

***** V A G A R Y 25 *****

C O N T E N T S

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and then all over the place.

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NOTE. "Blood Feud" is the first bit of fiction that I can remember putting in Vagary.

QUOTE. On Lord Longford's trip to Copenhagen to study the Danish brand of pornography, the Daily Telegraph produced the following leader title;

"Amid The Alien Porn."

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THIS AND THAT

Back again! At least I hope I will be, providing nothing else goes wrong. No, I am not going into a long catalogue of what has been happening - in the last Vagary I said that things looked awkward for a couple of years and by god! they were. But one thing I will say - if any of the members are trying to pluck up courage to go to the dentist, for heaven's sake, go. Because I could not screw up enough nerve to go early last year about a broken double tooth, I ended up with an infection that sent another tooth bad and in the end infected all my gums and spread across the roof of my mouth. Before the dentist could do anything he had to get the infection down, and because it has spread right round my gums, all my teeth had to come out. And then it turned out the infection was only lying dormant - it flared up again and I had to spend the next three months visiting the dentist. It did not do the rest of me any good, either, and only now do I seem to be snapping out of it. But if only I'd plucked up my nerve earlier I need only have lost a couple of teeth instead of the lot.

What I would have liked to have got into the zine were some mailing comments, but the trouble is when you miss a few mailings, you feel you ought to comment on them all, but there just isn't time and it would mean a whole magazine of nothing but mailing comments. But I will say that I have appreciated the mailings and I think they have certainly shown an upswing. Although OMPA has fewer members, on the whole the quality of the mailings is very good. A special thanks should go to Ken as the editor and to Terry Jeeves as the most faithful contributor.

In the last Vagary - some time in the distant past - I mentioned whodunits and Bill's comment that "On the floor lay the body" should appear in the first paragraph, or at least in the first couple of pages. I suggested that some of the members might like to have a go at this, but Ken Cheslin was the only one who took me up. So I have had a try at the damned thing myself - but I cannot really call it a whodunit. Mind, I may be able to wrest something out a distant relative, who occasionally has spasms of writing, then puts everything away and forgets it for years.

Selina, now fourteen and a half, is still with us, though we thought we had lost her last year. She would not eat and started drinking any old dirty water she could find. It was kidney trouble, of course, but fortunately of the non-uraemic type. One day, when she would not eat anything, Bill said he would buy a bit of chicken and see if that would

BLOOD FEUD

On the floor lay the body, the black clothes contrasting starkly with the aseptic decor of the hospital medical supplies department. There was a bloody froth on the man's mouth, in which could be discerned a couple of unusually long, sharp teeth.

Special Police Constable Jim Field looked at the body, feeling, in his own phraseology, dead narked. It was not the sort of thing he expected to find on a midnight to 6 a.m. beat in a quiet area. He would not even have been on duty if most of the regular police had not been called out elsewhere on demonstration duty and football fan riots. And he had only dropped in for a quiet cup of tea with his friend, Med-Tech. "Dusty" Rhodes - who did not seem to be around. But as he reached for his walkie-talkie, Dusty came in and said hastily,

"Don't call in yet, Jim. I can explain this."

"You'd better," said Jim, as Dusty plugged in the kettle. "Who is he, and what's happened?" He watched, uneasily suspicious, as Dusty locked the door leading from the supplies department, then hauled a vacuum cleaner from a cupboard.

"I suppose you could call him an acquaintance of mine," replied Dusty, "but you're going to find it hard to believe what I tell you, Jim. He said his name was Baron Drak from some place called Carpathia or something, and that he'd been a displaced person since first the Nazis, then the Commies, took over. He said there was too much competition, so he caught a high flight over here some years back, and has been wandering about the country ever since. He's been visiting me on night duty for a few weeks now, but tonight he drank something which disagreed with him."

"Here, you're not telling me you poisoned him, are you?" demanded Jim uneasily.

"Not exactly." The kettle boiled and Dusty made the tea. "In a way, he did for himself. I didn't expect it to act so quickly, though, or I wouldn't have gone away".

"That's as may be, but I'll have to call in about this."

"Jim, will you let me explain first." Dusty removed a glass from the table which looked as though it once been filled with blood, and set out cups and saucers. "What time is dawn?"

"About twenty minutes or so. What's that got to do with this body?"

"You'll see." Dusty sipped his tea thoughtfully, then said abruptly, "Would you believe me if I said that bloke was a vampire?"

Jim goggled.

"Been seeing too many Hammer films you have, or reading too many horror books on night duty." He paused, allowing his thought processes to go to work. Finally, with a note of triumph in his voice, he said, "If he's a vampire, what's he doing dead? Where's the stake through his heart or the cross that's supposed to scare hell out of them?"

"He's dead - or something like it - on account of being fastidious."

Jim looked disbelieving, but thought it would be better to humour his friend, who had obviously gone off his nut. Besides, Jim was beginning to feel vulnerable. "Fastidious?"

"It began several weeks ago," answered Dusty. "I was sitting in here minding my own business, when in walked this cove and asked if I were in charge of the blood bank. I said I was, and damned if he didn't ask for a pint of blood - to be poured in a glass. I asked what the hell and he explained he was a vampire and that he hated chewing people up to get a drink. Besides, other people got mad when their relatives started fading away, and it got wearing when they kept trying to stick snakes into him. He said when the hospitals started blood banks it was the best thing that ever happened to him."

