

## From the Back Verandah

I introduced Our Ladies' Man to you nearly six years ago. (Propitiously, it was in Issue 13, May 1999). For those of you too young to remember, OLM claimed to be a reincarnation of Nostradamus and demonstrated it with visionary gems like this:

Armageddon will chastise their titanic frenzy, but not before the centurial microbe devours the edge of time.

Not long after that column was published, OLM vanished in a flash of auto-combustive energy and hasn't been seen or heard of since. Till last Thursday, that is, when I tripped over him in a storm-water channel. He describes his absence (in the age-old flapdoodling style of the true clairvoyant) as "a cleansing pilgrimage into the dark neverland of unpredictation".

And now tells me that he wants to send me more divination, this time in the form of readings from the stars. When I put the idea to the editor, his immediate verdict, announced with some force, that horoscopes will make no more than an sporadic appearance in this column — if even that. In the end we compromised: if the planetary alignments are favourable he'll

allow something by OLM each July. "With any luck we will have collided with Mars before the first horoscope appears."

Unlike other soothsayers, OLM will be reading two zodiacal signs and laying out the future for readers who believe his words apply to them. Whew! At this rate, we should get through the twelve in six years' time.

And what are these twelve? Well, OLM won't disclose which months each applies to, but he is willing to give you foreknowledge of their names and the planets influencing them. (According to OLM, the three marked \* are "fixed signs", a fact that should bring great cosmic joy to us all.)

Sign	Planet
Sheba	Lorgnette
Mandrake	Ossian
Fitz	Doppler
Panto	Babbage
Barbarossa	Heliotrope
Cyclops *	Pickwick
Amnesia	Flexagon
Protocol	Pinchgut
Zeugma *	Ludd
Rumpo	Ellipticon
Hogen Mogen	Grundy
Übermensch *	Malaprop

— Fizzgig

# BIKWIL

*The Magazine of Quiet Enthusiasms*

Editor: Tony Rogers

ISSN 1328-7842

No. 48

March 2005

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## Location, Location, Relocation

Those of you with Internet access should prepare yourselves for a change of venue. The *Bikwil* site is moving to a new hosting service soon, once I get all the teething problems out of the way. When all is ready (hopefully by May, when the new *Bikwil* year begins), I'll email you with the details.

It will be interesting to see how long it'll take for links to the new site to start showing up in Google and other search engines.

Readers who aren't connected needn't worry: the only change you might notice will be at the bottom of this page, where the new Web and email addresses will show up in the Colophon.

At the same time I will be moving my own access to cable, which has the vast advantage of speed — with the drawback of an increase in service provider charges. (By the way, did you know that Australia has the second highest Internet charges in the world — after New Zealand?)

I had also hoped to reorganise and remodel the site before the move, but events have overtaken me. No matter: it's still on the agenda.

In the meantime, the first-class articles and poems you've come to look forward to will continue — right here. So let's get reading (and writing).

### Colophon

*Bikwil*  
18 Pembury Ave.  
NORTH ROCKS. N.S.W. 2151.  
AUSTRALIA.

Annual Subscription (Six Issues):  
Posted:  
Australia: \$A10 (cheque to "Tony Rogers")  
Elsewhere: \$US20 (via [www.paypal.com](http://www.paypal.com))  
Downloaded: Free worldwide

[www.bikwil.zip.com.au](http://www.bikwil.zip.com.au)

[tony@bikwil.zip.com.au](mailto:tony@bikwil.zip.com.au)

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*Back Issues Are Still Available*

I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific.

by Tomlir

Military justice is to justice what military music is to music.

Groucho Marx

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

Anybody who goes to see a psychiatrist ought to have his head examined.

Samuel Goldwyn

If it ain't broke, mess with it till it is.

Anonymous

Only self-promoters and spies know the second verse of the National Anthem.

Evelyn Waugh

Paul Cezanne

Was the man

Who had lots of fun,

Painting bulky bathers with no bathers on.

— Dorothy Filshie

Although Bill Gates

And one of his mates

Started Microsoft,

Neither had a hand in making lycra soft.

