post-breakfast drizzly April morning doings. On the particular morning of which he writes, Marigold Chew is away, which may in itself be significant. Dobson does not tell us where she has gone, but by checking the calendar one can conclude she was probably on one of her periodic jaunts to Shoeburyness as part of the bottomless viper-pit study group.

Dobson then recounts how he loses patience with his Cacodaemon. It is making demands upon him, as we are given to understand it 'always does', and the pamphleteer snaps. He goes to the broom cupboard and takes out a pointy stick, and dips the end of the stick in bleach, and charges across the room at the Cacodaemon, shouting his head off and threatening to impale it upon the stick. At this point, with a hideous sort of sucking and seething and squelching noise, the Cacodaemon seems to implode in upon itself. Bringing himself to a halt just before he clatters into the wainscoting, the pamphleteer peers down at the floor and sees a tiny smudge of noisome goo. This, he suggests, is all that is left of his Cacodaemon. He leans the pointy stick against the wall, and goes to the draining board to fetch a rag. He wipes the smudge with the rag, pours more bleach into a bucket, and drops the rag into the bucket. There is, he writes, 'a faint echo of the sucking and seething and squelchy sound, as if heard through a funnel blocked with pebbles and dust'.

And thus the pamphlet ends, save for a rather curious colophon from which not even Nestingbird has been able to wring any meaning. I suppose we have to ask if Dobson was just making the whole thing up. We know there were times when he felt compelled to write a pamphlet even when his head was empty of ideas. Perhaps this was one of those times. Further light will no

doubt be shed on the matter with the publication of Aloysius Nestingbird's forthcoming study *Dobson's Head, Its Innards, And What They Reveal About The Colossus Of Twentieth-Century Pamphleteering*.

I had hoped to be invited to write an introduction to this book, but I was told, in a dream, that there would be no such invitation, that Nestingbird had never heard of me, and that my pretensions to Dobsonist scholarship were flimsy and pathetic and doomed. Hard to argue with that, belched and spat out as it was from the fiery maw of a Cacodaemon.

Pallid Ada The Crippled Heiress

Herewith, Chapter One of Pallid Ada, The Crippled Heiress, originally published in weekly parts between 1851 and 1854.

THE WIND WAS howling across the desolate moors. It was an incredibly howly wind, and they were almost unbelievably desolate moors. Such desolation has seldom been howled upon by wild winds anywhere, ever, throughout the records of time, since the unimaginably distant past when the moors were an alluvial plain across which roamed weird primitive beasts. Once those beasts howled here, now it was the wind, ferocious in its onslaught upon the barren emptiness of the moors. Barren and empty and desolate but for a tiny ramshackle near-dilapidated cottage hunched alongside the single faint path that stretched across the moors, twisting and winding and leading none knew where. It was in this vile brickish habitude that Pallid Ada, the Crippled Heiress, eked out her sorrowful existence.

And sorrowful it was indeed, for Pallid Ada lived alone save for the company of her wizened uncle and even more wizened aunt, both near-blind and shrivelled and filthy and irascible. To them, Pallid Ada was more drudge than niece, and she skivvied all day and all night, every day and every night, with barely a moment's rest, without them showing a scrap of gratitude. Quite the opposite, in fact. Pallid Ada was spat upon and insulted and shouted at, and had either her wizened uncle or wizened aunt had the strength they would have beaten her with broomhandles and flung breakable household objects at her head.

Pallid Ada's ghastly pallor was due to a fundamental ignorance, or at the very least misunderstanding, of vitamins. She subsisted on slops-in-the-pot and

sop-in-the-pan, and though from time to time she went out on to the desolate moors foraging for vegetables, such foraging was always hopeless, there being no farms for many miles around. The only greenstuffs she might ever find were rotten things chucked out of passing carts, and few carts were ever seen lumbering along the faint path across the moors, for the moors were horribly desolate and wild winds howled.

Lack of vitamins, too, may have had something to do with Pallid Ada's becripplement, the precise nature of which would bring tears to the eyes of the most hard-hearted reader. For crutches, the poor pallid creature had only a couple of bits of worm-eaten timber salvaged from the wreck of the ship upon which she had been a passenger, and from which she had been hurled into the pitiless sea, many a moon ago. The ship was sailing for a distant land of pomposity and riches when it was boarded by pirates from the Symbionese Liberation Army's maritime wing. They carried out acts of the most gross moral degeneration among both passengers and crew before scuppering the ship on a rocky atoll. Clinging to the two pieces of timber upon which she now hobbled about the semi-dilapidated cottage on the moors, Pallid Ada, monstrously violated and newly becrippled, drifted in the broiling sea for weeks and weeks before being washed up on the shingle of a foul tempestuous stretch of coastline. Soaked in seawater, exhausted, vitamin deficient and with the pallor of curd, the half-dead girl was found by a kindly Christian gentleman who was roaming the strand collecting geological specimens in a little bag. He took her to his coastal manse and fed her on broth, and gradually she recovered her wits as she lay on a sofa in his conservatory surrounded by tweeting budgerigars in birdcages. In the evenings, the Christian gentleman sat with her, reciting improving passages from the Old Testament.

Pallid Ada's pallor grew less, and the first faint flush of health appeared on her cheeks. Eventually she grew strong enough to begin dragging herself around the conservatory on her makeshift crutches, and before long the whole lower floor of the manse was hers to explore. Now she ate her broth in the dining room, where linnets sang in birdcages and there was a cabinet of interesting geological specimens to look at. The kindly gentleman was often out, traipsing up and down the beach gathering additions to his collection, and when he was home he rarely spoke except when reading from his big leather-bound Bible, but Pallid Ada felt safe and secure. And as her own troubles

faded, she became aware that often, her Christian rescuer's brow was furrowed and his posture stooped and his fingernails gnawed to the quick, as if he were careworn, crushed perhaps by the weight of an awful family secret he durst not divulge to his pallid crippled houseguest.

Had Pallid Ada not been such an innocent, she may have intuited that the gentleman's clouded countenance was connected in some wise to the thumping and scraping noises she had begun to notice, which set the ground floor ceilings all a-tremor. If it happened that the gentleman was with her, reading his Bible or munching on a celery stick as his frugal luncheon, when the noises from above shattered the peace and drowned out the tweeting of the cagebirds, he would rise from his chair and excuse himself, and she would hear him clump up the stairs, and shortly afterwards the thumps and scrapes would cease. It was to be many months before Pallid Ada learned their cause and origin.

But one dreadful day, her idyll ended. She was reclining on the sofa, fashioning a pin cushion out of a couple of old rags and a handful of kapok, when of a sudden a panting hobbledohoy scampered in from without. Pallid Ada recognised him as the trustworthy local urchin who was employed to carry messages between the manse and the village. Scarce able to draw breath, the boy told Pallid Ada of the calamity that had befallen her benefactor. The kindly Christian gentleman had been collecting seashells at a deserted part of the beach when a hideous aquatic monster reared up from beneath the waves and grasped him in its savage lobsterian claws. He had time to cry out for the mercy of God before the monster, flailing and thrashing, dragged him into the sea, and plunged into the cold black depths.

No sooner had the urchin imparted his terrible news than the thumping and scraping sounded from above. Without the kindly gentleman present to climb the stairs and make it cease, howsoever he did so, the mysterious noise continued, and grew louder and louder, until poor Pallid Ada covered her dainty ears in fright. And then, with a mighty crash, the ceiling stopped shaking and the noise did stop. . . only to be replaced by an even more menacing sound of something descending the staircase. Pallid Ada was transfixed with terror, and her cheeks which had so recently had a healthy rosy bloom were once again bleached to a deathly pallor.

Then, into the conservatory lumbered a misshapen wretch with filthy matted locks straggling down almost to his huge ungainly feet. He was dressed in noisome rags and his eyes were those of an unhinged maniac.

'Cripes!' cried the hobbledehoy, 'Tis the kindly old gentleman's weak-brained brother Raoul, who has not been seen in this parish since before I was born!'

Pallid Ada swooned.

When she awoke, the pallid cripple found herself bound hand and foot on the back of a cart. She could tell, from its jiggery juddery bumpety progress, that she was travelling along pitted rutted rustic lanes, pulled by exhausted horses. She wondered who it was who was in the cab, shouting his head off in guttural gibberish and repeatedly striking the miserable steeds with a whip. The reader will not take too long to guess that it was the kindly Christian's maniac brother. But what may surprise any but the most astute is the knowledge that this vile abductor was merely following the command of Pallid Ada's wizened uncle and wizened aunt.

Ever since the yet uncrippled girl had set out on her journey from Mistress Pilbeam's Academy For Naive Young Virgins, to voyage across the seas and claim her inheritance, her dastardly ancient relatives had been plotting to have her waylaid and brought to their ramshackle cottage battered by howling winds, out on the desolate moors, there to be enslaved as their drudge, working her fingers to the bone and fed on slops-in-the-pot and sop-in-the-pan. Oh, how they cursed as their evil plans went all kim kam with the intervention of the kindly gentleman! And then how they cackled with fiendish glee as their eldritch powers gained strength and their spirit communications with the manse-trapped maniac bore fruit. And what an evil fruit it was, as cankerous and rotten as the innards of the apple with which the serpent tempted Eve!

So it was that Pallid Ada, the Crippled Heiress, was brought to the cottage where we found her at the beginning of this chronicle. Alas, she has much yet to suffer before our tale is done.

Four Last Songs

TRA LA LA, *The Drainage Ditch* is one of the *Four Last Songs* by elegantly-bouffanted sociopath Lothar Preen. It is, for the majority of critics, the best of the quartet, a brain-numbing racket of melodic astringency with oompah thumping, over which a rich contralto voice sings words torn from the innermost depths of Preen's creative being. There is also some yodelling, which rarely goes amiss, and reminds us that Preen often claimed to be channelling the spirit of Christopher Plummer in the film version of *The Sound Of Music*. Preen also claimed to be Swiss, which he patently was not, but that is a matter on which a quietus should be put.

It was long believed that Preen wrote the *Four Last Songs* in his deathbed, out on a balcony in the mountains, while in the final ravages of tuberculosis. New research shows that in fact he composed these towering pieces on horseback, while riding along various clifftop paths, and it was his horse that was tubercular. Armed with this knowledge, we can make much more sense of the second of the songs, *Tra La Lee*, *Dennis Is Coughing Up Blood*, Dennis, of course, being the name of Preen's horse.

It was long believed, up until a few seconds ago, that Lothar Preen had a horse called Dennis. I believed this myself, but I have just received a message tapped out by a spirit medium which suggests that Preen's clifftop journey was an elaborate fiction, that he had a goat rather than a horse, that the goat was penned in a goat-pen in a field behind his shack, and that he wrote the *Four Last Songs* while holed up in the back room of a rough tough seaside tavern while avoiding the bailiffs. This has the ring of truth, as Preen spent the best part of his life being pursued by bailiffs, sometimes across continents. It is not clear if the goat was called Dennis, and it would be interesting to know, but

the rapping of the spirit medium ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and now the only sound I can hear is the eerie whistling of the wind in the pines, or possibly the larches. I cannot tell one tree from another. Nor could Lothar Preen, if we accept that the words of the third song, *Tra La Loopy Loo, What The Hell Are Those Things Growing In The Orchard?*, are autobiographical, as surely they must be.

One curious feature of the *Four Last Songs* which has exercised the brains of some of our finest musicologists is that there are only three of them. It has been proved, in a breathtakingly pompous essay by Van Der Voo, that Lothar Preen never even considered writing a fourth song in the set, so all those hours and days and weeks and months and years, good God, *years*, that people like me have spent rummaging in dustbins in Switzerland, hoping against hope to find a 'lost' manuscript, have been a complete waste of time. Van Der Voo is a very arrogant man, with suspicious stains upon his bomber jacket, but his argument is watertight, and we must, all of us, bow to his superior wisdom, much as it rankles to do so. That is not the only thing that rankles, my word no!, but if I were to catalogue a full list of my ranklements you would lose patience, I fear, and put me down as a tiresome, complaining git. You would not be wrong.

Chunk Theory

CHUNK THEORY IS the theory that everything can be crumbled into chunks the better to apprehend its meaning. Chunks are very different to, say, lumps or clods or crumbs or bits, and must certainly never be mistaken for smithereens. The proper definition of the chunk is given in the standard work on Chunk Theory, *Chunk Theory, A Primer*, by the Theory's original theoriser, Gustav Chunk. Chunk was, of course, not the name he was born with, it is a pseudonym he hit upon the better to identify himself with the Theory he propounded. When he was not writing about chunks, Chunk busied himself destroying all trace of his true surname, so successfully that today we know him only as Chunk and do not have an atom of evidence regarding his real name. There is even some doubt as to whether or not his first name was Gustav but, as the parlance of today has it, let's not even go there. Chunk was fond of demonstrating the beauty of his Theory by physically crumbling things into chunks, even things that do not readily lend themselves to crumblement. Faced with such a thing - a public telephone kiosk, for example - Chunk had no qualms about deploying hacksaws, axes, large heavy hammers and similar tools in order to effect his goal. He could regularly be seen marching about his town smashing things to bits, although when challenged he would protest that he was engaged in the 'assisted crumbling of things into chunks'. And boy oh boy was he challenged! He made innumerable complaints that he was being followed about by municipal cohesion officials and coppers, arguing that such stalking was a form of entrapment. Much of the *Primer* was written in the waiting rooms of various courts and assizes where Chunk was due to face sanction. He was the kind of man who tended to topple over when shoved with sufficient force, and this led him to refine his Theory in later years. Shoving and toppling were to

be incorporated alongside crumblement and chunks without doing damage to the premisses of the original Theory, save for the sort of collateral damage one might expect. How it would all have held together is something we can only guess at, for the promised second edition of the *Primer* never appeared. Chunk himself was cagey whenever he was asked about it, which was seldom, as very few people - very, very few people - were remotely interested in his work. One Chunkist commentator claimed that only four copies of the *Primer* were ever sold, each of them to cronies with whom Chunk used to hang around in the streets of his town, laden with axes and hammers and slicers, eyeing up likely targets for assisted crumbling. But there are other Chunkist commentators who hold radically different views. Indeed, the most intriguing feature of the whole business is that Chunkist commentators, disputants, devotees, fellow-travellers and hangers-on vastly outnumber the total number of people who have ever even laid eyes on a copy of the *Primer*, let alone read the damned thing. This signal fact has led to an offshoot of Chunk Theory known as Chunk Theory Theory, a field which has spawned an entire academic industry populated by bearded good-for-nothings who would be better employed digging drainage ditches, some of whom, apparently, actually do such drainage ditch digging, in between penning abstruse articles for the numberless Chunk Theory Theory journals.

