

All's Well that Ends Well

The field was booked, the caterers were hired,
programmes were printed, seating was acquired,
the forecast said the weather would be fair
for entertainment in the open air:
the village all made ready for the day
when their own players would present their play.
“Merchant of Venice” was the piece selected,
and practised, if perhaps not quite perfected;
they all had tried their best to learn their parts,
and keen anticipation filled their hearts.
Too soon the day came round. Anticipation
became a panic-stricken realisation:
rehearsals might be fun, but this was real —
now they were faced with trial by ordeal.
The audience arrived, filled every seat,
and chatted, looking forward to a treat.
They quietened as the actors all appeared.
Antonio came forward and declared
“In sooth I know. Not why I am so sad” —
at once the audience knew it would be bad,
and as each actor massacred the text,
they tried to understand but were perplexed.
Bassanio spoke too slow, the Duke too fast,
and cues were often missed by all the cast;
Shylock kept coughing, Portia was too old;
the busy prompter had the hardest role.
The audience, embarrassed by the flop,
were wishing that the agony could stop.
And then, as Portia wearily proclaimed
“The quality of mercy is not strained,
it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven”,
the rain came, far from gentle, as if given
in answer to the prayers of all concerned
for mercy, and the last act was adjourned.
Both cast and audience fled to the marquee
and drowned their memories in beer and tea.
A brief and generous review next day
appeared under the headline “Rain Stopped Play”.

The Lost Flower

with apologies to Adelaide Anne Procter and Sir Arthur Sullivan ("The Lost Chord")

Seated one day in my garden, which was dreary and full of weeds,
my eyes were wandering hopelessly over the flower beds.
I don't know the names in Latin, nor what I have planted where,
but I saw one single tulip which was black – jet black, I swear.

A colourless tulip offended, like a blot on a white paper sheet;
however ungreen were my fingers, here was one weed I could beat.
I went for my fork and trowel and uprooted it that very day,
and tossed it onto the compost, where it wilted and shrivelled away.

Next week in the garden centre, I mentioned that flower's decease,
and was shocked to be told that this tulip was rare as the Golden Fleece.
I re-planted and watered it vainly, that one black tulip of mine,
and tried to achieve resurrection, but of life there was never a sign.

It may be next Spring will revive it, and win me undying fame;
or it may be I'll give up gardening, and probably change my name.

Village Sheepdog Trials - a sheep's-eye view

Today's a special day for sheep:
this festival each year they keep
to show the humans and their dogs
that gimmers, wethers, ewes and hogs
are not as dumb as they assume,
that now they face their annual doom.
The sheep wait in their hill-top pen;
excited dogs and nervous men
await below. Now both sides choose
their champions, and three chosen ewes –
experienced, wise, their task to show
the younger sheep just where to go
and how to break the canine hearts –
are loosed, and so the battle starts.
The first dog races up the hill.
The sheep wait, calmly feeding, till
the dog is near. Then starts the fun.
Their first plan: force the dog to run
in circles as it tries to keep
the three together: thus the sheep
split two and one, or one and two –
or scatter three ways, right on cue
just when the dog thinks he's the boss.
Plan two, to make him really cross,
involves direction: deviate,

go left or right but never straight,
and when the dog attempts a turn,
turn further than he wants. He'll learn
that sheep are cunning beasts – and worse, a
sheep rules a dog, not vice versa.
Plan three is put in motion when
at last the time comes for the pen,
when dog and man together try
to trap the sheep, who now apply
their masterstroke, a cheeky trick:
pretend to fear the human's stick
and meekly walk towards the gate;
the human waves his stick, too late –
one sheep leaps forward, darts below
both stick and arm; the others go
the other way. The dog, confused,
has had enough of being abused.
The sheep triumphant leave the field.
The next three, eager not to yield,
now follow their example. Then,
as each three join their friends again
they crowd round, asking how it went,
and laugh to hear, with deep content,
each tale of dog's and man's distress,
and count the day a great success.

The Bottle and the Glass

A Cautionary Tale concerning Communism

Said the bottle to the glass as they were standing on the table,
“I should like to pour a drink but I’m afraid that I’m not able.”
Said the glass, “I need one badly: can’t you see that I am empty?
Won’t you help me?” “I would like to, but although I now have plenty,
if I gave you some of mine then I would find that all the glasses
were demanding drinks, and soon I would have joined your poorer classes.”
“Just you wait,” replied the glass. “Your greed will cause the revolution,
for the glasses will arise and force a radical solution:
you’ll be taken by the neck and made to pour out all your treasure
and distribute it to every glass in strictly equal measure.”