— TR

**Web**

These three sites aren't "crazy" exactly — they're probably better characterised as "just off the wall".

First, come and enjoy *Rock On, Rock ON!* "This site is dedicated . . . to the work of San Francisco balanced rock sculptor Bill Dan and to the art, discipline and craft of rock balancing in general . . . , with information about naturally balancing rocks and world-wide stone balancing and rock stacking traditions." There are some remarkable photos here and even some short videos of B.D. and others in action. See: anything bizarre takes time and patience.

Now we're off to *The No Clown Zone*. Are you one of the millions of Bikwilians who suffer from chronic coulrophobia? If so, this



**Line**

site, which began in 1996, might give you some relief from your completely understandable fears. Just keep taking the downloads. Why, man, there's games to play, a store, other things to do, a forum, free stuff — plus email addresses you can get for an annual fee.

Lastly today, let's have some *Fun with Telemarketers*. Like me, you probably need to brush up on your prank-call technique. You know, for that special occasion — especially dinner time. The name of the game is obvious, so say no more. Well, say this much: some of it may be risqué, but you might be inspired by this man's example to fight back yourself.

— TR

#### Internet sites referred to above:

<http://rock-on-rock-on.com/>

<http://www.ihateclowns.com/>

<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Suite/4188/>

## *My Last Garden*

(For John)

Terraces bordered with strong stone  
 lie open to the promise of the sky,  
 to tender rituals of daily care:  
 this is my last garden born through pain.  
 Should a little night rain fall,  
 this gentle earth, if tended well,  
 an edible life will bear, and more  
 of all that we call beautiful.  
 Of all the edens I have sown,  
 my last garden, sown of love,  
 I like to think will be the finest  
 grown, bequeathed in hope and trust.  
 I cannot tell if last be least or best.  
 Other hands will plant the seed I leave.  
 Tend it well for me in tenderness and love,  
 for this is what my garden is and what I give.

— Bet Briggs

## *Now For a Clerihew*

Young Arthur Conan Doyle  
 Sighed after months of toil,  
 “I wish Sherlock Holmes were dead,  
 I want to write historical novels instead.”

— Richard Milne

Vincent Van Gogh  
 Sliced his ear off  
 In a fit of depression  
 To make an impression.

— Dorothy Filshie

The snow continued the rest of the day, and all through the night. When Jim tried to open his front door the next morning he found a foot of snow blocking it. Down the street, in fact as far as he could see, the thick, white cover lay unbroken, its frozen top glistening in the cold morning sun. Even the plough-trucks had yet to venture out. It seemed everyone was waiting for someone else. Well, at least it had stopped.

Jim didn't even bother to close the half-open door, but merely turned and threw on his overcoat, boots, and hat.

"Lord helps those . . ." he said as he forced the door fully open. Knee-deep, he crunched and high-stepped his way to his buried car. The trunk was unlocked and the shovel retrieved.

Within minutes, a nice clear path was cut from car to door. Jim stood for a moment on his cleaned doorstep, looking away down the street at the gentle, rolling whiteness.

A window banged open. Next door, on the second floor, old man Gaston stuck his thin, bald head out into the chill

winter morning, looking about in disbelief. Gaping (dentures not in), he stared slack-jawed at the whiteness that spread out before him.

Despite appearances, the furnace was on (as evidenced by the absence of snow on the roof). The old man called out to Jim.

"Hey, young man!"

Jim raised a gloved hand in greeting. "'Mornin', Mr. G!"

"Use that shovel to get to my door," Gaston yelled back, his breath puffs of white, "An' you'll find ten bucks waitin' for ya!"

"I'm on my way!" Jim called back, laughing.

Within minutes, a pair of crispy Lincolns were slid into Jim's pocket.

He stood for a moment, leaning on his shovel, taking a breath in the icy air.

Then, as there was an awful lot of snow in front of an awful lot of houses, he put the shovel over his shoulder, and moved on down the line.