While Dusty was talking, he stripped the body of its clothes. Jim started to protest, but gave up, convinced by now he wasn't going to leave the place alive. His mate had obviously blown all his gaskets, and Jim realised with horror that he had been drinking tea without taking thought as to whether it was poisoned or not. Dusty continued his story.

"Naturally, I didn't believe a word, thinking it was some horror film stunt. So I thought I'd call his bluff by showing him the blood bank and telling him to help himself. And, by God, he did! Well, there are people who have a desire for blood, so I thought I'd jolly him along. I asked him how he became a vampire. He said he got mixed up with some bint called Caramel Karnstein or something and got handed out a travelling coffin. So I said it was all very well, but he'd still need money as well as blood. He said it was dead easy

to knock the stuff of if you knew how to go about it. He spent a lot of his money going to horror films. He said they were a scream p you, know, dead funny. So I thought I'd humour the bloke and let him stay for a yarn. After that, he used to drop in every night for his ration, except on my nights off. I used to give him some blood the night before to take away with him. He'd made his home in an .old family vault in the disused cemetery near here - he showed it to me one night."

"Funny thing, Jim, I was almost getting to like him - he was a very knowledgeable chap in his way. But did you know that vampires are a lecherous lot? No? Well, they are - not that I minded at first. If he fancied a bird that was his affair. They were quite safe as long as I kept him supplied with blood. But one night, my girl - a night nurse - came in while he was here and when he cast his peepers on her I knew I'd have to do something. He had a bit of a hypnotic effect on women and my girl was no exception. So I decided he had to go. It was dead easy really. I'd noticed he had always chosen blood from the same group and he said that even vampires had to stick to their own blood group - if they didn't it could knock them out and send them into a sort of suspended animation which was death to them, as they were either found by vampire hunters or they were caught in daylight.

"So all I did was change the blood around. I put a different type in a container marked with his group. By this time, he had got to trust me and tossed his blood down without checking. Which is exactly what he did tonight."

Dusty rose and plugged in the vacuum cleaner. Jim watched him open the shutters and the first faint light of dawn appeared. As the glow increased in the sky, Dusty switched off the lights.

Jim found his voice. "You can't vacuum him off the floor, Dusty. Look, I'll have to call in, but I'll put in a good word for you. I'll say you've been under the hell of a strain."

"Wait a minute," said Dusty, as the rising sun reached the eastern facing windows.

Jim hesitated, then waited. Before long the sun's rays reached into the room and found the body on the floor. And then Jim's eyes bugged out.

A change was taking place. As he watched, the body seemed to blur, flatten, and finally collapse into dust.

Dusty pressed a switch and the mesmerised Jim watched all that was left of Baron Drak disappear into the vacuum cleaner.

"Well, that's that little problem solved," said Dusty. "I'll just put these clothes and dust into the incinerator and then make another cuppa tea."

But Jim hastily said he had to report in and departed abruptly. As he walked along, he tried to work out how he would report the night's doings, then decided not to. Nobody would believe him, anyway.

E N D

THIS AND THAT (cont'd from Page 2)

persude her to eat. It did - and it also seemed to improve her. We bought her some more, and she improved some more. The ironic thing was that chicken was a damned sight cheaper to buy than the raw meat I had been getting her. The thing is - did Selina manage to get it into our heads that she had a definite need for white meat? Because when we boarded at the vet's while we were on holiday, the vet told us that with her kidney trouble she would have to stay on a white meat diet, such as chicken, rabbit, white fish, but that she could have liver as a very rare treat. He also suggested cottage cheese if she would eat it. She wouldn't. The diet made a tremendous difference to her, and I am passing it on for any members with cats of their own who shows these symptoms, or who have friends with the same problem.

Some members may recall that in Vagary 24 I had an article called All The Big Steamers, in which I described the Queen Elizabeth being stuck on the Brambles for four days, and that not long afterwards the Q.E. went up in flames in Hong Kong. Oh, well, she never had the reputation for being a very lucky ship. Not long after the war started she pranged another ship, and there was a rumour that her back was all but broken and that from then on she was practically glued to gether with concrete in the middle. Whether this is true or not I do not know, but it seems to be all of a piece, with the bad luck which seemed to follow that ship. But luck or not, I find it very sad that a wonderful piece of modern craftsmanship should be wantonly destroyed.

As usual, I cannot find the last mailing, but I did notice that one member pointed that it was not the English who originally invaded Ireland, but the Normans and Welsh. In

/cont'd on Page 11

PROPHETS AND LOSS

A fearful punning title, yet with some point to it, as so many prophecies tell of disaster and consequent loss of life, land, or property. Or is it we dont remember forecasts telling of something good? However, in Jon Timbs "Abbeys, Castles, and Ancient Halls of England and Wales", published over a hundred years ago, there is a strange prophecy from Cheshire, recorded by Timbs on his journey through that county, and which appeared to have been fulfilled in 1940. Timbs calls the story "The Iron Gates, or the Cheshire Enchanter", and the tale is as follows.