But idealism seldom hits its target. Shortly after
came a hand which poured the drink, indeed, but then with cheerful laughter
grabbed the glass and said “Good health!” and held it high
— and drained it dry.

Spanner in the Works

There’s always

a snake in the grass	a scratch on the table
a smudge on the glass	a kink in the cable
a fly in the ointment	a blip in the data
a glitch in enjoyment	a noisy spectator
a spider in the bath	a worm in the bud
a puddle on the path	an eye in the spud
a knot in the plank	a midge in the porridge
a leak in the tank	a gap in your knowledge
a leaf on the track	a flea on the dog
a sheep that is black	a lie in the blog
a stone in the shoe	a stain on the carpet
a bone in the stew	a hole in the basket
a mistake in the spelling	a witch in a fairy tale
a growth in the telling	a chip in your Chippendale
a smear on the windscreen	a blistered heel when trekking
a bump on the putting green	an error after checking
a weed in the flower bed	a bill to pay for wine and dining
a nail in the tyre tread	a cloud with every silver lining
a mist on the Isle of Skye	a typo in the email
a pip in the apple pie	and a devil in the detail.

But Sod’s Law says that, however much it irks,
I can not find a rhyme for a spanner in the works.

The Message in the Bottle

There was a lonely island, quite unknown
to all the world, the world alike unknown
to those who lived on it. Now, long ago
the ocean sent on them a dreadful woe
which changed their world: tsunami struck their shore,
destroyed their fishing boats and left them poor.
The sea had turned against them: none were wishing
to build new boats and go back to their fishing.
They asked their god, in misery and terror,
if they were punished for some sin or error.
No answer came, until the famous day
when children who were on the shore at play
found floating in the sea an object, green
and shinier than they had ever seen.
They feared to touch it, but one ran and told
the priest, who, trembling, doubtful, yet was bold
to catch it and to take it to his temple.
The people, wondering, started to assemble,
and waited. Finally the priest appeared,
and to his hopeful people he declared,
“This is the answer we were waiting for!
This thing is surely god-made. And there’s more:
concealed within I’ve found our god’s own sign.”
He showed a leaf-like thing, white, with a line
of shapes drawn on it. Eagerly they stared.
The shapes meant nothing to them, but they dared
believe that their salvation had been given:
their god had spoken from his distant heaven.

The priest spent ages studying the leaf,
attempting to interpret each motif.
He pondered long, and finally reported
the shapes to be familiar, though distorted.
The first, their island standing in the ocean;
and then a fishing spear, their god’s own token;
the third a sailing boat; the next the same;
and last the sun. The message thus became:
“Your god shines blessings on the island fleet.”
The people cheered; their joy was now complete.
Thenceforth at each full moon and highest sea
the priest would don his robes and reverently,
with all the people, walk down to the shore,
and raise the sacred objects, and implore

the god to guard them. Faith brought its reward,
and thus their trust in fishing was restored.

Years passed, and generations came and went.
Then suddenly occurred the great Event.
A ship arrived. The islanders in awe
believed their god was here. He came ashore;
they fell down at his feet. The priest was sent
to fetch the sacred leaf, and then present
it humbly to the god. And he, bemused,
received and read the gift, grew more confused,
and wondered greatly how, at this first meeting,
they'd learnt to write an English word of greeting.

For the captain knew not that a child at play,
pretending that he was a castaway,
had thrown into the ocean long ago
a bottle. And its message? - just "HELLO".

Hidden Treasure

A hill behind Gairloch is called Torr na h-Ulaidh, Hill of Treasure

A thousand years ago or more,
people lived along the shore
of Gairloch. Those were peaceful times
for them: no roads, no cars, no crimes,
no shops, no schools, and no TV.
They planted crops and fished the sea,
they milked their cows and hunted deer,
and only had one thing to fear.