— Robert Tuohey

## Mary Bennet

20

I shall devote as little space as possible to the melancholy years after Mr Coates' departure. My memory of much of that time is in any case imperfect. The years when I was most seriously ill, my fourteenth and fifteenth years, are now almost a complete blank to me, and such memories as I do possess may not be accurate. The melancholia which afflicted me was accompanied by delusive sensations. I heard and saw things I now know could not possibly have happened.

That said, I shall return briefly to the winter of my thirteenth year — to the events which took place the week before Christmas and which, alas, I remember all too clearly. The first of these was the return of my four sisters to Longbourn — an event I had eagerly awaited but which proved a most bitter disappointment. They had been absent for exactly eleven weeks. I had

crossed off the days on the schoolroom almanack at Lucas Lodge, for Charlotte too had been looking forward to their return. But no sooner had we all sat down together in the Longbourn breakfast parlour than I saw — in the midst of the hubbub and present-giving and embraces — that I was not in the least necessary to the happiness of any of my sisters. I saw that the minds of the two eldest and two youngest were now so perfectly and exclusively attuned as to make them quite closed off to me. I saw, in short, that none of them gave three straws about me — that Jane's universal benevolence was a matter of course and counted for nothing.

For me, it was as blinding a revelation as ever that experienced by St Paul on the road to Damascus. I had hitherto believed that however much they might prefer each other's company, my sisters nevertheless loved me — that I dwelt at least in the suburbs of their affections. I now saw that I had been

mistaken. I recall sitting before the breakfast parlour fire, staring at Gil Pender's back — she was roasting chestnuts for us all — in a great terror lest some one of them should speak to me before I had sufficiently composed myself. And then Lydia had cried out: "Good lord! Only look at Mary. She has seen a ghost, I think."

Had I been able to go to my room that evening and pray and collect myself, all might yet have been well, but the bad weather had delayed the necessary roof repairs and I was obliged to share Elizabeth's bed-chamber, with all the attendant awkwardness such an arrangement entailed. My feelings of exclusion were not helped by our father's coming twice to the door whilst Elizabeth was unpacking — the first time to make her a present of a book (Madame d'Arblay's *Camilla*, for she was once again reading novels) and to tell her how much he had missed her; the second time to bid her goodnight and tell her again how he has missed her and how glad he was to have her home once more. (On this occasion, Elizabeth must have indicated my presence — my bed

was concealed behind a folding screen — for after a pause he had said with a sort of laugh: "Yes, to be sure. I had quite forgotten." Raising his voice then. "Good night to you, Mary.")

He had come a third time too — but it was to speak to me rather than Elizabeth. He informed me that he had received a letter from Mr Knowles in the morning's post which he had only that moment thought to open. "I am afraid you must prepare yourself for a disappointment, Mary. Mr Knowles writes that it will not be in his power to return to Longbourn until after Easter."

And upon my appearing from behind the screen clad only in my nightgown: "Come, child, 'tis not the end of the world. His mother wishes to go to Bath, that is all — but perhaps you would prefer to read it for yourself."

So saying, he had handed me the letter and left, and Elizabeth — seeing my distress — lit some work candles and bade me sit by the fire so that I might read in comfort, even placing a shawl about my shoulders before turning her attention again to her unpacking. The letter stated

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The personnel section of Devil Corp. was not busy; in fact, it contained but a single woman, blue-clad and neatly barricaded behind a solidly stacked desk. As Jim entered the silent, air-tight enclosure, the mechanized door spring hissing after him, the woman did not look up, but merely continued on assiduously filling-in whatever it what was she was filling-in.

"Excuse me," Jim said to the tight bronze bun bowed to the numbered boxes. The woman, expressionless, condescended to direct her eyes upward.

"I wonder if you have any openings —" he began, but before he could say anymore the woman was already shaking her manikin-like head.

It was quite obvious from her expression — she had no openings. Quite untouchable. Impregnable, one might say.

"I'm sorry, we're not hiring now," came the bland phrase. "You might try again in a

couple of months." She returned her attention to the empty boxes.

For a second, Jim considered asking for an application, if for the sole and sorry reason of "proof of appearance". He then rejected the idea: unemployment wasn't horseshoes and they weren't giving away a damn thing.