On Monk's Heath, near Macclesfield, there is a small inn called the Iron Gates, the inn sign showing a pair of ponderous iron gates, opening at the bidding of a figure enveloped in a cowl, before whom kneels another - a yeoman dressed nearer to our own times rather than the twelfth or thirteenth century, to which period the legend is attributed. Behind the figures a white horse is rearing, and in the background a view of Alderley Edge. /The legend, I believe, was the source of inspiration for one of Alan Garner's books for children. RG/. The story behind the sign is thus:

A farmer from Mobberley was riding a white horse over the heath near Alderley Edge. He was proud of the good qualities of this horse and while stopping down to adjust its mane, prior to offering it for sale at Macclesfield, he was surprised by the sudden starting of the horse. On looking up he saw an unusually tall figure in a cowl, who was extending a staff of black wood across his path. The figure spoke to him in a commanding voice and told him he would seek in vain to sell his horse, for whom a nobler destiny was in store. He then bade the farmer to meet him when the sun had set, with his horse, at the same place, and disappeared.

The farmer, wondering about the prediction, hastened to Macclesfield Fair, but could find no one to purchase his horse. Even though he reduced his price by half, no one was willing to buy the horse, though many admired it. Plucking up his courage, he determined to meet the mysterious cowed figure again, and reached the appointed place at sunset. The cowed figure was also punctual. "Follow me" he said, and led the way by the Golden Stone, Stormy Point, to Saddle Bole.

On their arrival at Saddle Bole, the neigh of horses seem to rise from beneath their feet. The stranger waved his staff, the earth opened and disclosed a pair of ponderous iron gates. Terrified, the horse plunged and threw his

rider who, kneeling at the feet of his terrifying companion, prayed for mercy. He was told to fear nothing, but enter the cavern and see what no mortal eye every yet beheld. On passing through the gates the farmer found himself in a spacious cavern, on each side of which were horses resembling his own in size and colour. Near these lay soldiers accoutred in ancient armour, and in the chasms of the rock were arms and piles of silver and gold. From these the enchanter took the price of the horse in ancient coin, and on the farmer asking the meaning of these subterranean armies, replied:

"These are the cavernd warriors preserved by the good genius of Britain, until that eventful day when, distracted by intestine broils, Britain shall be thrice won and lost between sunrise and sunset. Then we, awakening from our sleep, shall rise to turn the fate of Britain. This shall be when George, the son of George, shall reign. When the forests of Delamare shall wave their arms over the slaughtered sons of Albion. Then shall the eagle drink the blood of princes from the headless cross. Now haste thee home, for it is not in thy time these things shall be. A Cestrian shall speak it, and be believed."

The farmer left the cavern, the iron gates closed, and though often sought for, the place was never found again.

An interesting legend, as it began before there was ever a George on the British throne. It may, of course, refer to the Napoleonic wars. But could the headless cross to which the enchanter referred be the swastika? And could the time refer to Dunkirk in 1940? Bill, who was on those beaches for four days, says he vaguely remembers someone saying that there was a petrified forest beneath the sea not far from Dunkirk. Or could the prophecy have referred to the Battle of Britain? THE R.A.F. has its own legend of that time - a legend that as the pilots were fighting the battle of Britain, strange aircraft from the first World war joined them, and there even seemed to be extra aircraft from their own time. There is, of course, more than one explanation for this. Some of those men were almost continuously in the sky and when they had gone beyond fatigue and exhaustion, they were likely to see things that were not there. Yet sometimes, living constantly with danger or exhaustion can heighten the perception of the "inner" eye. The other explanation is that the aircraft had to land for refuelling, then take off for the battle again; those still in the sky may have assumed that the aircraft which returned had been shot down, and wondered where the fresh reinforcements kept coming from.

Yet the legend of the Iron Gates is an intriguing

tale, when one considers it was finally taken down and printed over a hundred years ago. But never mind George, the son of George - I think it is about time someone woke them up again.

To come nearer to our own times, in previous Vagaries, one or two may remember that mentioned an astrologer called Sepharial, who had an uncanny knack of hitting the mark. The original Sepharial (Walter Gorn-Old) died in 1929, but someone else took over the name and seems to be doing as well as the original. One of the books published by the new one is called "The World Horoscope". Although it came out early in 1965, it was probably written in late 1963, taking most of the following year to get through the printers and publishers - it takes an astonishingly long time for a book to get printed nowadays.

The book is mainly about the present Aquarian epoch of the Piscean Age; a subdivision of 36 years which lasts from 1945 to 1981 - and the sooner its over the better! The method Sepharial uses is too complicated to explain in a couple of paragraphs, but a different sign rises for each year. The method is symbolic, but for Sepharial it works. As I said, the book was at the printers in 1964, but consider what he says about that year.

"For instance, from a political point of view the year 1964 having the primary rulership of Saturn in Virgo, Saturn ruling the Labour Party, is in accord with the known trend towards Labour dominance..... The Conservative power has continued for more than a decade, but in 1963 with the return of the Leo influence the peak point was reached and passed, and with the Saturn vibration coking back through the industrial sign of Virgo, there has been from the Labour standpoint an increase in popularity and a marked strengthening of the potential, which if maintained could again carry it back to power."

In 1964 Labour did get in.

When Sepharial speaks of a planet being in a sign he is referring to the World Horoscope, and not planets which happen to be in a particular sign in a particular year. By his method, the Moon is the primary ruler for this epoch. Aquarius does not rise every year for the epoch. For instance, Gemini rose in 1949 and 1961, and as this sign is important to the U.S.A. these particular years show the U.S.A. getting involved in something which may react on the world. But as the Moon is the primary ruler Sepharial has this to say for the year when Jupiter was major ruler, with the Moon as secondary ruler - 1966.