I went to interview one such peasant scholar for this piece, but when I approached him, he shoved me with considerable force, and I toppled into the drainage ditch he had just completed digging. Such are the perils of Academe. I brush them aside, for I am both hoity and toity and I know where the bodies are buried. My father was a gravedigger, and his father before him, and they knew not only where the bodies were buried but on which side their bread was buttered, and they knew their onions too. You will rarely find a peasant scholar, Chunkist or otherwise, who knows such things. I was minded to follow the family gravedigging tradition, but I proved too weedy to handle a spade. Ironical, I suppose, that I end up flailing helplessly on my back at the bottom of a drainage ditch while a Chunkist starts to shovel chunks of crumbled earth over me, like a scene from a cheap horror film. But I shall abide, though I crumble to dust, dust in crumbled chunks, and in each crumbled chunk a worm that burrows.

Off At A Tangent

I HAD TO go and see a man about a lozenge, but he was at a tangent. He suggested I take a wafer. I have written elsewhere, at some length, about wafers, and I do not intend to repeat that pretty little escapade, not when I am standing at the bottom of a staircase down which I fully expect a ghoul to traipse. Upon the descent of the ghoul, I shall climb the staircase myself and enter the chamber from which it has been expelled.

My arrival may well cause consternation. A ghoul leaves, and almost immediately afterwards a chubby man wearing filthy gloves appears. When I use the word 'chubby' I am referring to my inner chubby man, you understand, my shadow self, the man I would be in my dreams.

I do not know who awaits me in the upper chamber, although I now know that whoever it is will half expect me to be carrying a wafer. I can use the filthiness of my gloves as an excuse for not doing so. It is an excuse I have flourished on many occasions, not always successfully. Like the ghoul, I have been expelled from chambers and attics and parlours and even from cow sheds.

But I will not be expelled from the chamber at the top of the staircase, for it is written that I shall dwell therein, unto the last trump. I am waiting for the ghoul to be thrust out, all dignity rinsed out of it, out out out, and then I shall rise up, a chubby man puffing up the staircase, and I shall take possession of my final chamber.

Food For Sport

BACK IN 2008, there was much press coverage of the frankly bonkers dietary regime followed by Olympic uberchamp Michael Phelps. It is instructive to compare the swimmer's daily food intake with that of fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol, the sprinter and pole-vaulter who thrilled the masses during the last century.

We are fortunate, then, that the fictional athlete's coach and mentor, the all-too-real and non-fictional Old Halob, devoted many pages of his *Memoirs* to this very topic. Old Halob himself grew up in paupery, and often had little else to eat but birdseed stolen from bird-tables on the lawns of bird-obsessed villagers in his bird-choked village. Later in life, dining in expensive restaurants, he would often demand a bowl of millet as a side helping, and, being Old Halob, he always got what he wanted.

When it came to devising a diet for his sporting protégé, the irascible and chain-smoking coach paid heed to the theories of the nutritionist Catnip Wedge, who was himself a top bobsleigh competitor, though never a champion. Wedge was convinced that he could have won a mantelpiece's worth of cups and medals had he eaten more 'Laughing Cow' brand processed cheese triangles during his active bobsleighbing years, backing up this theory with abstruse charts and diagrams. Old Halob could make head nor tail of these, but was won over by a certain hectoring tone in the nutritionist's prose. As he wrote in the *Memoirs*:

I could make head nor tail of Wedge's abstruse charts and diagrams, but there was something in his hectoring prose that convinced me he must be correct. Thus it was that when I took fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol under my capacious wing, I insisted that he eat a dozen packs of 'Laughing Cow' brand processed cheese triangles for breakfast

every day, including the packaging, with the tinfoil and that little red thread ostensibly designed to unseal each portion. Within a fortnight, he came second in the Bodger's Spinney Athletics Club's Annual Rainsoaked Five Hundred Yard Sprint Practice. In all his previous attempts at this race, the spindly fictional athlete had toppled to the ground in a swoon at the report of the starting pistol. It was the first time I realised that I had a future champion on my hands.

Old Halob's hands, by the way, were hairy and curiously fat, but that need not concern us here. He sought out the more obscure writings of Catnip Wedge and, though he did not really understand them, as the translations were unreliable, he soon had prescriptions for Bobnit Tivol's lunches and dinners as well as his breakfasts:

Lunch, he wrote, consisted of curd and balls of suet and reconstituted meat slices on a bed of sponge and fish innards, washed down with two big tumblers of aerated malt vinegar sprinkled with plenty of pips, followed by a slab of seed cake and a toffee apple. Dinner was a whole vegan pig substitute boiled in linseed oil, with a drizzle of cognac, two bowls of raw ears of wheat with paprika and enriched mulch, duck brains, cornflakes, hedge clippings, roast potatoes, cabbage and sugarsnap peas, and a dozen smokers' poptarts, plus pails of water siphoned from a distant eerie pond. If he had a race coming up the next day, I insisted that the fictional athlete tuck in to an extra supper of innumerable sausages in sausagey sauce straight from the saucepan.

Bobnit Tivol's performances, both on the track and in the pole-vault, underwent a dramatic improvement, but he failed to become an outright winner until Old Halob made a significant and unexpected addition to his diet.

All else would have been as naught, he wrote, had I not experienced a mental thunderclap one Thursday morning. I had good reason to be thankful to Catnip Wedge for showing me how to shovel food down fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol's gullet, but for him to be a perennial runner-up was not good enough. That morning, as I hacked and spluttered my way through a coughing fit brought on by my umpteenth cigarette of the day, the supply of oxygen to my pulsating cranium was temporarily cut off, and, during the resulting spasms, I think I had some sort of abnormal hallucinatory insight. Whatever it was, when I came to, writhing on the linoleum with sputum dribbling down my goatee, it was crystal clear to me that what was missing from all of Wedge's advice was guidance upon elevenses. Now, for any athlete, fictional or otherwise, elevenses is the most important meal of the day. I realised I would have

to devise something for my protégé, a toothsome snack that would make him into the world-beater I knew he could be.

And so began a series of experiments. Over the next few months, Old Halob tried out a bewildering variety of elevenses recipes on the lanky runner, including Bath Olivers, distilled ditchwater, lettuce 'n' castor sugar flan, jugged stoat, fish in pastry, contaminated yoghurt (pronounced yoh-hoort), chocolate swiss roll, greasy partridge pie, milk of magnesia through a straw, and the bone marrow of sacrificially slaughtered Toggenburg goats. Some of these snacks knocked seconds off Bobnit Tivol's sprinting times, but some made him windy or sluggish or hysterical. None seemed to work consistently. The breakthrough came on the eve of the fictional athlete's most important race to date. Back to the *Memoirs*:

The breakthrough came on the eve of the Blister Lane Exciting Tiptop Sprinting In Inclement Weather Challenge Ribbon. I desperately wanted Bobnit Tivol to be able to twine that legendary ribbon around his legendary, albeit fictional, forehead, and I was so fraught that I collapsed into a coma. Unsupervised, the fictional athlete spent the whole day snacking on elevenses, neglecting his breakfast, lunch and dinner. Not only did he scoff down my various recommended elevenses, but he got out the pots and pans and cobbled together some of his own, such as a delicious lemon meringue pie with eels. The next day, at Blister Lane, he triumphed. We never looked back.

I don't know about you, but I find these memories almost unbearably moving, so much so that I am going to sob into my napkin. Michael Phelps may be the most successful Olympian in history, but he was not coached by Old Halob, and compared to fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol he is just a weedy milksop.

Prudence Foxglove Sunday Schools

This piece was written by Vladimir Ilyich Foxglove

IN ONE OF his interminable screeds, Mr Key at one point tries to emphasise the horribleness of the Horrible Cave by suggesting that 'it makes every other cave seem like a Prudence Foxglove Sunday School'. We are meant, I think, to gasp and gawp at the force of the contrast. Well, I for one do not. I am Prudence Foxglove's grandson. I was both a pupil and, later, an instructor in her Sunday Schools. What I know, which Mr Key clearly does not, is that each and every one of my grandma's religious and moral education hubs was situated in a deep and dark and dank and damp and gloomy cave. This makes a nonsense of Mr Key's attempt at vividness.

My grandma decided to set up a network of Sunday Schools because she was much troubled by the moral dereliction she witnessed all around her. In a letter to the football ace known as 'the daisy cutter', Steve Bloomer (1874-1938), she listed some of the things she had seen on a weekend outing:

I saw a gravedigger with an unwaxed moustache, a butcher without a hat, a tiny cadet loitering near a bordello, an urchin with rickets whistling in the presence of a widow, a tippety fellow manipulating figs, a wretch in the gutter, a Papist on the loose, and I saw much else besides.

Convinced that the nation's moral resurgence could only be effected by brainwashing every five-year-old in the land, Prudence Foxglove fell under the spell of the pedagogue Walter Mad. Mad is best-known today for his involvement in a curious postage stamp scandal, but it ought not be forgotten that he was the author of dozens and dozens of tracts, the one that compelled my grandma's attention being *An Essay Upon The Brainwashing Of Five-Year-*

Olds Through A System Of Pedagogy Conducted Within The Confines Of Dank And Gloomy Caves.

My grandma went to meet Walter Mad to discuss his ideas. The man was an athletic, and, obviously, a most powerful ruffian. On his face he carried more than one large glazed cicatrix, that assisted the savage expression of malignity impressed by nature upon his features. And his matted black hair, with its elf locks, completed the picturesque effect of a face, that proclaimed, in every lineament, a reckless abandonment to cruelty and ferocious passions. Prudence herself, familiar as she was with the faces of pedagogical madmen in the dreadful hours of sack and carnage, recoiled for one instant from this hideous ruffian, who had not even the palliations of youth in his favour, for he seemed fifty at the least. But appearances, as we know, can be deceptive, and Walter Mad was all bonhomie and good cheer, albeit of a stern Protestant kidney, and not remotely the ruffian reminiscent of a minor character in Thomas De Quincey's *Klosterheim, or The Masque* (1832) whom he so strongly, if not exactly, resembled.

My grandma was astonished at the scale of the pedagogue's ambition. He had a vision of a vast network of caves where tinies would be entrapped from their fifth birthdays onwards, learning by rote a curriculum of decisive moral rectitude. She fretted, however, that Walter Mad seemed quite oblivious of the impracticality of his project. She fired questions at him, to which he had no answers save an airy wave of his arrestingly hairy hand.

Had he sent out a scouting party of spelunkers to identify caves suitable for his purpose? Conversely, was it his intention to employ a gang of geologists familiar with explosives to blast brand new caves where now stood only grim forbidding rock? How would he propel the tinies into his caves? Did he see himself acting as a sort of Pied Piper of Hamelin figure? Was he not concerned that so prolonged a stay in the cavernous gloom would ruin the sight of the tinies and render many of them almost blind?

Prudence swept away from their meeting convinced that Walter Mad was a nutcase, and a sinister one at that. She wondered if he had more in common with the Klosterheim ruffian than she had at first supposed. I am not sure if she ever learned of his later involvement in that postage stamp business, but had she done so, she would have felt to some extent vindicated in her decision,

when she arrived home, to make a waxen doll of Walter Mad and to stick it with pins, with many, many pins.

But my grandma saw, too, that beneath all the weirdness, there was a grain of sense in his cave-based education hub scheme. His plans were too lavish, too grandiose, but reined in and properly organised, they could, she thought, usher in a transformation in civic life. It was this insight that made her, rather than Walter Mad, the true visionary.

She wrote her own version of Mad's tract, entitled *An Essay Upon The Brainwashing Of Five-Year-Olds Through A System Of Pedagogy Conducted Within The Confines Of Dank And Gloomy Caves, But Only On Sundays*, and threw herself into making it a reality. She took on an assistant, a man even more like the Klosterheim ruffian than Walter Mad. This fellow's name was Ed Balls, incidentally, though as far as I know he was unrelated to the erstwhile Labour government minister. Balls sought out apt caves, kitted them out with Sunday School furniture and equipment, and appointed tweedy bespectacled types to teach the tinies, allowing Prudence Foxglove to concentrate on devising the curriculum, much of which was devoted to the more alarming passages in the Old Testament, with a leavening of twee drivel about fluffy animals and pretty flowers and submarine warfare.

Two generations of five-year-olds were brainwashed at my grandma's Sunday Schools, and it is an experience none of them forgot. Balls, as we know, turned out to be a less than competent judge of caves, for one by one they suffered collapses, or flooding, or seismological trauma, until no trace of Prudence Foxglove's magnificent obsession remained.

In closing, may I say what a fantastic time I have had writing this piece for Hooting Yard, and should I be invited to contribute again, I have a cupboard full of articles ready to publish, including several about beatniks, one about the shovelling of agricultural waste materials, and a potted biography of Ed Balls. Not my grandma's assistant, but the new one, the ex-government minister.

Dobson's Card Index

'Along the path, glued to the window panes or hung on the bushes or dangling from the ceiling, so that all free space was put to maximum use, hundreds of little placards were displayed. Each one carried a drawing, a photograph, or an inscription, and the whole constituted a veritable encyclopaedia of what we call 'human knowledge'. A diagram of a plant cell, Mendeleieff's periodic table of the elements, the keys to Chinese writing, a cross-section of the human heart, Lorentz's transformation formulae, each planet and its characteristics, fossil remains of the horse species in series, Mayan hieroglyphics, economic and demographic statistics, musical phrases, samples of the principal plant and animal families, crystal specimens, the ground plan of the Great Pyramid, brain diagrams, logistic equations, phonetic charts of the sounds employed in all languages, maps, genealogies - everything in short which would fill the brain of a twentieth century Pico della Mirandola.'