The cool nip had turned to a cold bite, and snow, in a steady drift, had begun to fall. Jim looked up through the white swirl, then down to the hard, black of the parking lot. The ground was just as cold; it was already sticking, beginning to pile up. How long would it last?

The sudden fall threw the town's traffic into a minor tangle. The thin-frame econo-models, as well as the all-engine sports jobs, spun and whirred. A few, in their hot impatience to get wherever they were getting to, managed to slide themselves off the road completely. Jim, however, simply kept his eyes wide open, a firm grip on the wheel, and let the tires do their work. Getting home was slow work, but he got there.

First was the rent and the car payment: his savings could handle those for a couple of months. But then he'd be flat broke. Next, 42 bucks wouldn't go very far in terms of a week's food and gas, but he figured he'd just have to skip a few meals and charge the fuel. About the electric and the phone . . . Well, Jim always kind of wondered how long you could go before Ma and Con cut you off.

The wind snapped at Jim's face as he unlocked the car. For the first time, he found himself considering the term "repossession". Though only two o'clock, the sky was dark, and the temperature dropping. Pulling the leads from his pocket, he frowned at the memory of the pencil-necked geek who'd pushed them across the desk at him.

Number one was Devon Corporation: "World famous manufacturer of fine paper products . . ." Jim snorted in derision, the cold air pluming white. Devon, everybody and their dog knew, churned out cheap toilet paper, and the only thing they were famous

for was treating their employees like crap.

Jim sighed at even the thought of working for Devil Corp. (as it was locally known). The rows and rows nondescript concrete buildings; the huge, circular water-treatment plants that stunk to high heaven and deep hell; and every fool in the joint droned-out in blue work clothes, heart covered by the devil's name and number.

A hard, cold wind rattled the tops of the bare trees, and Jim glanced up through the windshield at the cloudy sky. Yeah, it looked like it would get worse before better. Well, at least one problem was nailed down: a month back Jim had put on the snow-tires and even tossed a sturdy shovel into the truck for good measure. No, he wouldn't get stuck.

"Ok!" he said aloud, with resolution, as he shifted the car into gear, "time to pay the devil a visit."

Eyes on the road, Jim pulled out of unemployment.

merely that Mrs Knowles's rheumatism had worsened during the recent spell of cold weather and that the doctors advised a course of treatment in the warm baths together with plenty of rest, and — most important of all — the continuing companionship of her son.

My tears flowed in earnest then, and Elizabeth, to do her justice, did her best to console me, sitting beside me and taking my hand. "But Mary," said she presently. "You have been going on very well with Charlotte these last months, have you not? You have enjoyed taking your lessons with Maria?"

"'Tis not my lessons!" I was now utterly careless of what I said. "He is the only friend I have left — the only person who really cares about me."

"My dear Mary — you must know that that is not so."

And here she did a surprising thing — she actually kissed me on the forehead, whereupon I stared up at her open-mouthed, my tears dripping down so that I must have looked a comical sight. She got up then and moved back to her bureau and I

concluded that she wished to go on with her unpacking, but instead she took a handkerchief from the drawer and came back and handed it to me, saying: "Is there time for you to pay him a visit before he goes? Should you like me to apply to Papa?"

I thanked her, sniffing, and in a sudden rush of gratitude, said entirely the wrong thing: "I am sure that Mr Coates cared about *you* a great deal, Lizzy."

Her expression changed immediately — hauteur replacing affectionate concern. "We will not speak of him, if you please. He is to be forgot."

She had turned away from me then, but a moment later I glimpsed her face in the bureau glass. She was wearing her wild look — her mouth compressed and her eyes dark. For several minutes she went on with her unpacking before ringing the bell for Gil to take the boxes away. I kept my place at the fireside meanwhile, hoping that she would relent towards me. Instead, she took up her candle saying she must bid Jane good-night, and although I sat up for a further hour she did not return whilst ever I was awake.

But in the morning, there was no applying to Papa for permission to visit Mr Knowles. While we were dressing, an express came from London — my memory of this is preternaturally clear — and Hill, the new housekeeper, came running upstairs to tell us that she doubted not it was bad news for the master had shut himself away in his library. Jane and Elizabeth had run on ahead of me then — Elizabeth taking the stairs two at a time — and when I reached the library after them, the door was shut fast.

