

March, 1941.

Vol. 2. No. 2.

# The Abinger Chronicle

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## *The Abinger Chronicle*

appears frequently, as funds allow, monthly, if possible. While many of the contributors are local to the Abinger district, or frequent visitors to it, like Max Beerbohm, E. M. Forster, Desmond MacCarthy, R. C. Trevelyan and Ralph Vaughan Williams, many come from far afield.

MSS. (which are voluntary) are welcomed by

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## POEM (for Priscilla)

The ecstasy of art. The words sound foolish,  
Yet William Blake, though no madman, found poems  
To speak the ecstasies he felt he knew.  
The trouble is, were they the same as you  
Or I might feel now in these bitter times?

Poems speak quietly at such a moment,  
For who would dare make mountains in the mouth  
When all the world is on the edge of truth,  
Though news is full of lies and statesmen speak  
Of war as though it were a new adventure. Now,

Just at such times, watching the snowy ground,  
I think of you and all we may do later,  
Who little know what world we are coming to.  
Ecstasy, as Blake knew it, we may, too,  
If art works still to make all living better.

NICHOLAS MOORE

## BIBLIOPHILES

Some years ago I had the honour, for two winters, of sharing an Army hut with a pair of Blue Tits. This partnership, though it raised my prestige, involved me in some inconveniences. If startled from sleep the tits dashed wildly about the room, so that my *couchées* had to be made in stealth and in the dark; while to allow perfect freedom for their exits and entrances the window was kept open day and night throughout the great frost of 1929. My little boarders, christened Jane and Thomas, slept one behind the bookcase, the other behind the mirror. Like the famous couple, after whom they were named, they were restless sleepers,

often waking me with their scratchings and sneezings. Their butter-slides along the gutter, accompanied with squeaks of glee, brought showers of dust into the room; and the deafening barrage they directed against any surface reflecting their images obliged me to whitewash the window and cover every picture, photograph, and mirror with a cloth. But the objects of their most persistent curiosity were the books. Beginning with the poets, their appreciation of Milton, Tennyson and Keats was marked; the white vellum Shelley, the red cloth Wordsworth, and the tiny green edition of the Shropshire Lad proved equally agreeable to their taste. While barely nibbling those solid volumes on Sociology, so useful for wedging windows, they attacked the philosophers with zeal, sparing neither Plato nor Spinoza, and bestowing as many hard raps on Bertrand Russell's *Knowledge of the External World* as on his great rival's *Appearance and Reality*. Fiction and Belles Lettres, particularly the earlier publications of the Hogarth Press, were so quickly devoured that before winter was out Mrs. Woolf's charmingly covered Kew Gardens was reduced to a heap of confetti. But the volume which called forth their greatest exertions was Johnson's Dictionary. Intent, like its author when first opening a book, on tearing out its heart, they set themselves systematically to strip its back, riddle its sides, and scatter its pages to the winds.

What was the instinct that drove the Blue Tits to the book-shelves? The paper, which they so industriously shredded, was neither eaten nor used as material for their nests. No ornithologist has been able to provide me with a satisfactory explanation; and since some explanation is demanded I venture to put forward a theory of my own.

Psychologists have noted how the infant who, in later life is to be remarkable for learning shows, even before it can speak, an interest in the printed page. The future historian snatches at a newspaper sooner than a rattle; it is the *Encyclopedia Britannica* rather than the tin soldier that is the embryo philosopher's favourite toy. Now the Blue Tit is one of the most quick-witted of small birds. With bed and board provided, with family cares many months



*Bibliophiles*

ahead, Jane and Thomas found themselves, probably for the first time in the history of their species, confronted with the problem of Leisure. Is it not conceivable that in their small but active brains some spirit of free enquiry should have begun to germinate? That a love of play should develop happily into an enthusiasm for study? For just as that "election to embrace what is agreeable," which Bacon found in all bodies whatsoever, guides the divining rod to hidden water and the infant to inaccessible knowledge, so may not the budding intelligence of a humbler organism feel the magnetism of that "precious life blood of a master spirit embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life?"