– René Daumal, *Mount Analogue : A Novel Of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures In Mountain Climbing*, translated by Roger Shattuck (1952; 1959).

THE ASTONISHING THING about the 'little placards' displayed by Father Sogol, the Professor of Mountaineering in Daumal's novel, is how similar they are to the immense card index maintained by Dobson, upon which he relied when writing his out of print pamphlets. Dobson would have approved, too, the Professor's method of displaying the cards - at least, sometimes. One of the pamphleteer's more irritating characteristics was his inability to settle on

the keeping of his cards. At times, like Sogol, he pinned them up on every available surface. Then a frenzy would take him and he would tear them all down and shove them into one of his innumerable cardboard boxes. Marigold Chew reports that Dobson spent hours upon hours arranging the cards when they were in their boxes, ordering and reordering them according to various abstruse cataloguing systems. No sooner was he done than he would once again tip them out of their boxes and pin them up on walls and screens and pinboards and what have you. And of course, all the time he was adding new cards to the collection.

Much of Dobson's card collection perished in the Potato Building fire, and ever since researchers have been attempting to reconstruct it. This is probably an impossible task, but that doesn't stop them trying. The reward would be to create a sort of cardboard model of the innards of Dobson's pulsating brain - not to be confused with the cardboard model of the carapace of Dobson's brain which is currently being carted around the globe by a devotee. According to the timetable posted on the Cardboard Brain Of Dobson World Tour website, the cart with its precious contents is en route to one of the -nesses at the moment, either Skeg- or Dunge- or Foul-.

There was a flap of controversy some months ago when a previously unheard-of Dobsonist, one Bunko Chongue, claimed to have recreated an accurate cardboard box's worth of index cards. After painstaking study of clues littered throughout the pamphleteer's out of print works, and a visit to a stationery shop, the mysterious Chongue placed on display the results of his research. Purists' suspicions were roused by the fact that one had to pay an exorbitant fee to get through the door of the Nissen hut where the exhibition was held. Inside, however, there was an attempt to reflect the pamphleteer's indecision, with half the cards gummed to the walls and half crammed into a cardboard box. The cards themselves, too, demonstrated the variety that was characteristic of Dobson's collection, as it was of Sogol's. One visitor to the hut, later to denounce the show as a 'despicable farrago of falsehood and Nissen hut windowlessness', made a list of the cards he saw.

Instructions for the proper care of ostriches in captivity. Street map of Wivenhoe. Photo of a duck escaped from Rouen. Pig brain diagram. Bootlace aglet comparisons. Lopped Pol Pot pop tart. Torn and rent stuff. Widow's buttons. Tips on bell ringing. Sandwich paste reviews. Drawing of ghost. Railway station smudge. Voltage statistics.

Unsullied napkin from a remote canteen. Gunshot punctures. Drool from a pauper. Old Halob's hat measurements. Imaginary portrait of Tecwen Whittock. Muggletonian dinner menu. Fatal microbes. Winnipeg pumpkineer's cravat knot schema. Potter's duffel bag toggle analysis. Starling feathers. Stalin brooch. Desiccated plum pulp. Rubberised atomic sackcloth scrap. Latch. Pins. Bolt. Set of amazing stains. Devotional card of St Abodwo, arguably the patron saint of monkeys. Periodic table of the crumples. Gravy recipe. Tabulation of Orwellian egg count. Snapshot of Schubert's grave. Mezzotint of Schubert's boot. Handwritten screed of gibberish. Lock of Pontiff's hair. Gummy ick. Definitions of flotsam and jetsam and plankton and krill and lemon meringue pie. The dust of death. The dewdrops of doom. Pointless scribbles.

The Dobsonist who made the list, whose name has never been made public, was initially impressed by the exhibition. A few days later, however, in a letter to the *Daily Nisbet Spotter*, he got into a fit of the vapours about the windowlessness of the Nissen hut, pointing out that, depending on the disposition of the purlins, it is quite simple to insert windows into the hut's frame. It is rare for one who spends his life studying Dobson also to have expertise in the construction of huts, whether Nissen or not, and this suggests that we may be able to identify the writer, if anyone can be bothered to sift through the documentation in the register, if there is indeed such a register, as the rumour mill insists is the case, though of course its existence may be a wild fantasy. We know of such phenomena, of fictional imagined registers, not least because Dobson himself wrote so forcefully of them in his pamphlet *Wild And Unhinged Fantasies Regarding The Existence Of Wholly Imaginary Registers* (out of print). We can only guess how many index cards the pamphleteer used during the writing of this frankly blithering text, which Marigold Chew for some reason typeset to make it look like a pipsy-popsy book for infants.

Following the writing of his letter to the press, our unidentified Dobsonist had second thoughts about the exhibition. Where he had been positive, he now heaped execrations upon it, at first privately, shouting at his reflection in a mirror. He seems to have been oddly reluctant to bruit his views abroad. This changed after he spent a prolonged stay in a sensory deprivation tank and emerged hopelessly bonkers. He was seen wandering around various post offices babbling at anybody who would listen, and then he was seen scampering like a mad thing in the hills, and then he was seen weeping and rending his garments at the graveside of fictional athlete Bobnit Tivol. Then he

vanished. He was missing during the dog days of the year, emerging as they petered out to publish his magnificent counterblast to Bunko Chongue, which I cited above.

By quoting his words, I do not necessarily lend them my imprimatur. For one thing, I did not see Bunko's show myself, so I cannot say whether he grasped the essence of the Dobson card index in all its lost glory. And for another thing, I rarely lend my imprimatur to anything. It can be rented at a cost, usually a cost involving blood and body parts, and undying fealty, and one or two tangerines, and seeds, and the plasticine head of a wolf on a stick.

Unregistered Ice Cream Vans

IN THE MIDDLE of a tirade the other day, I mentioned an unregistered ice cream van, and I have been asked to explain in what ways such an ice cream van differs from a registered one. It is all to do with robins.

Some years ago, an inspector appointed by the regime started to notice the presence of threatening robins whenever an ice cream van went barrelling along the lanes around Pang Hill and its satellite dire and dirty villages. The more the inspector looked, the more robins he saw, in the sky, upon branches, in shrubbery and hedges, atop buildings, and even perched on the power lines that are strung from paling to paling with no apparent purpose in this gas-fuelled faubourg. When the wheezy tinkling of an ice cream van was heard, the number of robins seemed to double, then triple, and a sense of menace was made manifest.

The inspector passed this information on to an officer back at headquarters. The officer, resplendent in furry pelts and Hohenzolleren cavalry marshal's boots, immediately hauled in as many ice cream van drivers as his agents could pull from their beds at midnight, and had them questioned.

Have you, or has your van, ever been attacked by robins?

This was the gist of all the interrogations, however they were phrased. The replies contained much dissembling, many evasions, and outright lies, but that was only to be expected, and the graph on which the results were plotted was adjusted accordingly. The officer had half a dozen copies of the graph printed, in four colours, green and pink and dun and scarlet, and sent them by pneumatic tube to his superiors. He was commended for his rigour, and awarded yet another medal, this one of tin, circular, and expensively beribboned.

The committee of six, recognising their own lack of ornithological expertise, empanelled a birdy nutter to add weight to their deliberations. He was no robin specialist by any means, being more of a corncrake man. He spent most of his time out in the wilds, living in tree hollows, surviving on berries and water from rills, and the first meeting of the committee to decide what to do about the menacing robins had to be delayed while he was tracked down. The task of doing so was assigned to a cadet who happened to be a cousin of the original ice cream van investigator. Though cousins, they had been reared as brothers, as close as twins. The cadet's name was Bim and the investigator was called Bam, and they were both fanatically loyal to the regime, in spite of the fact that their other cousin, Shevelham, was a treasonous cur languishing in one of the prison forts on the windswept plains out west.

Bim found the corncrake expert hiding in a forest, eating a choc ice, peering at birds through a pair of binoculars. They were not robins.

There was a deal of difficulty in getting a seventh copy of the graph printed for the birdman. There was no shortage of coloured inks, nor of paper, but the regime was faced with terrific transport problems. So many vans had been converted to the vending of ice cream, despite the robins, that few vehicles remained abroad for other purposes. Ink and paper could not go by rail, nor by coastal paddle-steamer, due to ancient regulations none dared overturn. It was, after all, that sort of regime.

More and more robins were gathering in the sky and the trees and between the palings.

It was on the third or fourth day after the empanelment of the committee that the idea of registering the ice cream vans was proposed. The bird person, hefty, and somewhat disorientated out of his woods, remained unconvinced that robins were intelligent enough to tell a registered ice cream van from an unregistered one. The person sat to his left explained that unregistered ice cream vans would, if found upon the lanes and boulevards, be blown up with bazookas.

Fewer vans, fewer robins.

This was the committee's slogan. They had it stamped on items of stationery and teacups and beakers as part of a campaign. A protocol was devised whereby ice cream van drivers could apply for registration, at post offices and bureaux and at vanishing points down grim horrifying alleyways. This last was picked

as a wheeze to do away with the more stupid ice cream van drivers, those whom it was thought may be attracting more than a fair share of the maleficent robins. The birdy panellist was asked to draw up a special report on the meaningful brain activity of both ice cream van drivers and a sample of captured robins, to find out if there was any correlation. He decamped back to the forest before completing his work, and no search party ever found him, however frantically they crashed through the undergrowth beating the foliage with sticks.

Much was left undone that ought to have been done. Yet the registration of ice cream vans remained as an emblematic law. As the robins gradually dispersed, due to the depredations of owls and weasels and monkeys and a change in the shapings of the sky, so the enforcers with their scanners and firearms were removed from the kerbside kiosks, and unregistered ice cream vans again braved the roads.

That is how it was.

Boiled Black Broth And Cornets

I PAID A visit to my friend Becke Beiderbix in her fortress in the mountains. We had known each other since childhood, growing up on a postwar housing estate, a workaday world of compactness and convention. But Becke was always a singleminded girl who followed her own strange star, and while the rest of us went off to polytechnics and office jobs and became fodder for a peculiarly dull-witted type of English fiction, Becke decamped to the mountains and built herself a fortress with her bare hands. I had no idea where she had picked up the skills to do this, and in truth, when I visited I was astonished to find how solid and immense and impregnable her fortress appeared, a massive edifice perched upon a bluff, as forbidding in its aspect as the Schloss Adler in *Where Eagles Dare* (Brian G Hutton, 1968), but without the Nazi connotations, for Becke was the most apolitical person I have ever known.

When she greeted me at the gate, she was holding a cornet in her hand.

'Hello, Dennis,' she said, planting a peck on my cheek, 'As you can see I have taken up the cornet, like my near-namesake Bix Beiderbecke, the original young man with a horn, and perhaps the greatest jazzman of the nineteen-twenties.'

'From fortress-building to cornet-playing, you never cease to amaze me, Becke,' I replied, dumping my weekend luggage in a corner of the grim brickish vestibule.

'As you are well aware, I follow my own strange star,' she said, steering me into the canteen of the fortress where she ladled soup out of a tureen into a pair of bowls.

'This is my own home-made soup,' she announced, 'For in addition to building the fortress and learning the cornet I have taken a correspondence

course in devising original soup recipes. In your bowl you have what I dubbed Becke Beiderbix's Boiled Black Broth, in which every single ingredient begins with the letter B. As you can see, it is a black soup, of a black so black that if you stare at it, instead of spooning it into your mouth, you will become entranced, pretty much like a voodoo zombie-person, and be entirely within my power.'

'Then I shall shut my eyes while I drain the bowl, Becke,' I said.

'Yes, I was about to recommend you do just that, Dennis,' she replied.

The soup proved to be bland and without even a hint of taste, but it warmed my innards and stopped the gurgling in my belly.

'Now that your belly has stopped gurgling, Dennis, I shall take you to see my workshop,' said Becke, and I followed her into the bowels of the fortress, to a room with a thousand padlocks and reinforced walls and sputtering candles. I half-expected to see a gibbering hunchback named Mungo, but it seemed Becke worked without assistance.

'Well now,' I said, 'You have many towering piles of metal tapping machine directories from all around the world, much thumbed through and dog-eared, as if you have been poring over them with terrific diligence, Becke'.

'That I have, Dennis,' she replied, 'It is drudgery to be sure, but necessary to the success of my project.'

Of course, I asked her what the project was, and her reply shocked me to the marrow. For all that her star was a strange one, it had never occurred to me that Becke was capable of the abduction and incarceration, in dungeons beneath her fortress, of eight completely innocent souls. She had gone through those directories searching for names, and when she alit upon an apt name she tracked the person down, wheresoever they might be, and she crept up on them and shoved a rag soaked in chloroform over their breathing channels, and shoved them into the back of her van, and drove like the devil himself at tiptop speed until back in her mountain fastness, and then she dragged the abductee down into one of her dungeons and slammed the heavy iron door shut upon them, and every day thereafter she took them a bowl of her black, black soup, and made them stare into its blackness until it was lukewarm, so they were pretty much like voodoo zombie-persons, entirely within her power, and then she commanded them to drink the soup, until the gurgling in their bellies ceased.

'But why, Becke, why?' I shrieked, as if taking part in a melodrama, wondering how the sensible, resourceful woman I had known had become quite loopy.

'Oh, this is only part one of the plan, Dennis,' she said, 'It will all make perfect sense now that I have an abductee in each of my eight dungeons. You would not believe how long it has taken me to work my way through those confounded directories to find the names I need. And then of course to travel hither and yon to wherever they are and do the bit with the chloroform, which has its own risks. You gape at me goggle-eyed, Dennis, as if I have taken leave of my senses, and I would agree with you were it not that all this is merely a preparation for a grander scheme.'