"It is therefore not inconceivable that efforts which have been and are now being made will culminate during 1966 with the actual placing of the first man on the Moon. That definite attempts will be made is certain, but allowing for the possibility of temporary setbacks or even temporary failures, the knowledge gained by these attempts will lead on to what can be assumed will be the successful climax during 1969!"

But when he follows this with the remark "coming now to grimmer possibilities" one tends to feel depressed. He referring to 1973, when Gemini rises in the World Horoscope, with Moon and Mars conjoined, two planets antagonistic to each other. He goes on to suggest industrial war, civil or racial war, or international war - that 1973 is the danger year and the commencement of a period of world unrest which will continue irrespective of whether actual fighting continues or not, until 1977 at the earliest, or possibly until the end of the Epoch in 1981. That the last decade of the cycle will be an extremely eventful one. "There will be marked political changes throughout the world as a result of the emergence of entirely new and forceful leaders." One can hope, I suppose.

For history buffs, the last period which could be called a major Aquarian epoch was 1513 to 1549 (1693-1729 in a secondary way). But one must take into account modern environment and circumstances. For instance, in the period 1513 - 1549 the king should be regarded as the country and the Lord Chancellor, then Chief Minister, equated with what we call a Prime Minister. In 1513 England was fighting on two fronts, and won both the vital battles - Flodden Field in the north (which could be regarded as the enemy within the gates, and was won by old men and boys), and the Battle of the Spurs in France. There was also fighting on two fronts in 1945. Add nineteen years to 1513 and one gets 1532, stated in the history books as the beginning of the Cromwellian Tyranny. Add nineteen years to 1945 and you get 1964 - draw your own conclusions. It was also during this period that the currency was debased.

In the late 1530s feeble parliaments allowed more and more power to get into the hands of Thomas Cromwell - he took away much freedom - and the wishes of the majority were less and less regarded. Towards the end of this decade Cromwell persuaded the King (country) that he ought to go "into Europe". That is, form an alliance with Protestant Europe in order to kick Catholic Europe in the teeth - these days it would be political, not religious. It was Cromwell who talked Henry into marriage with Anne of Cleves, the Flanders Mare as Henry called her. The marriage took place,

but was never consummated, and annulment eventually being obtained. It was for this that Cromwell lost his nut in 1540. That year equates with 1972 - the year that the treaty to get us into the Common Market was signed, but not with the "full hearted consent" of all the public. So will something similar happen? After 1540 Henry decided to hell with Ministers and more or less ruled as virtual dictator until his death.

All this applies to Britain, of course, but the two periods in other countries may show similarities for anyone who is interested in checking up.

E.N.D.

THIS AND THAT (Cont'd from Page 6)

fact, some of the well-known Irish and Welsh families are referred to as The Race of Nesta. Nesta was the daughter of Rhys ap Tudor (not likely to have been related to the crumb who nicked the throne in 1485), the last king of South Wales. Nesta married Gerald FitzOtho, whose mother was Welsh, and whose father was half Norman, half Florentine (Gerhardi). By him she had a little FitzGerald. The normans used Fitz in the way the Gaels used Mac and the Welsh used Ap or Map. But Nesta got around. She also had a little FitzStephen, and then she met Henry I, who was also a fast worker, and had a little FitzHenry. I believe there was also a FitzMaurice and a FitzWalter. In the end, most of them took the name of FitzGerald. But it was these, with Earl Clare (Strongbow) who invaded Ireland. What were they complaining about, any way? They had spent the last thousand years raiding as pirates into Britain. In fact, the Scotti first came over from Ireland. The plantation of Ulster in Tudor and Stewart times was done mainly by Scots, who were more or less going back to where they originally came from. But no matter what happened in Ireland the English got the blame. Strafford, for instance, was the first man to give Ireland a proper administration, and got called Black Tom for his pains. Even Oliver Cromwell kept a fair administration going over there. And he gave strict orders that any soldiers caught pillaging or attempting massacres were to be shot - and they were. The English got the blame for the famine - relief was sent although this country was not in too good a state, but what the Irish will not admit, or refuse to believe, is that many of their own people took the opportunity to line their pockets during the famine. I am, of course, referring to a certain type of Irish, who cannot get it into their head that the so-called religious causes they are murdering for were dead more than three hundred years ago. The more excitable of them

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A SMALL WILDERNESS

In previous Vagaries I have occasionally mentioned the jungle next door - a small patch of ground which is overgrown as the place next door is only business premises and not living accommodation. Over the years it has become more and more overgrown. In our own pocket-handkerchief of a garden the tamarisk tree, which did not reach the top of the dividing wall a dozen years ago, is now so high that Selina could climb it, run along a branch and land on the roof of the other printers, whose premises stretch along the backs of both gardens - and also round the side of the other garden, so we are completely enclosed at the back, having a view of several different roofs. The firethorn did not reach the top of the wall, either, but now spreads itself all over the damned place. Just on the other side of the wall a hazel tree took root a few years ago, which is now big enough to spread itself impartially on either side of the wall - it has even produced a few nuts for the past three or four years. At first there was very little ivy, but it has now smothered the wall and trellis where the clematis used to be, at right angles to the back of the house. We cleared it from elsewhere, but left it there as it was better than looking at that from the continuation of the house, rather than a blank, brick wall.