So at least I was persuaded as the newspapers shrouding the bookshelves were industriously torn into a million tiny bits. It was words that these little adventurers were after, words which have made the world out of chaos, words which alone are certain good. But how to train these indefatigable students to habits less ruinous to order? How encourage a preference for the spirit rather than for the substance of literature.

The problem was never solved, for in the spring of 1931 the hut was sold and its contents moved to another county.

In the woods and gardens of Abinger, tits of every variety—blue, great, coal, marsh, long-tailed and, some daring observers even maintain, crested, abound. The pair of blue tits who rear a family in the nesting box every summer are familiar and welcome presences. An inquisitive black-moustached little face peeps in at the window; a tiny claw holds up to its beak a tit-bit from the bird table; their blue and primrose dress (so often favoured by the ladies in Vermeer's pictures) lends a brightness to dull buildings, a gaiety to the sombre pines. But although their material wants are well supplied, and an open window revealed rows of books, in all the long leisure of ten English winters no tit has once tapped a page.

It may be that Jane and Thomas were unique: gifted sports from whose eggs might have sprung a race worthier to carry on the traditions of Socrates and Shelley than the

*Bibliophiles*

mechanised and barbarous bipeds now bent on bringing their civilisation to ruin. It may be—or so it is permissible to hope—that the future belongs neither to man nor to beast, but to those aerial beings whose wings and music have won them admission to Heaven. And since angels may claim a monopoly of bliss surely their songs will be enriched by those unheard voices, whose tones are finer than celestial harmonies, more enduring than the eternal stars. Even here and now it takes but little to turn a wilderness into Paradise. A bird, singing on a bough and underneath, a book.

OLIVE HESELTINE

## KINGFISHER IN THE SNOW

Was I not blessed who walked today  
Through snowy fields where not one footstep showed,  
Saving the tiny feet of little birds,  
And found the place where the dark river flowed  
Beside a broken weir. There, carved and still,  
A solitary swan, to silver turned,  
Motionless floated 'neath the snowy hill.  
Silent and colourless this winter world,  
Subdued like thought to sombre nothingness  
Till, brushing past my cheek, O darling bird,  
You sped so suddenly with warm rose breast;  
From bank to bank a radiant pattern drew  
And looped the frozen fields with living blue.

EILUNED LEWIS

## LANDSCAPE

There's nothing better I like seeing  
Than a round hill with the birds fleeing,  
Over the top the trees showing  
High in their branches the wind blowing.  
Shadowy forms 'gainst the sky making  
Patterns that break with the wind's shaking.

JOHN GRIFFIN





The other evening an Angel came to me from the Architectural Division in Heaven and said: "I have bad news for you—you are to live in the Town for the rest of your days." "Good Heavens, Sir," I gasped, "what have I done to deserve such a horrible fate? Don't I live the greater part of the week there now, and you know how I hate it; but when the War is over. . . ." "Just so," said the Angel, snapping his compasses, "you are all alike. A war brings you to the Town and you see it being destroyed, you even get familiar with the ruins, but you quietly plan to move out of it at the first opportunity. In my Division, we are sorry to see some of the best places we've built, knocked down overnight, but we have to think of the future, and we need some assistance."

"But Sir," I said, "I'm not an architect, and I really don't see how I can help you by being forced to live in a street all my days!" The Angel pouted. "Sir," I cried desperately, get me out of this, and I'll do anything you please."

Angels, like devils, have a way of jumping at such offers: both are concerned with soul-pacts, all-or-nothing affairs, very disconcerting to the mere mortal. I knew I was in for it. There was an awkward silence.

"You were in Exeter Cathedral last week," the Angel said slowly, with that extraordinary knowledgeability angels have. "Yes," I murmured. "And you also walked in the Close of Salisbury Cathedral last week." Right again—oh! these angels. It was all quite true. I had taken a week's holiday and done both these things in the course of it. "Also you have travelled all over the world these last twenty years," he went on, "now use a little memory, a little common-sense, and a dash of desire, and see what you can produce. Exeter and Salisbury had their master-masons, who were told what was to be done and worked it out. If you can give even a hint to my master-masons about building the new cities, you can go back to

your precious cottage and hens after the war."