I did not discover, over that weekend, what the grander scheme was. Becke showed me a few other things in her workshop, including some mysterious small trunks, then insisted that we head on up to her rooftop pingpong area and play pingpong for hours and hours. Every so often she took a break to visit the dungeons, and left me to lie on my back, exhausted, staring at the bitter sky, trying not to think about what in heaven's name was going on far below in the subterranean depths of the fortress.

I made my farewell on the Sunday evening, after being given a bowl of a different home-made soup which I could sup without shutting my eyes. It was as bland as the black zombie soup, but extremely welcome after all that pingpong. Becke waved at me as I trudged down the mountainside towards the bus stop. I looked back, and there she stood, at her fortress gate, and above her in the now darkening sky shone a single star. I couldn't help but smile. She may have become bonkers, but she would always be my pal.

A year or so passed. I was too busy with my halibut research to give much thought to Becke and her eight abductees. I sent her the occasional metal tapping machine message, to which she always replied, although she never said much about what she was up to, confining herself to remarks about general fortress maintenance. And then one day, passing through Pointy Town, some kind of woolly-hatted student in need of pin money handed me a leaflet. I shoved it into my pocket and forgot about it, and only later, as I was rummaging through my jacket for scrunched-up halibut research notes, did I come upon it and read it.

Pointy Town Hepcat Jazz Club, it said, is pleased to announce a concert by a thrilling new combo. For the past year, Becke Beiderbix has been teaching the cornet to an octet of eight amateurs, and she is now ready to lead them in what promises to be a fantastic debut. The Becke Beiderbix Bix Beiderbecke Tribute Cornet Octet, featuring newcomers Bixder Beibecke, Beike Bixderbec, Kebec Bixderbei, Bixbec Beiderke, Beibix Becderke, Derke Bixbechei, Kebeider Bixbec, and Bixke Derbeibec will perform a show of Bix Beiderbecke classics. Soup will be served, in the form of Becke Beiderbix's Boiled Black Broth. Admission free.

I attended the show, of course, but shut my eyes for the soup.

Lord Love A Duck

WHEN WE CONSIDER the relationship between God and humankind, we tend to think of God as the one who issues commands and decrees and ukases that mere mortals must obey. Occasionally, however, it is the other way about. I have in mind the Cockney cheeky chappie who will, from time to time, exclaim 'Lord, love a duck!'

What are we to make of this? Is our loveable scalliwag telling the Lord to bestow His ineffable beneficence upon a denizen of the local duckpond? Or is it the case, as I prefer to think, of a command to God to engage in sexual congress with a duck? After all, there seems little need to be telling God to direct His abounding love upon any particular one of His creatures, for that is what He is doing all the time, apart of course from when He is smiting the sinful. It is a rare thing for a duck to require smiting, for by and large ducks do not sin.

We must ask why a chirpy eastender would command God to have sex with a duck, and the answer must be in the hope that the duck falls pregnant. For of course, a duck into whose womb wiggles a divine seed will eventually lay an egg from which will hatch, not an ordinary duckling, but a being that is half duck, half God - a duck-god, if you will.

The sexual link between Gods and aquatic birdlife is not without precedent. The most famous example is probably the story of Leda and the swan, although there the waters are muddied somewhat by the fact that God, in the form of Zeus, inhabited the body of a swan and proceeded to rape Leda, the mother of Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra, Castor and Pollux. None of Leda's children, either by the swan-God or by her husband King Tyndareus, turned out to have aquatic avian characteristics.

On one of his infrequent visits to Cockney haunts, Dobson overheard many ragamuffins and urchins shouting 'Lord, love a duck!', and he was led to wondering just how many duck-gods may have been spawned and were perhaps plashing unremarked in the ponds of the city's parks. Armed with a notebook and pencil, and some sort of pneumatic scanner device of his own invention, the out of print pamphleteer plodded around those very ponds during a wet October weekend. Sadly, he never wrote up his findings in pamphlet form, and the only record we have of his researches is a fragment from a letter Marigold Chew wrote to her cousin Basil.

Dobson has returned from his tour of east end ponds, she reported, and appears to be convinced that a wigeon (or baldpate) he spotted plashing in a pond in [illegible] had a spark of divinity about it. I argued that a mere spark was surely insufficient, and that a true duck-god would be immediately recognisable as such, for it would probably emit a blinding efflorescence of heavenly majesty and be surrounded by duckling apostles bowed in worship of its mighty duck-god omnipotence and of its boundless love and mercy. I added, perhaps unkindly, that Dobson's ornithological ignorance was of such an unfathomable depth that it would not surprise me if he had mistaken a wigeon for a pigeon, and, the latter not being a duck at all, his whole theory would come crashing around his ears. He took umbrage at this, and retired to his escritoire to scribble some twaddle about another topic entirely.

Pebblehead's Christmas Annual

THE LATEST VICTIM of crunchy credit conditions is *Pebblehead's Christmas Annual*, due to be published tomorrow but now indefinitely postponed. The bestselling paperbackist has been issuing his annuals every Christmas Eve for as long as anybody can remember, so this is what is known, in the language of his potboilers, as a bitter blow. Indeed, one of the features of this year's annual was to be an exciting tale of polar tragedy called 'Captain Jarvis And His Starving Huskies Are Pressed Flat Against A Glacier By The Bitter Blows Of An Antarctic Blizzard'. I am sorry I am not going to be able to read that to my grandchildren as a bedtime story, nor indeed to act it out in the community hub frolicking compound, if necessary using bags of flour as a snow substitute should the weather continue balmy.

As ever, the annual was to contain dozens of stories Pebblehead dashed off this past year in between writing his tremendous novels. According to the publisher's blurb, we were promised such gems as 'Vanessa Redgrave And The Revolutionary Space Cadets', 'The Six Million Dollar Goat', and 'Ooh La La, As He Sinks Beneath The Waves, Captain Jarvis Recalls What Bliss Was It In That Dawn To Have A Mild Headache'. It is something of a mystery why Pebblehead has yet to write an entire novel about this Captain Jarvis character, who gets into all sorts of exciting scrapes in all sorts of locations, exotic and otherwise. Last year's story, 'Captain Jarvis Topples Out Of A Hot Air Balloon Piloted By Richard Branson' was particularly thrilling.

We could also have expected many pictures of bees, ducks, gaping chasms, weasels, kitchen utensils, frogpersons, eggs, Ludwig Wittgenstein, cardboard boxes, giraffe heads, and tweezers. Pebblehead has been criticised for retaining the same picture categories year after year, every single annual containing three

cack-handed pencil drawings of each subject, all crammed into the endpapers, but I think this says a good deal about the man. He is reliable, he is consistent, he is a bestselling paperbackist, and he can't draw for toffee.

This year's factual articles were to include a potted history of potted fish-pastes, an analysis of sulphurous woozy barbershop quartet demons, an annotated diagram of Christ's wounds, and a reprint of Pebblehead's classic pig paragraph.

Add to that the quiz and the cut-out board game and the coating of scum upon the dust jacket, and it is clear we shall all be bereft at this time of otherwise unbridled jollity.

In Search Of Plunkett

Herewith Chapter 49 of Pallid Ada, The Crippled Heiress:

COUNTLESS FATHOMS DEEP, far far below the roiling ocean waves upon which our battered leaking ship is pitched and tossed, down, down in the black depths at the very sea bed, in a crevice of a rock encrusted with a billion years of salty encrustment, what wonders would we see, lit by the glow of fat eerie beings that pulsate and drift in the undersea world! Directly below our ship, far, far below, nestled in the crevice, there is a man! Dressed in garb half tattered black cloth half trailing weed, he is breathing freely, from his perfume bottle atomizer air bulb invention. Around him are gathered ranks of aquatic beings, the finned and the tendrilled, the suckered and the eyeless, the translucent and those that are mere blobs. They are rapt. For, with glubs and gurgles, the man is preaching to them the Word of the Lord. The man is none other than Alonzo Plunkett, the kindly Christian gentleman we last saw being dragged into the sea from a deserted stretch of British beach in the lobster-like claws of a sea monster!

It is with the aid of compass and sextant and stout-hearted prayer that we have dropped anchor at the very spot, in the vastness of the oceans, below which the semi-amphibious benefactor of Pallid Ada, the Crippled Heiress, is converting the denizens of the deep. Following his briny abduction, a committee of seaside worthies raised funds for a voyage to go in search of Plunkett. No better captain could we have than the terrifying and God-fearing retired Admiral Pipstrew. Poring over his charts, sucking on his pipe, beseeching the Lord, our captain has steered us hither and thither for six long years, following the most fleeting of clues, until now the prize is in our grasp!

Auks and guillemots wheel madly in the sky above our ship as, out on deck, crewmen Totteridge and Whetstone laboriously engarb themselves in the very best shiny brass Victorian diving gear. The captain stands to one side, his highly-polished peg leg glistening in the sunlight. Having at the last affixed to their helmets unfeasibly extensive lengths of pneumatic rubber tubing, the crewmen topple over the side, but not before Admiral Pipstrew booms out a hymn, and we all join in. And then, first Totteridge, then Whetstone, are gone, vanished below the waves. We can but wait for their return, Alonzo Plunkett safe and sound in the net they carry between them.

Sound, did I say? However kindly, however Christian, however expert in the geological treasures of the British coastline, how sound can a man be after spending six years in the blackest deep, his only company the weird aquatic life-forms that God, having made, at once condemned to remain submerged in the depths of the blue tumultuous waters? From poop to orlop, as we wait, there are mutterings that the Plunkett restored to the world of men will be a twitching and shattered glub-glubbing wreck, drooling brine, his once fine bouffant shockingly tangled with weed and sea-scum. The tension mounts, and we busy ourselves with abstruse nautical activities, as our captain broods on the bridge, absent-mindedly prising barnacles off a stray timber plank.

Night falls. Night at sea is very different to night on land. Better writers than I, immeasurably better, have evoked the arresting aura of the sea-night. So much greater are they, the very air around them is rarefied and pure and I am not fit to breathe an atom of it. If ever I were to meet such a writer, which I would not, but if, say, I was mistakenly invited to a swish cocktail party at which one was present, I would expect to be squashed beneath their boot like a mite. I am but a humble jack tar, eking my sorry living in the rigging, scribbling prose in my too few idle moments, smudging the brine-soaked pages as I sweep from them the crumbs of the hard tack biscuits that fall from my caried gob.

Dawn breaks, and still there is no sign of Totteridge and Whetstone. Dawn at sea offers a very different prospect to dawn on land. There are great painters whose canvases will show you why. My own daubs, done with the dregs from tins of ship emulsion, will not.

Our only means of communication with the two crewmen gone below to rescue Alonzo Plunkett is a coded system of tugs to the ropes to which they

are attached. It had been thought prudent not to extend the complexity of the system by adding a series of secondary tugs to their pneumatic rubber tubing, as a single misjudged tug might disrupt their air supply and consign them to a watery death. Admiral Pipstrew, who has not slept, is ready to command one tug on the ropes, to signal, as previously arranged, 'Is Almighty God keeping you safe from harm in the immensity of His fathomless oceans?' But he stays his hand when an eagle-eyed cabin boy pipes up to announce that both Totteridge's and Whetstone's ropes are being tugged from below. And as we look, indeed they are, not merely tugged but yanked, pulled with main force, so threatening to topple the mast to which they are lashed. That mast is the mainmast, so as it topples, the ship itself will keel over. We are in mortal danger!

Whatever is tugging those ropes has inhuman strength. Our captain has to decide whether to sacrifice two of his crew for the good of all. But a night without sleep has scattered his wits, and he delays too long. With a last mighty heave, the ship is overturned, and every man jack of us is tossed into the sea.

Our descent to the depths is calm and dreamlike. There is no panic, no thrashing about, no bobbing to the surface for a last hopeless gulp of air before plunging again. We sink, every one of us, slowly and peacefully, until we land, with scarce a bump, on the sea bed. And there before us, in translucent shimmers, we see Alonzo Plunkett, and Totteridge, and Whetstone, and any number of fantastic marine life-forms, greeting us with glub-glub hosannahs, in the undersea paradise built with his bare hands by the kindly Christian gentleman during six years of hard subaquatic toil, to the glory of God.

Shipwreck Is Everywhere

Si bene calculum ponas, ubique naufragium est.
– Gaius Petronius Arbiter.

THAT IS, 'IF you consider well the events of life, shipwreck is everywhere'. Nobody considered the events of life with as much rigour as the out of print pamphleteer Dobson, and he came to agree with Petronius. Indeed, late in life he became notorious for breaking up happy gatherings, such as cocktail parties and jaunty sporting occasions and infants' birthday celebrations, by brandishing mezzotints of famous shipwrecks in the faces of those gathered and reciting, in a booming voice, *The Wreck Of The Hesperus* or *The Wreck Of The Deutschland*, or both.

The mezzotints Dobson clipped from a magazine to which he subscribed for many years. *Partridge & Peacock's Weekly Shipwreck News* collected accounts of shipwrecks real and fictional, usually written in lurid prose, and illustrated them with mezzotints, many from the hand of noted mezzotintist Rex Tint. Neither Partridge nor Peacock had the slightest interest in improving safety at sea, nor did they campaign for better lifeboat provision or similar initiatives. Quite the opposite, in fact. Partridge and Peacock were a gruesome pair, who relished the horror of shipwrecks, clapping their hands in unseemly glee when they received fresh tales of maritime disaster. They employed a team of backroom scribblers to empurple and embroider the basic reports which came clicketyclacking into the office on some kind of tickertapeyfaxy gubbins the duo had themselves invented.

Dobson never wrote for the magazine, although both Partridge and Peacock begged him to do so. There was one particular winter when either or both of

the creepy cousins came banging on Dobson's door offering blandishments, but the pamphleteer never succumbed. Even in the depths of penury, he appears to have held himself aloof, which is the more curious when one considers how devoted a reader of the weekly he was. Odder still that shipwreck is one of the few topics, one of the few 'events of life', to which Dobson did not devote a pamphlet of his own. It is true that he penned more than one blitheringly infantile encomium upon mezzotintist Rex Tint's shipwreck mezzotints, the ones he clipped so carefully from the magazine every Tuesday morning for untold years and which, late in life, he took to pressing upon the attention of jolly partygoers, but of shipwrecks in and of themselves, he wrote not a word.