In the past all this area was Selina's territory, but now she is getting old and does not wander so far afield. In fact, since her left hind leg has shown signs of weakness (this was through that thug of a Felix-cat pushing her off the roof into the pool below twice) one branch of the tamarisk tree was cut off so she could not try to get on the roof and maybe slip. Her friend from up the road are getting old, too, so we do not see much of the antique dealer's cats any more.

Yet despite Selina and the once upon a time visiting cats, over the years the small wilderness has somehow been transformed into a sanctuary. Birds come from all over for the firethorn berries, the elder berries, the ivy berries, and the catoniasta berries - and also the slugs and snails which abound next door, as well as the loganberries, as it was once a cultivated garden.

At first, there were not many birds, but as all the stuff started to grow, including ash trees, a maple tree, an elder tree, a plane tree, (plus a clump of hemlock from the birdseed), and a sycamore tree next door, they began to get more numerous. In fact, I swear one sparrow acted as a scout to warn the other birds of approaching cats. Then early in

1963, during the bad winter, on a very cold but sunny day, I caught a glimpse of blue and yellow among the ivy. Knowing as much about birds as I did of flowers, I said to Bill "What the hell are those two budgerigars doing out there?" He said they were not budgies but bluetits, who had probably come in to town to see what they could find, and where it would be slightly warmer than in the country.

That winter many birds were freezing to death or starving because they could not find enough food - or dying because of the sprays that were being used. The bluetits and others of their family are useful as they keep down insects, especially greenfly, which makes them very welcome to the rose-growers. But there were very few insects about in that January, so I got some wild bird seed and spread it on top of the wall. A flock of grateful sparrows instantly descended on it, then the bluetits turned up and managed to sort out the bits they liked. Not long after this I heard about the nylon socks filled with nuts for birds, and hung one on the growing hazel tree for them. The bluetits, now named Betty and Billy-boy, thought it was a marvellous idea, but so did some of the other birds.

I could not understand why the nuts seem to vanish so quickly from the sock, until I noticed large holes in it that could not have been caused by the bluetits' beaks. I still put out birdseed and then discovered one morning why the sock was getting damaged. Looking out to the wall, I saw some birds on the sock and said to Bill, "Those are damned queer looking sparrows." He looked and said "Sparrows be damned! They're greenfinches."

It was about this time I thought I'd better get a book on birds, before I mistook a visiting eagle for somebody's lost hen. All I can say is that it was female greenfinches I saw first, and they are not as brightly coloured as the males.

I solved the problem of the sock by putting one sock inside another, which made it a bit more difficult for the finches to wreck it. In any case, the bluetits were privileged, as I put separate nuts on the wall for them. In the end, Bill built a small platform outside my study window, so Billy-boy and Betty could get their nuts from there.

When spring finally came, one morning I heard a sound like an enraged football rattle in the wilderness next door. This time I recognised the bird - it was a great tit, with its mate lurking not far away. A very brash pair, who came down when I called out there were some nuts on the platform. They were dubbed George and Gina. They were not the only

arrivals as, on investigating some odd little ticking sounds one morning, I saw four robins hopping about the garden. Four! This was unusual as robins like a lot of territory, sometimes nearly an acre, and do not suffer other robins around gladly. It finally became just a pair of them, so I assume the other two had been told to get lost.

Not all visitors were welcome ones - in the summer of 1963 two of them started strutting up and down the far high wall and their behaviour would have made Lord Longford blush. Pigeons dammit! I called them Stephen and Mandy, but a few days taught them not to come down into the wilderness - a parade ground voice sent them scuttling. Even their descendants, of whom there are now quite a number, know better.

Some of the birds I named. Billy-boy and Betty one day turned up with two very small bluetits - their children-whom I called Benny and Bonny. These four, and George and Gina all used to come to the landing platform for their nuts when I called them, plus one rather bemused looking male greenfinch, who became convinced its name was "Not-you-you-greedy-sod."

The trouble with greenfinches and sparrows is that they can't keep a good thing to themselves, but go and tell all their friends and relations, with the result that more and more of them turn up. Occasionally there were accidents. Every time I let Selina out I used to yell "Lock out, birds, Selina's out," some of them did not believe me, or were too greedy to go away, with the result they were pounced on. Casualties were very few, though - most birds can get away from a cat, unless they are fledgelings who have not yet learned to fly properly. But one greenfinch probably got caught through conceit. The male finches can vary in colour quite a lot - some being rather dull and others brilliant. This one was about the most brilliant I had seen. Instead of a dull olive green he was almost emerald in colour and his wing bars, from shoulder to tip, were more than yellow - they were almost bright gold. I noticed that when he landed on the wall for seed, even the other finches deferred to him, and waited until he had finished eating. I called him Kenneth, which is Celtic for handsome, and didn't he know it. That bird practically strutted, and considered he could go anywhere in the garden, with the result that Selina got him. All I found of him was his brilliant head and wings. I raged and hated at her - she knows I don't like her to go after the birds. But if Kenneth had not been strolling about the garden as though he owned it, she would never had got him.

Other unwelcome visitors were starlings. A whole flock of them descended on the wall one winter, just after I had put out some bread and seed, and it had all gone before I could yell at them to clear off. But they got the message - they never came back. There was one starling who used to sing and chortle on one of the chimney tops, but he never came down to the garden. I took against him from the first. Starlings can be good mimics, but this one had inherited a whistle from his ancestors which sounded just like a bomb falling - a sound I could have done without. I do not think the present chimney top resident is the same one, and he and his mate had a call which was puzzlingly familiar. It went something "tut-tut-tut-tut-tut-tut-ting!" over and over. I finally realised what it was. The damned birds were trying to pretend they were typewriters.