"But I don't know the first thing about town-planning, Sir, I must protest . . ."

"Nor you do, but people like you have got to live in towns, so get busy. I'll be back in a week."

"Sir," I called after him, "I know how to garden and rear animals, and ride and make cider; people like me *don't* have to live in towns!" "Well, find out who does have to live in towns and tell me what they want," he called back from a great distance and was gone.

\* \* \* \*

It was a grim business. Where could I turn for help? There was a bagful of letters about it in *The Times*, but the Angel *must* have seen those. I had been all round the Docks soon after the big attack on them; I had walked through the charred remains of the City of London when they were still smouldering, and seen the tired firemen hardly able to hold up their great hoses. Wasn't the present sufficiently strange without a vague, and therefore uncomfortable future?

That night I raised the question with one of my fellow fire-watchers, a Londoner of three generations' standing, Mr. Bert Burney. "Gor' blimey," he said, "arsking me wot I'd like to live in after the war. Anything'll be nice after the Shelter. Still, it won't ever be so sociable-like again. Near me work, yes, and none of your fancy garden-cities for me. A town's a town. You arsk my missus. She ain't going ter vacuate, not she. All them little imitation houses is silly."

"Yes, but Mr. Burney, what *sort* of a house; it's very important the sort of house."

"What sort of a house?" repeated Mr. Burney, "a house's a house, ain't it? Rooms, roof, front door, I dunno. Modern, of course, I likes me bath of a Saturday night, an' a cosy kitchen."

"A flat, Mr. Burney?" I ventured.

"Dunno as I'd mind much, so long as it was reasonable and comfortable, with room for the kiddies."



"What about a skyscraper?" I suggested. The fat was in the fire.

"'Ere, wot yer gettin' at. I ain't no bloomin' American, and London ain't Chicago, not yet anyway, and what's it to you, you can't *do* nothing about it."

"Oh, someone asked me," I said lamely.

My second fire-watcher was a lady, a manageress of a restaurant these last ten years. As we were doing our hundred paces in the street outside she said: "I was reading in there, but I heard your questions to Mr. Burney, and I know what I'd like to live in after the war. I want two rooms you can look out of, near my work and everything handy, because I've no time for housework. And I agree with Mr. Burney, it'll never be so sociable again as it is now, the way we all meet for fire duty at night and nod when we meet in daytime, unless, unless. . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you made every big house have a kind of place where neighbours could meet if they wanted to. A lot of people would like that. I know I would."

I shivered a little. The Angel was mistaken. People like me were not townsfolk.

For the next few days I felt like a spy, eavesdropping wherever people were talking about where and how to live. If no one mentioned it, I raised the subject. Wherever I went I heard about the loneliness in big towns and how the War had brought neighbours together for the first time. When I was alone, the Close of Salisbury Cathedral surrounded me like a pleasant quiet thing of great beauty, the like of which only grew up where generation after generation build round a place they love, be it a Cathedral or a park or water. And by way of contrast with the spire-like climbing Gothic of Salisbury there was a memory of the grand twin-towered, turreted, squatting giant of a Cathedral at Exeter, immensely strong and broad, suddenly turning all its strength into height as soon as you enter—a memory of fan after fan of great sunny grey stone arches, unfolding in endless height.

My week was nearly up. Could Salisbury and Exeter help me any more than Samarkand or Bergamo? In Regents Park a rook cawed, "Stone, stone, build of stone." Very expensive, I objected, but perhaps angelic finances can surmount expense. "Light cities with balconies," chirped the finches, "where we can fetch our crumbs." "Skyscrapers," screeched a prosperous owl, "for my offices and workshops." "Runnin' 'ot water," grouched Mr. Burney. "Near my work," shouted everyone, "and near my play" shouted everyone else, "and make it friendly." A Ducal hum and haw said, "I should like to occupy my first floor, if you must have the rest"; a wit shouted, "Give me Bigglesbottom for company. London's too big for the likes of me," and a rabble of children shouted, "Why can't we play in the street, we like the street best?" Whereat a Social Worker frowned.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, as I was coming "off duty," about six in the morning, there, sure enough, was my architectural Angel waiting for me, toying with a large spirit-level.