One day a girl was guarding sheep
above the village, trying to keep
the flock from wandering. The day
was clear and sunny. In the bay
she saw the fishing boats; beyond
was Skye. The sea was like a pond,
so calm and blue. But then she spotted
that in the Minch the sea was dotted
with dark shapes: she counted ten;
she wondered what they were, and then
she knew, jumped to her feet, and raced
downhill full pelt. Her dog outpaced
her, barking madly. Out of breath
she gasped her news: "The ships of death
are coming!" She was quickly led
to see the village chief, who said
"Now calmly tell me what you saw."
"We've heard" she said "of ships of war
which come from far away to kill
and burn and steal. Well, from the hill
I saw them coming: rouse the village."
The chief said "Vikings! come to pillage:
just what I feared. Now sound the horn
to gather everyone, and warn
the fishermen to come ashore."
So all the village gathered for
the chief to tell them what to do:
"We can not face them, we're too few.
We'll go into the hills and stay
in safety till they've gone away.
Bring food and clothes, and travel light:
we must get quickly out of sight."

The men complained: "It is not right
to let them land without a fight.
We'll stay. But if they are too strong
we'll follow you before too long."
The chief reluctantly agreed,
and said that he himself would lead
the rest to safety. Up the hill
they climbed, with heavy loads, until
they paused to rest, and saw below
that Viking ships, their deadly foe,
were in the bay and soon would reach
their men who waited on the beach.

They staggered on and passed the top,
and here the chief told them to stop.
“I think” he said “that some of you
have brought more than I told you to.
Empty your bags and let me see.
We have to move more rapidly.”
The chief was right, for they had got
their pots and pans, their knives, the lot! —
their precious metal treasures which
they would not let the Vikings snitch.
The chief was kind and did not scold;
instead he thought a bit, then told
them: “This idea seems best to me:
here where the Vikings cannot see,
bury your treasures in the ground,
and trust that they will not be found.”
They did as they were told, and then
they hurried on their way again.

Meanwhile the men were wishing they
had not been quite so keen to stay.
They had some rusty swords and spears,
but had not had to fight for years.
And as the Viking ships drew near,
their confidence soon turned to fear.
Before the first ship reached the shore,
they had decided to withdraw,
or rather run until they dropped.
And when at last, tired out, they stopped,
one said “I’ve had a good idea.
There is a little lochan here.
We’ve no need now of weapons, so
let’s hide them: easiest to throw
them in the water. There they’ll stay
until the Vikings go away.”
They all did as he said, and then
they hurried on their way again.

And so the villagers, by hiking
to the hills, escaped the Viking
raid, and saved their precious treasure.
But this gave them little pleasure:
for they saw the smoke of burning,
and they knew they’d be returning
to the ruins of their village:
victims of the Viking pillage.

This perhaps is why today
there is a hill above the bay
called Hill of Treasure, while beyond
there’s Weapon Loch, a muddy pond;
but in the water and the ground
no swords or saucepans have been found.

Volunteering

When I was but a little boy, I heard my mother say
“I love a volunteer”, or that was what I thought she said.
And as I wished to please her, I decided every day
I’d volunteer to do a task before I went to bed.
And this has been a habit which I’ve never overcome,
so mine has been a life obsessed with helping everyone.

When I was young I volunteered
to walk the dog and feed the fishes;
after every meal I cleared
the table and washed up the dishes.
I dusted shelves, I wound the clocks,
I mowed the lawn, I trimmed the shrubs,
I cleaned my room, I darned my socks,
and obviously I joined the Cubs.

At school I always answered questions,
took in books and picked up litter,
stayed behind for extra lessons,
acted as a baby-sitter,
cleaned the blackboard, kept the score,
tidied classrooms, issued hand-outs;
when prep was set I asked for more,
and obviously I joined the Boy Scouts.

At work I’d always volunteer
to make the tea, to work on late,
to post the mail, to buy the beer,
to pay the bill, to lock the gate.
In public life I volunteer
to do the jobs no-one is keen on.
I give a hand, I lend an ear,
a shoulder too to cry or lean on;
face the press, produce the briefings,
and, when no-one else will write ‘em,
write the minutes, chair the meetings.
Et cetera, ad infinitum.

The problem is, as you can guess,
I cannot say the small word “No”.
And since all I can say is “Yes”
my climb to power has not been slow.

I volunteered my way to being MP;
I volunteered to be the new Prime Minister.
When people asked me how this came to be,
I told them that my rise was nothing sinister:
my mother’s chance remark had sown the seed.
My mother, when she heard this, said “My dear,
you heard me wrong; for I’d just read Candide,
and said how very much I loved Voltaire.”

S.L.O.R.