In the meantime, the sanctuary sorted itself out and, apart from the ubiquitous sparrows and greenfinches, there seemed to be two pair of bluetits, one pair of great tits, two wrens, two dunnocks, a couple of blackbirds who always seem to leave one baby here for the winter, a pair of thrushes and occasional visitors. I once saw a bullfinch on the wall and a chaffinch stayed for a few days. Treecreepers and a couple of goldcrests have examined the place, but probably decided there was too much competition. A lot of Cheltenham centre was being knocked down and rebuilt, with the result that a lot of greenery went, and I suspect I got the evicted birds.

One pair of birds just visited for nesting material. A few years ago I vaguely noticed that something was tugging at an old bit of string that once kept the clematic in place and when I took a proper look there were a couple of goldfinches - two beautiful birds. Bill got some lambswool from his surgery for them and hung it over the trellis and they pounced on with joy. Mrs. collected while Mr. kept watch. Lambswool can stretch and stretch, but Mrs. Goldfinch used to wrap it neatly round her beak, then give a tug and parted it, and fly off to the tree in the prep school playground where she and her mate had her home. But the year before last the tree started dying and had to be cut down as it was liable to fall on the children. When they came back last year and discovered their home gone, they never came here for their nesting material, so I assume they moved elsewhere. They were not the only ones who thought lambswool was a good thing to kine a nest with. The bluetit saw it and decided to have some, so grabbed it in its beak and pulled - and pulled - and pulled. The lambswool stretched and stretched, then suddenly parted, and the bluetit fell upside down for several feet before it remembered it had

wings. Unfortunately, we thought the sight amusing, and when it heard us chuckling got so annoyed that it would not speak to us for several days.

Those birds seem to know when Selina is not around. We came back from a holiday one weekend and found snail shells all over the garden path. One of the thrushes obviously knew it was safe to come down and use the stones. We could not get Selina from her cat hotel until Monday, but on the Sunday Bill and I were sitting out in the sun when a thrush calmly landed between us with a snail, and commenced to eat her lunch. She was only a matter of inches from us, but was not in the least concerned.

A robin comes regularly for the winter now and though it will not yet perch on my hand, it will land inches from me on the low wall outside the back door for its currants - which the blackbirds and thrushes also fancy. I called this nearly tame bird Mr. Robin or Rex and it was some time before I realised it should have been Regina. Last another robin came courting and there was a fascinating bit of byplay on the wall. While I watched Mr. Robin landed on the wall, carefully selected the best currants and seeds and popped them into his girl friend's mouth. They nest elsewhere but Regina was back with us for the winter. Come summer and Rex turned up again to claim her. Regina landed on the wall with joyous squeaks, opening her beak and flapping her wings and not a bit of good did it do her. Rex just went on eating. "Well, what did you expect?" I asked her. "Last year he was courting and had to be nice to get you. Now he's got you he doesn't have to offer choice titbits anymore. What's the matter with you both? Planning to be human in your next life?"

Last year the sanctuary suddenly got converted into a nursery for all the baby birds. So how did they know that our poor Selina was not at all well during the summer and that it would be safe to feed their babies there? Grizel and Gilbert, the two blackbirds, brought up about four families - I began to run out of names to call the children. And, as usual, they left one half-grown baby with us for the winter. For this once, this one was easy to distinguish from the others, as she had a touch of nearly white feathers at her throat, like a little cameo. I named her Brenda and she would actually come when I called her, and have her currants while I was standing only about a yard away.

The sparrows brought their babies along, too. So did the starling and his mate. The blackbirds used to tuck their babies into the maple tree for the night - and if Gilbert went into the ivy at night, we knew Grizel had

hatched another clutch. The starlings put their two babies in the ash tree, despite discouraging remarks from me. Then tragedy nearly struck. Selina started recovering from her kidney trouble and in early July I heard chirps of alarm from all the birds. The previous day I had said to Selina that she was to leave the blackbirds alone, but if she could catch a starling that would teach them a lesson. Among the squawks of alarm I heard a queer, harsh "quark, quark, quark" from the starlings, and when I went out there was Selina coming along the path with a small black bird in her mouth. "Give that to me at once," I yelled, "I told you not to catch the blackbirds." Much to my surprise she let me take the baby bird, which was uninjured, and I discovered I was holding a baby starling. "You did say she could," said Bill. "Yes, I know," I replied, but it's only a baby, and I'm not going to give back to her now I've taken it away. Besides, I couldn't bear the sound of the two panicking parents on the other side of the wall. I put the baby over the wall, where it was shoved into the ashtree by its mum, who still made the quarking sound, but this time in a sort of crooning soothing way, almost like a lullaby. The next morning, looking up at the high roof, I saw the starlings chivvying their two children along, but not letting them come down into the wilderness. The children were being evacuated to a safer place and seemed to be protesting about it. Somehow, it looked a rather pathetic sight.

Their dad turned out to be an ingratiating bird - every now and again he would swoop down and grab some of the food I had put out for the other birds, then it would fly to a safe distance and make ingratiating noises at me. I think we are beginning to develop a love-hate relationship.