"Well," he said, "you've had a busy week, I know. Any message for my master-masons?"

"No," I said dejectedly. "It seems to be a matter of drains in London. Houses follow the cables and water-pipes, so there's nothing to be done. Besides, the landlords are chiefly concerned with rents, not with beauty, so it is hopeless. Also the Spirit of the Town is dead. It died slowly as London grew, first in one district, then in another. Attempts were made to revive it in and about Piccadilly, which is too far from Hampstead or Poplar to be much use; in Harley Street and Saville Row, where the Doctors and Tailors are quite useless to the people in Putney or Chelsea; in Charing Cross Road, where the old books foregather. But three-quarters of London has no meeting places for its dwellers other than a cinema or a 'pub. All the lovely churches and inns and squares are hidden away, so that nothing can be built in harmony with them. And there is talk of dwarfing even St. Paul's, by re-building a



huge City of London. Half the big hospitals and schools which need light and air are built up to within a few yards of their giant walls. It is quite hopeless, I can't help you."

The Angel toyed with his Spirit Level. "You haven't mentioned the skyscraper," he said, "everyone else does."

"It's an abomination," I said emphatically.

"O ho! and for why?" asked the Angel. "We have several million souls living in them over the water; and on the lower floors, where it is rather dark, the citizens have even improvised a pretty, diffused and permanent sunlight, which they operate by a switch."

"Sir," I said, "even if sunlight could reach the lowest floor, the skyscraper is absurd. It is a hive and man isn't a bee, but the father of a family. The family is the unit to build for. Even if offices become skyscrapers, they will spread like the plague. If London is to live again the Boroughs must live. Couldn't you provide each Borough with beautiful places of worship, learning and amusement in the best stone you have, dry and warm, carved, if carvers there be who can shape it to more beauty, then perhaps wide and sunny streets, with four or six-storied houses would grow from such centres as, say, the streets of Bergamo grow, straight and beautiful, or in fine curves like Regent Street or Whitehall? But it is hopeless, quite hopeless." I had indeed given up all hope of getting out of the awful sentence the Angel had brought me a week earlier. "No," he said, not *quite* hopeless. Give me your identity card." I was startled, feeling that an identity card has something final about it.

I saw him make a mark in it, and then he flew away. It consisted of two small capital letters, thus

**PR**

Very awkward having one's Identity Card tampered with, I felt, even by an Angel. So next morning I went round to the Town Hall to ask the clerk there about it. He was friendly, and he knew Latin like all clerks. "It's alright," he said, "we've had one or two in, like that, mostly meddlers. P.R. stands for 'Procedas, Rustice.'" S.S.

## ORCHARD COMPANY

Give me the orchard company,  
 the tan of fruits in garden plot,  
 low walls where russet loves to spread  
 and there's rich harvest overhead  
 of quince and pears, and apricot,  
 when cherry tan is on the leaves  
 and thistles show a silver crown;  
 Where there is ripeness in the air  
 Rich plenitude for all to share  
 and the flit of finches up and down.  
 Go where you please—but let me be  
 In an orchard span for company.

D. EARDLEY WILMOT

## WE HAVE CAST OUT OUR SOULS

We have cast out our souls  
 Into the dark,  
 Into the unknown deep.  
 There is no guiding light  
 But the roaring spume,  
 And the tempest all around us  
 And no sleep.

Only the body can rest  
 And its frailty bend  
 To the sleep of death; but the soul  
 Goes on. Over the furious waves  
 beyond the end.

JOHN GRIFFIN

## LETTERS

The dear and forthright handwriting of friends  
 this day, so cheered my grieving mind and heart,  
 that I, with letters in my pocket, wandered out,  
 in goodly company, however far apart.

S.S.



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