I'm starting a Society
for Lovers Of the Rain.
You wonder who will join it? —
allow me to explain.
We sit inside our houses and
we watch the window pane,
and as the rain slides down the glass
we bitterly complain,
and talk of awful weather,
and wish for sun in vain,
and curse our British climate
and long to be in Spain,
where rain (we think) is never known,
not even on the plain.
But hate of rain's a state of mind,
a bias in the brain:
why not decide that rain is good? —
go out in it, and train
yourself to count its blessings,
to love it! Yes, regain
your childhood's joy in wetness when
you met with mere disdain
the adults' horror if you played
in pouring, drenching rain.
Learn to simply love our weather,
see it all as gain:
wet or dry, in cloud or sun,
it's pleasure, never pain.
At first you'll find this difficult —
it goes against the grain —
but with a little practice you'll
find water's like champagne:
it cheers you up and cools you down
and takes away the strain.
So when it's raining cats and dogs,
to stay in is inane.
Beginners may wear waterproofs,
but soon you will attain
a higher level where from such
a weakness you'll abstain:
after all, your skin's a perfect
waterproof membrane.
Don't worry if the others stare
and say that you're insane.
The truth is quite the opposite:
it's you who's right as rain.
They grumble when they look outside
"Oh no, not rain again!
How horrible: no choice for us
but indoors to remain."
But you are wiser: "carpe diem"
must be your refrain.
Go out, get wet, and spread the word
to join my rain campaign.
P.S. But perhaps not if it's cold as well.

Mini-Macbeth

Witches: Macbeth of Glamis, and Cawdor, and our King.

Macbeth: One out of three: what nonsense you do sing.

Ross: Cawdor's dead: his place is yours, Macbeth.

Macbeth: Wow, that was quick: next, wait for Duncan's death.

Lady Macbeth: No! You must kill him now, while he's our guest.

Macbeth: Must I? Of course you always know what's best.

Is this a dagger? Yes. *[He does the deed.]*

Lady Macbeth: Well done, you're King. Now backbone's all you need.

Porter: You knocked? Come in.

Macduff: We want to see the King.

Alas, he's dead! Who did this bloody thing?

Macbeth: A few loose ends: I'll hire a contract killer.

First, Banquo... Oh! — his ghost! Now that's a chiller:

I'm off to ask the witches for a hand.

Witches: Macduff, trees walking and an unborn man
are all you need to fear.

Macbeth: A good reply.

Macduff and all his family must die.

Messenger 1: Bad news, my lord: the Queen is going barmy;

Macduff lives, and has brought an English army.

Messenger 2: Worse news, my lord: the Queen has gone and died,

and Birnam Wood has just arrived outside.

Macbeth: Against all humans born I've still protection.

Macduff: Bad luck: I entered life by Caesar section.

Congratulations, Malcolm, you're now King.

But mind, you owe the English everything.

The Dream (Scotland, 18th September 2014)

The village woke to find, in every street,
advertisements which showed the fishing fleet
and posed the question "Want to catch more fish?
Join us," they said, "and you'll fulfil your wish.
We know a place of plenty where you'll find
the seas are teeming and the land is kind:
a land fertile with crops of every sort,
a sea where fish are eager to be caught.
Come with us to this land of milk and honey
and never more will you be short of money."
The names below appeared to some auspicious,
but fishy to the rest, who were suspicious:
the leader was called Trout, his second Whiting.
So quiet village life became exciting
as parties formed and arguments began:
to stay at home or seek the promised land?
The Stay-at-homers' leader was called Dear;
he told the Seekers what they had to fear
in leaving home for unknown foreign shores
and risking life and fortune without cause.
"Scaremongering," said Trout to each prediction,
and out of hand dismissed it as pure fiction.
When Dear asked what was wrong with village life
and why they were so keen to stir up strife,
"Mere balderdash," cried Trout. "We must be free:
in our own land is where we ought to be."
Soon Trout and Whiting's vision ruled supreme
as hearts were stirred by this romantic dream
and minds were closed to questions and to doubt.
Poor Dear was clueless how to answer Trout.
Some help came when the rulers of the city
arrived and told them it would be a pity
to lose so fine a village, and they swore
to tax the people less and pay them more;
they held debates which filled the village hall,
but still the outcome was too close to call.
The great day came at last for the migration,
and Trout and Whiting, filled with expectation,
awaited by the boats the multitude.
They waited, but the boats remained uncrewed.
They waited, but by nightfall, all alone,
they knew the dream was done, their hopes had flown.
The villagers, awake at last, had seen
that this whole project was indeed a dream,
and gambling all their livelihoods away
seemed foolish in the clearer light of day;
for life, if not quite perfect, was okay.
And so their Yea turned just in time to Nay.