This year the sanctuary did not become a nursery - I did not tell the birds Selina was better, but somehow they seemed to know and were not going to risk their children this year. So once more many of the birds disappeared for the summer. Then in August there was quite a racket in the garden and when I went to look several of them had returned for the winter - the bluetits (Billy-boy and Betty disappeared a couple of years ago - old age probably) Bonny and Benny with two smaller ones, named Barry and Biddy, two new great tits, called Garry and Greta, Brenda and her son MacBren, Thelma the thrush, a couple of greenfinches and Regina the Robin. They must have all caught the same train.

The birds were not the only creatures to have made their home in this small wilderness. We even had leaf-cutter bees until the honeysuckle went. There are quite a number of snails next door, who have a bad habit of climbing the wall and helping themselves to the seed spread along the

top. One day I thought I'd fix them. Picking up a brick I went over to the wall ready to do execution, but one snail was there with something like a cornflake in its mouth, and it looked so innocent and ridiculous munching its flake that I hadn't the heart to do anything. I just picked up it and its mates and dropped them on the other side of the wall, telling them they would have to take a chance with the black-birds and thrushes.

Then there were the ants. They appeared several years ago, but I did not take much notice of them as they were in the garden. But one morning I picked up an opened packet of Sugar Puffs and discovered the ants had got there first. Then I noticed that hundreds of them were making raids on the garbage can. It seemed wherever I looked there were ants. I swept them up and put them out. They came back. In the end I decided to get rid of them and put special ant poison down by the two nests. When I looked late one night they were falling over each other to lick it up. By next day I had forgotten about it, but a very odd thing happened. As I opened the back door, I very faintly sensed a feeling I knew I had had before, but could not place for a while. Later on I realised it seemed to be a very faint echo of the awful silence which always occurred for a moment or two after an air raid was over. But I did not understand why until quite late that day. A terrible disaster had struck and I was the cause, something I did not realise until I saw several ants coming in and out of the nests with corpses of other ants. The live ants looked transparent and could hardly carry their dead burdens. Instead of thinking that's got rid of them, I felt awful. The poison was supposed to go down for three nights, but I never had the heart to put it down again.

In the end I made a bargain with them. If they stayed outside I would give them a few titbits, but if they dared to venture into the house they would be lucky to see their home again. At first I stood on the doorstep and stomped on any who ventured over it (and it was quicker than poison), but it did not take long for them to get the message. I kept my side of the bargain and they kept theirs. Every now and again I put down fruit syrup, currants, small pieces of fruit or a few grains of sugar, which they accepted and stayed outside the house. Ant geld, I suppose.

They were rather fascinating to watch at times - they are called social insects and seem to run their nests in a well-organised way. They even have one or two dim ones among them. One day I watched a rather thick-witted ant wandering aimlessly round the nest entrance, getting in the way of several ants who were trying to get in. Eventually,

one exasperated ant butted it through the entry. And about every two years here we have a cloudburst, when the pool overflows and a torrent roars along the garden and down the area steps. I think the ants' nest may have been flooded several times, but after the last cloudburst a couple of years ago I saw a number of them dragging along twigs - twigs to us, but probably enormous tree trunks to them - and pushing them into the nest. This went on for several days and I suspect they were building a dam against further floods.

Yet one sees nature red in tooth and claw among the birds and insects. Poor Billy-boy spent his last couple of years with only one eye. The goldfinches will not talk to the sparrows, and if they see sparrows using their pool they will never go near it again. Pigeons have batted themselves silly in mid-air over a female pigeon, and the same thing goes on among the insects. One summer day I saw a bumble bee lurching about in the air, obviously dying. It sank lower and lower and then of all places to sink down it landed right in the entry of the ants nest, who were all over it in a second. "Oh, no, you don't," I said, driving them off with a small stick, "let it die in peace." I worked it on to a small leaf and put it on the wall. More ants instantly appeared. In the end I placed it on a large leaf of one of the trees. Another time I saw a large, fat, light-green caterpillar and thought it was going along with a rather peculiar motion, so picked it up to see why. It was quite dead, but underneath were two long columns of ants, who had been humping it home to their deep-freeze. I hastily put it down again and went away, so I do not know if they picked it up again, or whether some passing bird spotted a free meal.

Their mating habits, like the spiders, are rather revolting. The female ants may mate several times, but the male gets bitten in the thorax and left to die, which can take several hours. The fertile female ants are mis-called queens, as there may be several of them to a nest. Some of them, after being fertilised, will try to enter a nest and if the inhabitants decide they need another queen, they can stay. If not, they either get thrown out or killed. They grow wings and mate in the air, but do not swarm unless the day is very hot and close. Some of our lot tried to swarm in July, but the temperature was not right and I saw the worker ants round them up and drive them back to the nest, dragging them back if it was necessary.

Yet the ants do not always behave sensibly. Some are agriculturists, some stock-raisers, some gardeners and farmers, some slave-owners - and some allow aliens into the nest which does them no good at all. Remy Chauvin wrote a very interesting book called "The World of Ants" (translated

by George Ordish) and published by Victor Gollanz 1970. He has one chapter on how ants allow destroyers into the nest.

He describes the beetle, *Atemeles*, which is adopted practically without delay by the red ants, because of its larvae's special glands, the smell or taste of which the workers find delicious. The larvae raises its head and moves its mouth parts very much like a hungry ant soliciting for food from another. It works, for the ants will feed *Atemeles* larvae sooner than their own. The ant "sniffs" or licks it from back to front and when she reaches the front part the larvae raises its head backwards so the giving of food can begin.