Although she did not share Dobson's macabre interest, Marigold Chew once set *The Wreck Of The Deutschland* to music. She was, at the time, a pupil of grim beetle-browed composer Horst Gack, who set her the task of using Father Hopkins' great poem as the basis for a harmochronotransduction for voice, piping, valves, and flute-to-be-played-while-standing-on-one-leg. Legend has it that she tried to get Dobson to sing the words during rehearsals in a farmyard barn, but that the project had to be abandoned when cows toppled over and goats got the vapours, hens became hysterical and rooks and bluebirds plummeted from the sky.

Babinsky

I AM GOING to tell you how I took my revenge on the monster Babinsky, but first I have to say a few words about the duckpond. Well, I don't have to, but I want to, to clear my head. It was the kind of duckpond that had clouds of gnats hovering over it, and from which the ducks had long since fled, supplanted by swans, particularly savage swans, so rightly it ought to have been called a swanpond rather than a duckpond, but these terms have a way of sticking. At least for me they do. I tend to use the same names for things as I did when I was still tiny, which was a very long time ago, so long ago that I had never even heard of Babinsky. Nor had the world heard of Babinsky then, for he was yet to commit his terrible crimes. Funny to think that I grew up in a world so innocent.

This duckpond was one of the first ponds I came to in my days of eggy Wanderlust. You know how it is, when you stuff yourself full of eggs, hard and soft, and feel compelled to go a-roaming o'er the hills and the meadows until you strike upon a duckpond or two. I no longer eat eggs, and I no longer go a-wandering as I did in those days. When I had a belly full of eggs I had vim and a compulsion. Rare was the day I did not stamp across fields grinding daffodils underfoot, on my way to a pond, in the teeth of storms. The ducks are gone, and the swans make a din, but the gnats still hover, and now my head is clear and I can tell my tale.

What is that Holland-Dozier-Holland song, the one about 'Empty silence surrounding me / Lonely walls they stare at me'? I would sing it to you if I could sing. Not the whole song, you understand, just those lines, to give you an idea of the circumstances in which I write. Solitude and silence and gloom - just the ticket. In the past, when Babinsky still roamed the earth, I had to write

when and where I could, on the deck of a packet steamer or out in the wind and the rain on a pier or bundled in the back of a cab careering along broad urban boulevards. But now I can choose, and I choose a room of gloom. There is just me and my tortoise, Destiny's Child, and we are content.

I was at the duckpond when I heard Babinsky's name for the first time. Swans had already frightened away the ducks, and I was, in those days, very keen to learn as much as I could about the intricacies of swan behaviour patterns. I camped out in tentage at the edge of the pond for what I hoped would be a jolly fortnight. On the second day, reports reached me of a terrible enormity committed by Babinsky at a nearby farmyard. It was the kind of thing Truman Capote might have written about, but was certainly not a fit subject for a song by Brian and Edward Holland and Lamont Dozier. As for me, I had not become the word-drunk penman I am now, so it did not occur to me to write about it. No, I hid inside my rented tentage and blubbed like a baby. When I was done I hied over to the farmyard to see what horrors the monster had wrought. Then I vomited into a churn.

I was singing Hosannahs at a service in a consecrated cabin in the foothills of some very important mountains when next Babinsky struck. Earlier I told you I cannot sing, but Hosannahs are different. Try them and you will see. I felt it imperative to finish the Hosannah in spite of the havoc Babinsky had wrought, at an off licence in a village in a neighbouring foothill, and thankfully the rest of the choir agreed with me. How I treasure the memory of that mighty hymn of praise! It was like a slap in the face to Babinsky, or at least that is how it seemed. We did not learn until later that day that he had gone on immediately to down an airliner, using the same method as deployed by Colonel Stuart in *Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1990).

You may be wondering what the coppers were doing all this time. It grieves me to say that they were utterly witless. Their photo-fit showed a lugubrious man with a pencil moustache and pimples and one eye alarmingly larger than the other. In other words, almost the opposite of Babinsky. The tape recording they claimed was of Babinsky making one of his criminal demands turned out to be of Mick Jagger engaged in idle chitchat. Worse, the psychic investigator attached to the case was only able to communicate with long-dead Aztecs. I began to realise that if Babinsky were ever to be brought to justice, it would fall to me.

In truth, I wasn't interested in justice. I wanted revenge. The farmyard, the off licence, the airliner, the countless other targets of his unquenchable criminality - it mattered not where or how he struck. I knew it was me he was after. And yesterday, at long last, I put an end to his reign of terror after, what, thirty, forty years?

I saw him at the duckpond. I went out that way partly for old time's sake and partly because I still take a vague interest in the way swans conduct themselves. I saw a stooped and shambling figure walking a dog around the pond. Don't ask me what kind of dog it was, I neither know nor care. How typical of Babinsky to be walking a dog around a duckpond, as if his soul was spotless! I rushed at him without warning and bashed him over the head with a spade, and he fell. I picked up the dog and wrung its neck and then I bashed Babinsky's head in with repeated blows of the spade. Then I threw him and his dog into the pond, where the particularly vicious swans made short work of them.

I walked slowly home to my room of gloom with my spade slung over my shoulder, and then I stuffed myself with eggs. I felt young again.

Blodgett Boils My Lady Kent's Pudding

IN LOOKING THROUGH *Thaumaturgia, or Elucidations Of The Marvellous* by An Oxonian (1835) the other day, for a quotation about a delusional glass man, I came across this:

We shall conclude our astrological strictures with the following advertisement, which affords as fine a satirical specimen of quackery as is to be met with. It is extracted from 'poor Robin's' almanack for 1773; and may not be without its use, to many at the present day. We will vouch for it being harmless, but as we are not in the secret of all that it contains, our readers must endeavour to get the information that may be wanted, on certain important points, from other quarters

ADVERTISEMENT.

'The best time to cut hair. How moles and dreams are to be interpreted. When most proper season to bleed. Under what aspect of the moon best to draw teeth, and cut corns. Pairing of nails, on what day unlucky. What the kindest sign to graft or inoculate in; to open bee-hives, and kill swine. How many hours boiling my Lady Kent's pudding requires. With other notable questions, fully and faithfully resolved, by me Sylvester Patridge, student in physic and astrology, near the Gun in Moorfields.'

'Of whom likewise may be had, at reasonable rates, trusses, antidotes,

*elixirs, love-powders. Washes for freckles, plumpers, glass-eyes, false calves
and noses, ivory-jaws, and a new receipt to turn red hair into black.'*

One man who knew a thing or two about boiling My Lady Kent's pudding, apart from Sylvester Patridge, was Blodgett. Blodgett first came upon the recipe when he was under the culinary tutelage of the so-called Culinary King of Cuxhaven, Binsey Poplars. Poplars himself unearthed the pudding details during his researches in an archive of pudding recipes at the Texas Recipe Book Depository in Dallas, bang next door to the more famous - or infamous - Texas Schoolbook Depository, from a sixth floor window of which, on a November day in 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald shot President John Fitzgerald Kennedy with a mail-order Mannlicher-Carcano rifle. Some would add 'allegedly' after that statement, but not me. I have read my Posner.

Nobody, so far as we know, ever shot anyone from a window of the Recipe Book Depository, not even Binsey Poplars, who, when he was not rummaging through old recipe books, could himself be impelled to acts of senseless violence. He once broke Blodgett's legs, for example, quite deliberately, with blows from a tent peg mallet. Poplars called this mallet his Hammer of Pedagogy, which was something of a misnomer, as he also used it to crack eggs, to bash out dents in his pans, and to hammer tent pegs into campsite mud. He was fond of taking his students on camping trips to the outskirts of Cuxhaven, and having them forage or starve.

It was on one such escapade, when Blodgett was still on crutches, that teacher and student fell into a lengthy conversation about puddings. The Culinary King had only recently returned from his Texas trip, and his head was full of the recipes he had discovered in the pudding archive. The countryside around Cuxhaven was at the mercy of roaring winds that weekend, and Poplars and his students were huddled in their tents. It was not foraging weather. The pedagogue made a point of sharing his tent with any student whose bones he had broken in a fit of temper, and so it was Blodgett on this occasion who sprawled at his master's feet. As far as puddings went, Blodgett knew almost as much as Binsey Poplars. He had immersed himself in the world of puddings since infancy, and it was this enthusiasm that had led him to sign up to the Culinary King's Crash Course in the first place. For though Blodgett could tell

you about thousands of different puddings, he had no idea how to make a single one of them.

In the tent, as gales howled and canvas flapped, Poplars and Blodgett talked about puddings for hours.

'Of course,' said Binsey Poplars pompously, 'Sylvester Patridge claimed to know the correct boiling time for My Lady Kent's pudding, but the man was a charlatan and a fool, and if you boiled it for the time he recommended you would end up with a pretty sorry excuse for a pudding'.

'Tell me more,' said Blodgett, all ears, because here was a pudding that, remarkably, he had never heard of. And as his tutor prattled on, Blodgett scraped shorthand notes on to one of his crutches with a sharpened twig.

Years later, far from Cuxhaven, restored in limb, and now a dab hand at cooking the puddings he had once merely salivated over, Blodgett stumbled upon his old crutch and deciphered the scrapings he had made upon it. He transcribed them into a notebook, embellished them, and published them as part of *Blodgett's Book Of Many Puddings*, a copy of which, fittingly, was acquired by the trustees of the pudding archive at the Texas Recipe Book Depository on Elm Street in Dallas, just along from the overpass on the Stemmons Freeway.

A fantastic challenge for any maker of boiled puddings, he wrote, is the pudding named after My Lady Kent. Should it be steamed before boiling, or afterwards? Should it indeed be steamed at all, or should one just get on and boil it? What is the best type of pan in which to chuck the pudding ingredients prior to boiling? Does the pan matter? If the pan is dented, should one bash out the dents with the Hammer of Pedagogy beforehand? If one neglects to do so, will any indentations in the finished pudding caused by the dents add to its savour, or will they detract from it? Is there a place, in the contemporary world, for dented puddings, or should we be aiming for clean lines and smooth edges? Can a modern version of My Lady Kent's pudding compete with the original? Should we allow indentations irrespective of their effect simply because, in all likelihood, given the rough and tumble of the times, My Lady Kent's own pans would have been outrageously dented? Rare was the pan in those days that did not get bashed about and suffer because of that bashing. That may be one reason for the popularity of puddings, for there are cogent arguments claiming that the final shape of a pudding, particularly a boiled pudding, matters not a jot to the eater of the pudding. Are there any cases we can advert to where a pudding has been sent back from table with the complaint 'I cannot eat this pudding. It is dented.'? Such reservations are likely with

other things one might eat. A duck of the wrong shape, likewise a pig's head or a pie full of misshapen blackbirds, will cause revulsion, for the eater may think, rightly, that they are being fobbed off with abominations of nature. But there is no such thing as the correct shape of a pudding, not even of My Lady Kent's pudding. And yet to make one that is succulent and lip-smacking remains a challenge, and takes years of study, sometimes in a tent, on the outskirts of Cuxhaven, while canvas is buffeted and fierce winds blow.

It does not escape the reader's notice that Blodgett fails to answer many of the questions he, or Binsey Poplars before him, raises, and nor does he provide a workable recipe for the pudding he so enthuses about. That is Blodgett all over, of course, infuriating and exasperating yet strangely adorable for all that.

Incidentally, it is said that the dressmaker Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the famous footage of the Kennedy assassination on his top-of-the-range Model 414 PD 8 mm Bell & Howell Zoomatic Director Series movie camera, was planning to spend the afternoon, following the passing of the presidential motorcade, in the Texas Recipe Book Depository, specifically to consult Blodgett's book. Whether he was intending to boil My Lady Kent's pudding, and was looking for helpful hints, we do not know, and now we never will, for history took a fateful turn on that sunny day in Dallas, and the dressmaker's boiled pudding thoughts were wiped clean from his brain. But not from yours, or mine.

Piling Ossa Upon Pelion

MY APPOINTMENT WITH destiny, or dentistry, I forget which, was cancelled, and I had an afternoon to play with, so I thought I would try my hand at piling Ossa upon Pelion, as the Aloadae did in the old story. In some versions, they piled Pelion upon Ossa, so to be on the safe side it seemed best to attempt both. Now obviously my withered limbs and general puniness prevented me from literally piling one mountain on top of another. I had in mind to construct miniatures, to scale, out of cardboard and rags and cotton wool and glue.

Before turning my hand to this exciting if pointless project, it occurred to me that it was just the kind of thing Tiny Enid might have done when she found herself at a loose end. The plucky infant fascist could not bear to be idle, and it was quite possible that, between adventures, she might have piled Ossa upon Pelion, or vice versa, although in her case I am sure she had the resourcefulness to tackle the real mountains instead of small lightweight copies. Had she ever passed the time in this fashion, I was keen to pick up any tips, so I consulted the literature. Ever since the publication of Mavis Gasball's majestic *Complete Reference Guide To All The Doings Attributed To Tiny Enid, In Twenty Volumes, With Twelve Rotogravures By Noted Rotogravurist Rex Rotograv*, it takes even the dull-witted a matter of minutes to track down the most obscure episodes in the life of the heroic tot. The afternoon was still young when I slammed the books shut, satisfied that there was nothing Tiny Enid could teach me about the task ahead. There was mention of neither Ossa nor Pelion in the index, nor of the Aloadae, nor of Otus nor Ephialtes, and the sole reference to Mount Olympus led to a thrilling, yet unrelated, account of Tiny Enid setting fire to a paper aeroplane upon its pinnacle at the culmination of the *affaire désagréable* in 1955. I was too familiar with this to reread it, so I replaced the books on the

shelf, buckled up my boots, and pranced off across the greensward to the hut wherein I kept my cardboard and rags and cotton wool and glue.

Was ever a hut so cherished as mine? It is filthy and in a state of collapse, but to me it is a kind of paradise.

I switched on my radio to listen to Cardboard Mountain Modeller's Playtime as I worked. They were playing Scriabin. How curious, I thought, that so accomplished a pianist had such tiny little hands! My own hands are leaden and fat and clumsy, more's the pity. I am afraid that after an hour or two of inexpert fumbling and mashing and prodding I had created a quartet of shapeless compacted clumps. A quartet, because I strived to make two model Ossas and two model Pelions, that I might pile Ossa upon Pelion, and pile Pelion upon Ossa, simultaneously rather than consecutively. Perhaps, in so doing, I was overambitious, and would have obtained better results had I been satisfied with a single pair, the positions of which, Ossa atop Pelion, or Pelion atop Ossa, I could have switched as often as the fancy took me, or, indeed, never, were one tableau more pleasing to the eye than the other. As it was, all I had to show for an afternoon of strenuous cackhandedness were four almost identical messes of cardboard and rags and cotton wool and glue, a fuming temper, an overheated radio set, and a sense of defeat I would struggle to shake off for years to come.

I bundled my Ossas and Pelions into a burlap sack and, on my way home, chucked the sack into a pond, where it floated for a while, until it was eventually destroyed by the ferocious pecking of swans.

Spillage On Cambric

HAVING SPILLED SOUP on a piece of cambric, the verger tried to amend his sloppiness by dabbing at the cambric with a damp sponge. Alas, so much chemical colourant had been added to the soup, which was of a tomato flavour, and so hastily and violently did the verger do his dabbing, that a bright orange stain was impressed into the cambric. The cambric, by the way, was blue with golden stars, like the vault of heaven. Fearing that he had ineradicably besmirched a representation of the ethereal realm, the verger hid the cambric and the sponge in a cupboard and poured the remainder of his tomato soup down the drain. He cleansed his bowl and spoon with more care than he had dabbed at the cambric, and placed them exactly where he had found them among the crockery and cutlery, having first dried them with a tea towel depicting the martyrdom of Saint Anselm. This was an historically inaccurate tea towel, as Saint Anselm died a natural death rather than being martyred for his faith. It was not the only erroneous tea towel in the kitchen.

The verger hoped that hiding the evidence of his sloppiness in the cupboard would prevent it from coming to light, but he reckoned without the involvement of Detective Captain Cargpan. The detective was called in by the bishop on an unrelated matter, something to do with the local sniper, who had been taking potshots at the cathedral hens. Cargpan was noted for his energetic approach to police work, and on this occasion he strained so many sinews that by midmorning he was exhausted and dehydrated. Characteristically, he did not whimper to the bishop begging for refreshments, but instead blundered about until he found the kitchen, where he intended to gulp down water straight from the tap. Having done enough gulping to make himself feel human again, Cargpan could not resist opening all the drawers and cupboards in the kitchen

and examining the contents with his magnifying glass.. Such was his method. Although it was unlikely that either the sniper or the hens had ever been in the kitchen, the detective assumed nothing. Thus it was that he discovered the hidden cambric and sponge. He was extremely suspicious of the bright orange stain.

Under questioning, the verger admitted his part, but insisted that the sponge and the cambric had no connection to the sniper and the hens. Detective Captain Cargpan roughed him up a bit, breaking one of his arms and dislocating his jaw. This, too, was his method. The verger continued to protest his innocence throughout his subsequent trial and the long years on the prison hulk moored off an unspeakable stretch of coastline. Long after his death, campaigners sought for him a posthumous pardon. But we now know that Cargpan was right all along, and that the verger and the sniper were one and the same. Interviewed for a television documentary during his long and happy retirement, Cargpan explained that, for him, it was an open and shut case.

'A man who can smear tomato soup upon a picture of the vault of heaven, and who makes use of historically erroneous tea towels, is precisely the sort of man who would shoot at innocent clucking hens with a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle,' he said. Today we are at last able to acknowledge the wisdom of those words.

Vargas

VARGAS, THE MOUSTACHIOED Mexican cop played by Charlton Heston in Orson Welles' classic *Touch Of Evil* (1958), had a walk-on part in one of the more curious episodes of Dobson's life. Mystery surrounds the sudden appearance in Mexico of the out of print pamphleteer, although the oft-repeated story that he hove into view on the very spot where, a few seconds earlier, Ambrose Bierce had vanished, never to be seen again, can be discounted on the basis that it is chronologically incoherent. What makes the idea of Dobson-in-Mexico so perplexing is that he was notoriously unsuited to hot temperatures. Like Horace Walpole, he often had a bucket of ice close to hand, though not, of course, when he was in Mexico, for in the high noon of a sweltering day such as the one when he made his inexplicable appearance in that hot land such a bucketful would have melted away within seconds. As one might expect, Dobson was dressed inappropriately. Witnesses record that he was enwrapped in a fur muffler and some sort of reindeer-hide kagoul, his large ungainly feet slotted in to a pair of padded boots as worn by Alpinists. It would be helpful, I think, to have a goodly supply of words in Spanish to deploy when setting the scene. Alas, that language is not among my accomplishments, nor are most of the languages spoken and written in the world, so you will just have to picture the pamphleteer tottering unsteadily down a dusty road in a Mexican village. No one knew where he had come from, how he had got there, nor what the ramifications of his presence would be. And you can bet there would be ramifications. There always were with Dobson. He was not, to be blunt, the sort of pamphleteer who could shrink into the shadows, like a discarded and overlooked violet. If he did not always make a lot of noise, he somehow *seemed* to. Things would crash around him, or he would disturb the kinds of animals

that howl and screech, such as dogs and wolves and screech owls and monkeys, or he would set off clanging alarm bells. At least, such rackets occurred on his foreign trips, for when he was at home in his dismal backwater silence could sometimes reign for days on end, broken only by the endless thrumming of rain upon the roof. There was no rain here in Mexico, not today, just a broiling and battering sun in a sky innocent of clouds. Beneath it tottered Dobson, a pencil in one hand and a notebook in the other. Had anyone dared ask him what he was bent upon doing, he would have explained that he was engaged in what he liked to call 'pamphleteering in the field'. By this he did not mean the sort of field he was used to at home, with its cows and rusty farm equipment, but the abstract 'field' beloved of anthropologists and ethnographers, and indeed of all sorts of persons who charge about the place imagining that they are grappling with the 'authentic'. Dobson did not care two pins about authenticity, delusional or otherwise, but he fancied himself as the kind of pamphleteer who could wring a pamphlet from whatever circumstances he found himself in, and once he had hit upon the 'pamphleteering in the field' phrase, he made a meal of it. Thus in the year of which I write he had been stumbling aimlessly from one place to another, pencilling pamphlets as he went. Now, in Mexico, he slumped against an adobe horse-related street appurtenance, lit one of his crumpled cigarettes, and wrote in his notebook:

Pamphlet In The Field, Number Ten. I appear to be in a Mexican village. There will be ramifications, but as yet I do not know what they will be.

It was at this point that Ramon Miguel 'Mike' Vargas came upon the scene. He was off duty from his top job in the Mexican narcotics bureau, but his presence in the small dusty village has never been satisfactorily explained. Perhaps, like Dobson, he was just there, for no real purpose. History is full of such apparently meaningless conjunctions. Consider that Stalin and Trotsky first met each other in what is now a McDonald's restaurant on Whitechapel Road in east London, or that Richard Milhous Nixon left Dallas from Love Field mere hours before John F Kennedy flew in on that fateful November morning in 1963. Can the encounter of Dobson and Vargas be said to have the same resonance? Certainly, what passed between them seemed unimportant at the time. Remembering that he had to buy some fruit pastilles for his wife Susie, and wishing to jot down a note, Vargas asked to borrow Dobson's pencil. The pamphleteer obliged, mindful of the quiet authority of the Mexican lawman,

but as he handed over the pencil he managed, in that Dobsonian way of his, to frighten some hens who were coming to eat some grain that had been scattered near the adobe horse-related street appurtenance. If you have ever seen a gaggle of panicked hens fleeing from a pencil-brandishing pamphleteer, you will know quite well what chaos can be wrought in a dusty village. There was uproar, and shouting, and the clattering of many cooking pots, and semi-automatic gunfire. By the time things settled down a few minutes later, after the village hen person wove his henly spell over the hens to placate them, Vargas had forgotten all about Susie's fruit pastilles and Dobson had quite lost his train of thought. Both men might have forgotten the entire incident, but their lives were changed forever. It is not clear precisely what happened when Vargas returned to his motel room fruit pastilleless, and it would be foolish to speculate. We know, however, that Dobson underwent a neurasthenic miasma when he found he was incapable of completing *Pamphlet In The Field, Number Ten*. By nightfall, he had left the Mexican village as suddenly as Ambrose Bierce had vanished. Indeed, he had left Mexico altogether, and was aboard a packet steamer, bound, eventually, for home. He spent the entire voyage, and the connecting voyages on any number of other seagoing vessels, huddled in his cabins, sucking on vitamin tablets and mopping his brow with wrung-out dishcloths. His notebook remained unopened, unwritten in, partly due to the neurasthenic miasma and partly because, in all the mayhem of the panicking hens incident, Vargas had popped Dobson's pencil into his pocket, and he had neglected to return it. The pamphleteer fetched up at home months later, still wearing his fur muffler and reindeer-hide kagoul and padded Alpine boots. The rain was thrumming on the roof and Marigold Chew was fixing a tarpaulin over the guttering. She greeted Dobson brightly.

'Hello Dobson! How was the field?'

'I am done with the field,' he muttered, 'It has broken me. From now on, I shall write all my pamphlets sitting at my *escritoire*, a pot of pencils and a pencil sharpener in easy reach.'

And without another word, he went and sat at the famed *escritoire*, and began to write the pamphlet we know today as *The Unutterable Chaos Caused By Panicking Hens* (out of print). As you probably recall, he dedicated it to Ramon Miguel 'Mike' Vargas.

All Around My Hat

ALL AROUND MY Hat is an English folk song, popularised in the 1970s by folk rock titans Steeleye Span. Their version was very similar to the one published in *A Garland Of Country Song* by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1895. Apart from folk song and folklore collections, Baring-Gould wrote hymns, a sixteen-volume *Lives Of The Saints*, many novels, a study of werewolves, grave desecration and cannibalism, and a biography of Robert Stephen Hawker (1803-1875), the eccentric country vicar who spent much of his time smoking opium in a clifftop hut made from driftwood, talked to birds, dressed up as a mermaid, excommunicated his cat, and had a pet pig.

'All around my hat' are also the opening words of one of Dobson's more curious pamphlets, in which he describes wearing a hat lined with lead to deflect weird invisible rays aimed at his brain. It is not clear who, or what, is sending these putative rays, nor why the Dobsonian cranium needs to be protected from them.

'All around my hat' writes the pamphleteer, 'the air is a site of constant barrage from weird invisible brain rays!' Note the exclamation mark, an uncharacteristic touch which has convinced some critics that Dobson was fooling around. The idea that this pamphlet is an unserious blotch on the canon has gained ground in recent years, with Nestingbird, for one, going so far as to claim that Dobson did not even write it, but simply copied out random paragraphs from a booklet given away as a free gift with a packet of breakfast cereal. This argument loses a certain force when Nestingbird has to admit that he has not managed to identify the said booklet, nor the breakfast cereal. In any case, as upstart young Dobsonist Ted Cack has pointed out in a series of increasingly aggressive letters, Dobson usually ate bloaters for breakfast.

The Nestingbird-Cack correspondence is a perfect example of the way in which the minutiae of Dobson studies can be magnified to the point where common sense is blotted out, much as the bulk of a pig the size of Robert Stephen Hawker's pet pig would blot out the sun if you were sprawled in a particular patch of muck in its sty. It was a very large pig. Thus, the senior critic floats the idea of the breakfast cereal booklet, the upstart counters with the point about bloaters, the elder counters that the packet of breakfast cereal may have been purchased by and munched by Marigold Chew, the youngster replies with a computerised database of known breakfast cereal free gift booklets for the period in question, the old man picks out flaws in the research, the rookie lets loose a vituperative attack on his opponent's atrophied brain sinews, and before long the columns of a reputable literary journal read like the ravings of H P Lovecraft in his more hysterical passages. All of this can be great fun for those entertained by Dobson-related pap, but sober-minded scholars are, I think, ill-served. There is a great temptation to take both Nestingbird and Ted Cack by the scruffs of their necks and crack their heads together. Hairline fractures in the skulls of both might just allow in thin shafts of light, akin to the weird invisible rays Dobson feared may be beaming towards his own brain. Or, I should say, the weird invisible rays Dobson *possibly* feared, unless of course he was just fooling around for reasons which must remain obscure to us.

Without wishing to generate further controversy over what is, in any case, a pointless and trivial matter, I should add that I have recently completed a lengthy work, at fifteen volumes just one book short of Sabine Baring-Gould's *Lives Of The Saints*. It is a comprehensive study, with lots of illustrations and diagrams, of all Dobson's known and suspected hats. I conclude that not a single one of them was lined with lead.

Plutarch Versus Petrarch

THE CHIEF REASON Plutarch and Petrarch never met in a he-man wrestling bout is a matter of simple chronology. Consider their dates of birth and death, Plutarch (46-120) and Petrarch (1304-1374). More than a thousand years separates their days on our little planet, and none of the fantastic time-travel contraptions dreamed up by sci-fi writers and visionaries has ever been built, at least not in any working form. Had one been made, then Plutarch could have been whizzed into the future, or Petrarch into the past, and, suitably attired, or possibly naked and greased like the wrestlers of certain ancient civilisations, the pair could have entertained the crowds, displaying all sorts of he-man wrestling holds, and grunting, and throwing each other around the ring. If their bout was fought according to a brutal set of rules, someone may have needed to stand by with a pail and a mop, to clean up any shed blood, and someone else, preferably a surgeon, would be needed to place splints on any broken bones. It is unlikely that either Plutarch or Petrarch would agree to fight to more genteel wrestling rules, for they would not wish to appear namby-pamby to their thousands upon thousands of supporters.