The writer points out that the ants crazy predilection for *Atemeles* does the community no good, but the damage caused by this unnatural addiction is nothing compared to that of another perversion: the admission of destroying foreigners to their nests: *Lomechusa*. This is the name of an Ancient Roman poisoner. The author goes on to say that *Lomechusa* is an insignificant looking beetle about the same size as an ant, but when it enters a nest the inhabitants are doomed. Although at first it is greeted with distrust, as soon as an ant approaches with hostile intent *Lomechusa* presents the hairs on its hindquarters, which carry a highly attractive, and probably sweet secretion. It also sprays into the ant's face the repellent, even toxic, contents of a special gland. Once the ant has sniffed the two trichomes, all is lost. The workers lose interest in everything but the deadly secretion, neglecting their own larvae so badly they produce deformed adults. Meanwhile, *Lomechusa* lays its own eggs and the ants look after them to the best of their ability. As soon as the *Lomechusa* larvae hatch they begin to devour all the ant eggs and larvae within their reach. Very shortly, addiction to the trichomes' dangerous juices produce various symptoms of intoxication in the ants. The sense of balance is lost, for instance, and from then on complete degeneration comes quickly. Not that the *Lomechusa* worries about this, as when the enfeebled colony starts to die off, it leaves the nest in search of other victims.

The author stress that the "Lomechusa-mania" among ants as perhaps the only known case of drug addiction among animals.

With the same results as drug addiction among humans.

I do not know if this only occurs among the red ants the author has studied. The lot in our garden are the brown ants and I presume they are free of this addiction. I would hate to see it happen - those ants are friends of mine.

I suspect of having some Fir-bolg in their genes - a race which predated the Celt. But they also seem to have the terrible Celtic tendency to clan suicide. Curiously enough, the Sinn Fein was started in America by expatriate Irish - long after the famine was over and things had got back to normal. But I had better not go on too much about the goings on in Ulster as I am not sure I can take an impartial view. You see, during the troubles my father, a regular soldier (he went back because of the unemployment after the first World War and he had a family to keep) was sent to Ireland. He was not even my height (5'6") and a half a dozen of them rushed up from behind and stabbed him in the back. They did not manage to kill him and discovered they had taken on an Army boxing champ and in the end those that were left standing sandbagged him over the head. He died about ten years later - with gassing and bronchitis from the first World War (and being blown up in a truck) - not before he had managed to have more children - he did not have a good life expectancy, and the stabbing probably shortened it even more. And the blow on the head caused a personality change.

To go on to something lighter. It was not until I read in George Charters' "Scarr" that I realised that there had been a "poet" called William McDonagall - I thought someone had invented him. But after that his name kept cropping up. And then I found a book in the library of all his poems, with comments by McDonagall himself. From these one gathers he had very little humour (although there is plenty of unconscious humour in his poems) or tact - he was always on about the Demon Drink, then had the crust to ask if he could recite his poems in public houses. Somehow or other his poems can read very prosaically. He writes about some wonderful scenery and then goes on like a list "then there's" etc. and use words which just did not lend themselves to poetry. Some months ago, Andrew Alexander, the parliamentary correspondent for the Daily Telegraph, sat in on a Scottish Bill which was being discussed. Andrew Alexander can actually extract humour from that dreary, prosy lot in the House, but he thought he would describe this Scottish debate in McGonagall verse. It was not bad, but not bad enough for McGonagall - try as he would it rhymed too well. This brought a reply from Norman Buchan, a Labour M.P. in McGonagall verse, which was nearer the mark, which ended up accusing Andrew Alexander of "being an impostor from Surbiton or Donegal, Yours sincerely, William McGonagall." This moved me to reply in kind. The letter was not published, but if it were now it would not go down as it would have lost its topicality. Besides, I remembered afterward I had forgotten to sign the damned thing. But to finish up the letter to the editor is as follows:

Dear Sir,

Have read the rhymes of N. Buchan and A. Alexander,
Something which will have surely roused William
McGonagall's dander.

And what the Dundee Muse will think is far worse
Is for years I have been writing this sort of verse.
But I thought when writing this sort of deliberate
trashery

That I was indulging in what is called Ogden Nashery.
One of Mr. Nash's long line of imitators,
Which I thought proved I knew my taters.
I know I should have said onions, but it did not rhyme
And besides, onions do not sound sublime.
But it was really very rash

Of me to think I was copying Ogden Nash
When all the time it was William McGonagall.
A fact which is enough to drive the poor chap's
ghost up the wall.

When I found last year he had existed it was a
disagreeable surprise,
As I'd thought he was a myth or Alfred Austin in
disguise.

I wrote about T.V. radio activity and the cinemacro-
batic,

Also music about which I was emphatic,
In rhymes which the purist would call erratic.
Also "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Man",
After which I wed, so it must have proved something
even though it did not scan.

But it did not occur to me to write about M.P.s.
A fact which will cause my friends blood to freeze.
And will also make them feel quite discontent
If they have to read what I write about Parliament.
Then there's another who may be quite irate,
Who is my lawful, wedded mate,
Having to check and ensure the lines do not scan.
Enough to make him emigrate to Yucatan,
Or wish the Telegraph paper
Had never started me off on this caper.
Which leaves me nothing more to say
Except

Yours sincerely

Roberta Gray.