Whose side you come down on depends to a large extent upon your own cranial blips. If you have spent much of your adult life poring over the *Parallel Lives* and the *Moralia*, scribbling a lot of notes in the margins, or in a pad, then you will probably cheer on Plutarch and hope that sickening crunching noise you heard is not one of his bones being shattered. On the other hand, if you like nothing better than to curl up in a hammock with a copy of *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* or the *Secretum*, then you will be backing Petrarch, and wanting to see that pail filled with the blood of Plutarch. Or, if you have wasted your life and never read a word by either of these titans, you may be

swayed by, say, Plutarch's beard or by Petrarch's hat. The position you will not want to be in is one of neutrality, for you will see how the adherents of both the 'Big P-Archs' are violently partisan, with a lust for gore, kept apart by a fence of iron stakes. Not to join one mob or the other is to miss out on the frenzy of the day, and in any case, you will have to choose to sit in one section of the ringside. And in spite of their screaming and gesticulating and spitting, the mobs do sit, quite neatly even, on their benches or their bucket seats. No one wants to spoil the view of the ring, wherein Plutarch and Petrarch land forearm smashes and trip each other up and stamp about in a great show of he-man grappling.

Once you have plumped for your champion, you will want to take out a bet with one of the ringside bookies. Gambling at time-travel wrestling bouts is big, and sometimes ugly, business. Punters' scuffles tend to break out, and rampant bookie-hounds are unleashed. These are fearsome dogs, each one individually cloned from the DNA of Cerberus, or whatever Cerberus' equivalent of DNA is. That would be a matter for the mythologists, and it is not a good idea to get embroiled in their arguments, for you would soon go loopy. The bookies set their bookie-hounds on any punter scuffling, or any punter they just don't like the look of. But carry yourself with grace and good humour and you ought to have no problem placing your bet, whether it is on Plutarch or Petrarch.

This is not, of course, a he-man wrestling match to the death, for both writers need to return at some point to their own times, albeit bruised and bloodied and broken. If for any reason one or both of them were not plopped back into their own small world, whether it be in Boeotia or Arezzo, or thereabouts, there would be a hideous juddering panic-inducing crumplement of the space-time continuum, with unforeseen consequences. One such consequence, weirdly, might be that you wake up in the morning to discover that the world is run by giant hamsters, and all because, after their close-fought he-man wrestling bout, Plutarch and Petrarch wandered off together out of the ring and forgot to return to the wholly fictitious time-machine at the appointed hour. Giant hamsters in charge is one of multifold possibilities, but one I suspect we would all wish to avoid. However attractive the idea of the two literary giants hobnobbing as they vanish over the horizon, arm I arm, it really is important to bundle both of them back, or forward, to their own times, for the good of all, except perhaps the hamsters.

A Magic Trick

HERE IS A simple magic trick to astonish your family and friends. When performing it, wear a sweeping black cape, and apply some mascara around your eyes. Doing so will add a dash of mystique and make you seem a little more exotic than you are already. If you have no family, and few friends, you can drag some mendicants and urchins and dogs off the street.

The trick can only be performed on a sunny day, for to begin you need to position yourself in such a way that you are standing in a shaft of sunlight beaming through your window into an otherwise gloomy room. This shaft of light will make visible motes of dust dancing in the air around you. The OED defines a mote as *a particle of dust, esp. one of the innumerable minute specks seen floating in a beam of light*. There are several other definitions of mote, but that is the one I am talking about. Dust, meanwhile, is given as *earth or other solid matter in a minute and fine state of subdivision, so that the particles are small and light enough to be easily raised and carried in a cloud by the wind; any substance comminuted or pulverized; powder*. Again, the dictionary gives other meanings of dust, including *that to which anything is reduced by disintegration or decay; spec. the 'ashes', or mouldered remains of a dead body*. Note that I am not for one minute suggesting that you should perform this astounding magic trick while engulfed in a cloud of the dust to which some close relative, say your Ma or your wan tubercular sister, has recently been reduced. If you are grieving for one not long departed, whether it be your Ma or your sister or anybody else, you should probably not be trying to do conjuring tricks, even as a way of perking yourself up. Grief is grief, and must run its course, as any number of books in the self-help section of your local library will tell you, even in this day and age. You may search fruitlessly, in your library, for a work of literature or

history or science, but I am told that the shelves still heave with self-help books of all kinds, especially ones with a television tie-in.

Make sure you are standing within the shaft of sunlight erect and resolute. Do not hunch your shoulders, or slouch, and try not to topple over. If you are the sort of person who tends to topple, because you are overwhelmed by the sheer weightiness of existence, shore yourself up with something. Metal poles, artfully placed, can keep even the weediest of neurasthenics upright, at least for long enough to perform this trick.

Explain to your audience that you are going to astound and amaze them. Speak in a booming voice resonant with melodrama. If you are incapable of producing sufficiently booming and melodramatic sounds, hire a ventriloquist, who can be hidden somewhere within the gloom. Do not be disheartened if any members of your audience chuckle, or titter, or even guffaw. That will be a reflection upon them, not upon you. They will, I would wager, be chuckling or tittering or guffawing due to nerves, nerves strained to snapping point in anticipation of the eldritch forces you are about to unloose. Meet any laughter with a cackle of your own, or of your ventriloquist's, and make it a fiendish cackle, but do not overdo it.

Now it can happen, especially in a climate such as ours, that a sudden cloud will scud across the sky and occlude the sunlight, thus rendering the motes of dust around you much less visible. If your room is sunk in particular gloom, the motes of dust may not be visible at all, and you yourself may be but a shadow in the murk, and a blurred shadow at that, to those of your audience whose ocular faculties are pitiable. It is imperative that you keep their interest until the cloud passes and the shaft of sunlight beams once again upon you. Whip out a banjo or a ukulele and launch into an Appalachian folk song, preferably one with innumerable verses but a less-than-compelling narrative, so that you can play and sing for as long as necessary, but break off as soon as the sunlight returns, even in the middle of a verse, without disappointing your audience. Some people find it difficult to play stringed instruments while wearing sweeping black capes. I have never quite understood this, but apparently it is something to do with movement of the arms being hampered by the cape. If you are affected by this problem, try tucking the cape behind your back, or pick an Appalachian folk tune that requires only desultory strumming so that you need not move your arms too much.

It may be that the cloud blocking the sunlight is a harbinger of further clouds, even of a completely overcast sky, and that a torrential downpour will begin. That would not be surprising in this land. Now, while such a turn of events may leave you crushed, and in no wise able to perform the astounding magic trick due to the lack of a shaft of sunlight beaming through your window, it has the advantage that your audience will almost certainly wish to remain indoors. True, some of them may have come armed with sou'westers and mackintoshes and galoshes, and be willing to trudge back across the fields in the pelting rain, but the likelihood is that most will stay with you, for though you and they are enshrouded in gloom, it is at least dry gloom. I assume, of course, that you do not have gaping holes in your roof through which the rain comes in and forms puddles in the dents of your floor. If your repertoire of Appalachian folk songs is scanty, and you have exhausted it before the rainfall ceases, you will need to devise some other form of entertainment for your guests. This is where the ventriloquist, if you have hired one, can be a godsend. Even if he or she has not brought their usual dummy with them, it is a simple enough matter to bundle a few rags together into a puppet. While the ventriloquist is keeping your audience spellbound, you can familiarise yourself with a few more Appalachian folk songs using speed-learning techniques picked up from a self-help book. Between the two of you, it ought to be child's play to keep your audience entertained for hours and hours, by which time, even in this country, the sun should shine once more. On the other hand, if you have a booming and melodramatic voice, and saw no need to hire a ventriloquist, things might get a bit ugly once your store of Appalachian folk songs has dried up. This is particularly the case if among your audience you have persons with short tempers, low boredom thresholds, or those on day release from the nearby secure clinic for the criminally insane. In these circumstances, it will be well if you have borrowed from the library a self-help book such as *How To Pacify Enraged Audiences Who Were Expecting A Conjuring Trick But Were Fobbed Off With Appalachian Folk Songs Followed By An Eerie Silence*.

But let us be optimistic, and hope that that scudding cloud was no more than a fugitive visitor, and that the sun shines brightly once more. Cast aside your banjo or ukulele and make a couple of sweeping gestures with your cape. Ensure, as you do so, that nobody in the audience gets a glimpse of the badger concealed within its black folds. Now, ask one of their number to step into

the shaft of sunlight with you and to lend you their hat. On very, very rare occasions, not a single person in the audience will be a hat-wearer, but this need not concern you. You will have taken the precautionary measure of planting a stooge with a stovepipe hat among your guests. Should nobody else volunteer, this person now leaps up, with enthusiasm yet without betraying that the pair of you are old muckers who go way, way back. You take the stovepipe hat from him, and, using sleight of hand, insert the badger into it. It is absolutely crucial that no one sees you do this. You then place the hat on your stooge's head and tell him to return to his seat, or stool. At this point, do some flummery for a minute or two. Then, with an air of distraction, as if it is an afterthought, ask your stooge to take his hat off. To the audience's amazement, he will do so to reveal a badger asleep upon his head! To resounding applause, go and collect the badger. Remember that you will need to pump it full of antidote fairly soon to rouse it from the coma induced by the serum with which you injected it earlier.

You can then pass your own hat around, upturned, to collect any coinage which your stunned audience wishes to give you in gratitude for so thrilling a magic trick. A proportion of any monies collected should of course be spent on a treat for the badger.

Wolves And Fruit

I WAS IN conversation the other day with someone who mentioned fruiterer's adhesive. This reminded me of a little-known story that is told about Tiny Enid, in which the plucky club-footed tot devised a method of placating wolves through the agency of fruit-based gas sprays. Yes, yes, I know that a gas spray is a different order of thing to a fruiterer's adhesive, but given that most fruiterer's gums and pastes are made from mashed bananas and the pulp of tangerines, and that Tiny Enid's gas spray was formed, at least in part, by a gas derived from the pulp of bananas and mashed tangerines, I think I am on pretty safe ground in forging the link.

The weird woods of Woohoodiwoodiwoo, near where Tiny Enid spent some time in a boarding house, were infested with packs of fierce and dangerous wolves, packs which had savaged any number of innocent woods-hiking types who blundered foolishly into the weird woods of a weekend. The heroic infant was not herself a hiking enthusiast, but she had a curious sentimental affection for hikers, with their thick woolly socks and social ineptitude. Alarmed by reports of wolf attacks, she took it into her head to do something about them. The attacks, that is, not the reports of the attacks. She sighed and left it to someone else to take on the task of correcting the slapdash grammar, misspellings, and vile prose in which the reports written by the cub reporter on *The Daily Wolf Attacks In The Woods Clarion* were couched.

Tiny Enid's first impulse was to slaughter the wolves, one by one, in hand-to-paw combat, or with pebbles and a catapult, or with her trusty blunderbuss. She had got as far as driving towards the weird woods in her souped-up jalopy, flying a banner emblazoned with the words 'Death To The Wolves In The Woods!' daubed in blood, when she had to brake sharply and slew off

bumpety-bumpety-bump into a field to answer an urgent message on her metal tapping machine. Tiny Enid was an independent sort of girl, but she had a mysterious mentor whose advice she often took. It was this mentor who suggested to her that rather than killing the wolf population she instead seek a method of placating them. 'I have no particular love for wolves,' came the tapped-out message, 'But we must be ever mindful of biodiversity, Tiny Enid. The earth can support both wolves and hikers, just as it supports both fruit flies and fruit.' The diminutive adventuress was not wholly convinced by this analogy, but on this occasion she deferred to her mysterious mentor, possibly because she had been reading up on the Gaia theories of James Lovelock, drawn to them by her interest in the primordial and chthonic deities of the Ancient Greek pantheon. Never forget that Tiny Enid was a girl of broad education, even if the only book she ever learned by heart was *Atlas Shrugged* by the postage stamp collector Ayn Rand.

Faulty as the fruit and fruit fly analogy may have been, it obviously set Tiny Enid to thinking how fruit might help her placate the wolves of the weird woods. She turned her jalopy round and sped back to town to consult some encyclopaedias in the library. Unfortunately, thick-headed Andy Burnham had got there before her, and the reference section had been turned into a chill-out zone for feral teenagers. There was not an encyclopaedia to be seen, just games consoles and reconstituted patties of meat in buns. Tiny Enid felled a handful of youths with pebbles fired from her catapult before heading off to the laboratory of her pal Professor Fang, a man who knew a thing or two about fruit and wolves, as he knew about everything else in the universe, everything, that is, except for hiking and thick woolly socks, for he was an indoors type.

'I want two things from you, Professor Fang,' announced Tiny Enid in her shrill shouty way, 'First, a method of placating wolves with fruit, and second, a way of reprogramming the spongiform grey blob that passes for the brain of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Due to his thick-headed ways I have had to use my stock of pebbles just now, and will have to waste precious time collecting further catapult ammo. Who knows how many hikers will be torn apart by wolves in the weird woods of Woohoodiwoodiwoo while I am scrabbling around at the allotments replenishing my pebble supply?'

'Give me fifteen minutes,' replied Professor Fang.

So it was that, in the time it would take to read a chapter of *Atlas Shrugged*, the madcap boffin devised both the spray of banana pulp and mashed tangerine-based gas with which Tiny Enid was able to placate the wolves, and a similar gas, derived from tomatoes and conference pears which, when injected into Andy Burnham's head through his ears, would allow his brainpans to work properly.

History - and hikers - tell us that Tiny Enid succeeded in becalming the wolves and making them less savage. After the heroic club-footed infant had clumped from one end of the weird woods to the other spraying her gas, not a single hiker was ever attacked again. *The Daily Wolf Attacks In The Woods Clarion*, having no news to report, was forced to close down, and its cub reporter became a bitter enemy of Tiny Enid, feeding spurious stories about her to *The Independent On Sunday* and other downmarket rags. Not that the tiny one cared, for she was forever after the champion of bearded men and batty women with maps in protective cellophane pouches on lanyards, safe at last to tramp through the weird woods of Woohoodiwoodiwoo.

As for the terrible tale of Andy Burnham's brain, that is unsuitable for family reading, and will have to wait for another, more ghastly, time.

Flies In Mud

BORED BY STAMPS, coins, and football paraphernalia, I decided to collect flies in mud. I began my collection last Saturday, and what with one thing and another have not been able to devote as much time to it as I would have liked, so it is very much in what you could call its pupate stage. I have one fly trapped in mud, but have assembled much of the kit I will need to add to my collection, which I envisage becoming the finest in the world one day, if I stick at it.

Currently the collection is small enough to present no display problems. My fly in mud is resting on an ornate Frampton stand in my parlour. Few people these days designate one of their rooms as a parlour, but I do, and with reason. Some time ago, I had an astonishingly vivid dream in which a terrifying divinity - I think it may have been the hideous bat-god Fatso - appeared before me, shimmering, and roared 'You will have flies in mud in your parlour!'

I do not always act upon instructions given to me by frightful gods in dreams, you understand, otherwise my life might be untenable. But I was happy to go along with Fatso, if indeed it was He, partly because, as I say, I was bored by stamps and so on, but partly, too, because it gave me a chance to redesignate one of my rooms.

There was a chance I had slightly misheard the spooky intonation in my dream, and that what the god had actually said was 'flies and mud' rather than 'flies in mud'. I pondered this for a while, before realising that the 'in' would meet both cases, whereas if I went with the 'and', I might be at risk of mucking up what was quite obviously an important pointer to my future.

It is not difficult to find mud around where I live. I will not go into detail, but if you think about constant rainfall, unsurfaced rustic tracks, and the

clopping of drayhorses back and forth morning, noon and night, you will get the idea. As for flies, they are plentiful, as they always will be in an area with a large number of illegal butcher's shops. Time was I got involved in hopeless attempts to shut them down, or at least to stop them selling contaminated pork, but I had my arms broken and skull cracked once too often to continue with my civic duties. Now I try to do my bit by subsisting on a diet of peas and radishes and gooseberry fool. Very occasionally I have one of my pork cravings, but I have found I can satisfy it by carving a radish into the shape of a pig and using my imagination.

Of course, I use different cutters and slicers for radish-carving and for hewing the tidy cubes of mud in which my flies are entrapped. Well, more accurately I should say 'cube of mud in which my fly is entrapped', for as I said, so far I have only had time to make a start on my collection. The cutter-slicer is one of the crucial elements of my kit, which also includes a Bolsover scope, tinted contact lenses, pincers, an illustrated fly identification pamphlet, and a modified pippy bag. Making the necessary adjustments to the pippy bag was a nail-biting process, and in the end I called in expert help. One of the illegal butchers had been 'turned', regularly attending a twelve-choking-fit programme set up by Illegal Butchers Anonymous, and he proved invaluable. Where I had been screwing my courage to the sticking place, he ignored the sticking place entirely and soon had my pippy bag ready for flies in mud. I was so pleased I gave him a handful of peas as a gift.

I am hoping to add to my collection this coming weekend, and have in mind a particular stretch of mud over by the Ringo Starr Caterpillar Breeding Centre. Armed with my kit, I shall trudge out in the rain, at dawn, tum packed with a hearty gooseberry fool breakfast, the world, thanks to my contact lenses, all gold and purple and brown and green and puce and mauve and blue. If you see me, doff your cap, if you have a cap to doff. If not, just tilt your head at the angle prescribed by Blötzmann (Second Handbook).

Unconscious Squirrel!

READERS WILL RECALL *Unconscious Squirrel!*, the unsuccessful cartoon strip about an unconscious squirrel created, and then abandoned, by Lamont Pinochet. One hesitates to say that the character is much-lamented, as nobody took much notice of the strip when it appeared, and Pinochet himself found it tiresome, so much so that he used to fall asleep while drawing it.

Now, in a bold move, the unconscious squirrel has been revived in a new potboiler by Pebblehead. *The Nuts Of Narcolepsy* is set in a woodland idyll, where an unsuspecting squirrel eats some poisoned or contaminated nuts which cause it to swoon into unconsciousness. As ever, the bestselling paperbackist handles his material in a bravura manner, investing his simple tale with stylistic flourishes and cracking dialogue, displaying an enviable command of the exclamation mark. Early reviews have been positive, with Lex Pilg in the *Daily Hubbub Monitor* praising it as 'a real page-turner of the sort we expect from Pebblehead, with thrills and spills aplenty', while the angling magazine *Minnows In Nets* noted with approval its lack of clunk.

Curiously, *The Nuts Of Narcolepsy* is dedicated to the memory of Eric Fogg (1903-1939), the English composer who fell, or possibly threw himself, under a tube train at Waterloo station on the eve of his second marriage. An open verdict was recorded. There is no evidence that Fogg had a thing about squirrels, and Pebblehead has never expressed any previous interest in him, nor about English music in general. The paperbackist is known to be an enthusiast for noisy aggressive Germans. We shall have to await the deliberations of those dedicated folk who compile the annual *Register Of Dedicatees Of Potboilers* for enlightenment.

Interviewed on the porch steps of a particularly sordid bordello, Pebblehead dropped hints that we will be seeing more of the unconscious squirrel.

'I find,' he said, 'There comes a point when my characters take on a life of their own. It is almost as if I am a reporter, or a biographer, rather than a novelist. You will recall Digby Smew, the fascist podcaster who first appeared in my book *The Assassination Of Stephen Fry*. Sometimes I fancy he is sitting at breakfast with me, slurping porridge with disgusting table manners. I can't even remember writing the other forty potboilers of which he is the protagonist. The words come unsummoned. I have an inkling that something similar will happen with the unconscious squirrel. Now that the basic lineaments of his character have been established - that he is a squirrel, that he is unconscious - already he seems freed from the confines of my own pulsating writerly cranium. I swear to God he took on corporeal form this morning. I was eating my breakfast, and across the table there was Digby Smew, and he was staring at something, something behind me, and I turned to look and got a fugitive glimpse of a narcoleptic squirrel snuggled against the wainscot, shimmering in a hallucinogenic haze for a moment before the vision dissolved. But I know he will be back, and I have already felt impelled to dash off twenty thousand words of a second Unconscious Squirrel! potboiler. I don't want to give too much away, but in this one he plays a leading role in the Hindenburg Disaster.'

When he was able to get a word in edgeways, Pebblehead's interviewer taxed him with the point that he had not in fact created the unconscious squirrel, but taken him, in all his particulars, from an almost forgotten cartoon strip by the creator of *Magnet Boy! The Boy Magnet*.

'That is indeed true,' said the paperbackist, having now unfurled his umbrella against an unprecedented downpour, 'And I have never tried to conceal the fact. If you knew anything about my work, you would know I have revived and reinvented existing fictional characters before, many a time. I have written, at the last count, twenty-six short stories about Doctor Slop, from *The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, and a trilogy of sci-fi adventures featuring Brave Driver Josef Bong from *The Good Soldier Svejk* by Jaroslav Hašek. They too, have become very real to me, though for some reason neither of them ever comes to breakfast. Doctor Slop is usually hovering on the landing, and Josef Bong sits in the potting shed on my allotment, whistling.'

The revelation that Pebblehead maintains an allotment will come as a shock to his readers. How in the name of all that is holy, one wonders, does so indefatigable a paperbackist find time to grow radishes and kohlrabi and tomatoes and potatoes and bugloss and beetroot and hollyhocks, not only to grow them but to keep them free of hideous diseases and the predations of tiny parasitic creeping things? Annoyingly, the interviewer did not pursue this fascinating line of inquiry. Dismayed by rainfall, he left Pebblehead standing alone on the steps of the bordello, tucked his notepad into an inner pocket, gave his pencil to a vagrant, and ducked into the shelter of a railway station, descending the escalator to catch a train back to his office. All the more perplexing when one considers that he was working for a magazine entitled *Potboilers And Allotments And The Social Glue That Binds Them*.

In an echo of the past, the railway station into which the rainsoaked reporter hurried was Waterloo, and he fell, or possibly threw himself, under a train from the very same platform from which Eric Fogg fell, or threw himself, seventy years ago to the day.

Tin Vase

THERE'S A TIN vase on my mantelpiece where I keep my buttons. But where am I to put my unbuttons? A bright six-year-old would put their hand up and cry 'In your unvase!' But there is no such thing as an unvase, neither of tin nor of untin. Or, if there is such a thing as an unvase, that which a vase is not, it would not be possible to put anything into it, because it is the ability to hold things - buttons, unbuttons, flowers, coinage, treasury tags - that, in part at least, defines a vase.

I am particularly keen on tin vases, because they are cheap and light and batterable. Bash one with your fist while cursing the universe and it will not smash into smithereens, it will merely receive a dent or two. As we say in my little groupuscle, such dents can lend a tin vase character. Heaven knows what would happen if you bashed a tin unvase, or even an untin unvase. That is assuming you could do so in the first place, which is by no means guaranteed. I suppose if you staged it so that you, and the unvase, were reflected in a judiciously-placed mirror at the time of bashing, that might work. I must share that thought with the groupuscle when next we meet. Usually we gather in a hut, but we are keen to push envelopes, so we plan to hold our next meeting in an unhut. As yet, we have failed to locate one. That bright six-year-old might say, 'Well, a shed is an unhut, being a shed instead of a hut', but that is not strictly true. A shed is sufficiently similar to a hut to be mistaken for one, by most people, on most days, in most circumstances. What a palaver.

Another advantage of the tin vase is that, when struck with, say, a pebble, it makes a tinny clang. There are untinny clangs, and we can easily imagine an unclang, tinny or otherwise, for an unclang would be any noise that is not a clang. Or, actually, it might be silence, dead silence, as one will find in

the grave, when one is consigned there, eventually, six feet under, pushing up the daisies. I have things so arranged that when my time comes I am hoping to push up undaisies. I have circulated instructions, to the members of the groupuscule, in case they survive me. They might. Some of them are young and hale. I condescend to them, it is true, but they take it in good part. Perhaps they can see the shadow looming over my shoulder, the grisly worm-eaten shadow that is a sort of unguardian angel, or guardian unangel. Is an unangel a devil, or is it something more horrifying? I have wondered, from time to time, in the bath or upon a balcony, if an unangel is the kind of being so unutterably gruesome that, when one tries to speak of it, one's tongue cleaves to the roof of one's mouth, and one can only make incoherent muffled noises, like a small animal trapped in the sights of a larger one, and about to be torn to pieces, with great savagery, in bright battering sunlight.

One of the reasons I keep my buttons in a tin vase upon the mantelpiece is to give my brain a distraction from these dark and debilitating thoughts. As soon as I sense my mind rolling along the cold iron rails towards bleakness and death and the triumph of an unangel over my soul, stamping it underfoot, I hie to my mantelpiece, and take my tin vase, and I spill the buttons out of it onto a platter, and I count them, or I polish them, rubbing them with a rag steeped in bleach or swarfega, or I examine them closely, through an optical aid, one by one, holding each button between my forefinger and thumb, in my left hand, squinting, peering, until I am no longer conscious of the sounds in the garden, the awful sounds of large beasts slaughtering small ones, and the sounds of the gravedigger, in his filthy overalls, forcing his spade into the muck, again and again, and tossing each spadeful onto a heap, so slowly, relentlessly, while he whistles a tune both sweet and unnerving, a tune I have heard somewhere before, long ago, in my youth, when I played with Billy and Perkin, and the idiot child, in fields and hills, all summer long.

And when my whole head is numb, its innards like suet, I tip my buttons back into the tin vase and replace it on the mantelpiece, and I gather the groupuscule, and address them, in a voice dripping with contempt, or in a roar, until they clap, they clap, they clap, they keep on clapping, as if I were Stalin. But I am Unstalin. Remember my name. Engrave it on a piece of putty, and carry it with you, wherever you roam.

The Last Ditch

LOOK OVER THERE, beyond the pond and the puddles and that ramshackle owl enclosure and the ditches. Now, count the ditches. You see there are one, two, three of them? Take this telescope. Can you see, way beyond the third ditch, across the flat muck, there is another ditch? That is the last ditch. That is where we are headed. Give me back the telescope and take my hand.

I have a palsied hand and a withered arm and unsightly scars hidden under my cloak, the results of a botched medical procedure. It was both invasive and pointless. I sense further withering of other limbs and appendages. Call it guesswork or hypochondria, I feel it in my water. That is why I am so keen to get to the last ditch. It is where I will wallow, pending the last trump.

You must help me across the pond and through the puddles and past the owl enclosure and then over one, two, three ditches, and then through the flat muck until we get to the last ditch. After that, it's up to you. You can come and wallow with me, or turn around and make your way back. Either way, keep hold of your first aid kit. It's of no use to me.

It's interesting that the carrion crows are hovering over the pond and the puddles rather than over the ditches. I suppose they have a completely different perspective, up there, bewinged and raucous. My wife became a crow. The Woohoooodiwoo Woman cast a spell on her and off she flew. I was standing by the pond, in a puddle, watching my crow wife soar through the sky. I took out my telescope to follow her until she vanished in the blue. That is when I saw the last ditch for the first time.

I thought it was just another ditch, the fourth one, after those three you can see from here. I supposed there were other ditches beyond it, a fifth and sixth and so on, as the flat muck stretches to the horizon. But one day I put on my

hiking boots and carried a stick and strode out that way, for miles. This was before the witherings, of course, before the medical procedure. I had vim. I walked all day and all night, and I got as far as the mountains, but I didn't come across any other ditches. That really is the last ditch.

You remember Istvan? I heard that he carried on past the last ditch all the way to the mountains, as I did, but instead of turning back, he started climbing. Of course, he had grappling hooks and pitons and sturdy rope, so he was prepared. His vim made mine seem like lassitude. I received one postcard from him. It was ice cold to the touch. After that, nothing.