I knocked, and after what seemed a long time (I daresay it was no more than three or four minutes) the door was thrown open and Papa bade me enter. Elizabeth and Jane were the only ones present; they were standing beside Papa's desk reading a letter. Jane was weeping unashamedly. Papa told me then that little Susan Gardiner was no more; she had been knocked down by a carrier's cart outside her home in Gracechurch Street. The accident had happened shortly after five o'clock the previous evening when in defiance of the nurserymaid, Susan had run out onto the road to retrieve a ball. She had died some six hours later.

Elizabeth then handed me Uncle Gardiner's letter. It was brief — a dozen or so neatly written lines — with only the scrawled signature giving a clue to the perturbation of his mind. Susan had not appeared at first to be seriously injured, the apothecary had been confident there were no bones broken, but Aunt had remained anxious — Susan had continued to complain of a pain in her left side — and a physician had been appointed to conduct a second examination. Susan had died before he could attend her.

I could not straight away submit to God's judgment in all this. Susan was a most loveable, albeit wilful, little girl — impossible to believe that she would never again run off with my spectacles or open the lid of my pianoforte without my leave, or — as soon as Gil's back was turned — roll down the grassy bank behind Longbourn House in a clean white pinafore. After breakfast — a miserable meal attended only by Kitty, Lydia and myself — I returned to Elizabeth's room to pray for resignation. *Let the Almighty's will be done. God gives and God takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*

carefully contrived funeral-pallor atmosphere, invariably fulfills two conditions. First, this person will be unaware of the surreal reality governing the Employment Office (i.e., it is his or her first time out of work). Second, "dependents", as children are termed, will be waiting at home.

The authorities have studied these cases (everything is studied), and have found that, invariably, one of three conclusions will ensue. Most likely, the angered person will rapidly quiet down, settling into a kind of numbed stupor, staring dumbly at a "benefit" check that amounts not to one third of a normal week's pay (and that limited to X weeks). Second, a moderate number will be so incensed as to storm out of unemployment, yelling to all within earshot, that the mayor or their brother-in-law who works on the local newspaper will hear about this. Finally, a rather small, but growing, number will actually have the police called on them. These insistently naïve individuals are then charged with breach of peace, disorderly conduct, and so on, and then efficiently hauled off to the local jail

(under current social conditions, standing up for one's rights is no longer permitted in the "Land of the Free", as many have noted).

Jim, however, had no illusions. Although vaguely entertaining the notion that the government did do *something* for people, in his own experience he'd never known them to do anything but collect taxes, hand out speeding tickets, and occasionally pave the roads.

Well, all this being the case (and in government offices, everything is a "case"), Jim could only laugh when the sour-faced fellow behind the desk informed him, after three hours filled with as many multi-page forms, that his benefit would amount to a grand total of 42 dollars per week, for 15 weeks. Starting in two weeks. Minus tax.

As he walked out of unemployment, printed copy of "leads" in his shirt pocket (a list of three companies he knew damn well not to be hiring, but was obliged nonetheless to apply to in order to "qualify" for his benefit), Jim once again sized up his situation.

in 1935, with a loan from FDR. Two and a half generations had been proud to produce fine tools and make a decent living by it. Sure, there had been some tough times too, but quality, hard work, and guts had always won out.

But now? Well, people and quality were out, and machines and mediocrity were in.

He held out as long as he could. Maybe even longer. At last, there was nothing left to do but cut everybody a month's severance, type up letters of recommendation, and file for Chapter 11.

Jim and a few of the other fellows had tried at some of the new factories. Each time, however, they got the same song: 1) you were over-paid at you last job, 2) you're over-skilled for this work, and 3) we don't need any additional workers at this time, anyway. You might try in a couple of months, for the cleaning crew.

At 21, Jim already knew that life was mostly hard knocks. But at that age, your strength, and inexperience, provide optimism. Old man Mitchell, however, who could see more than

he wanted to say, had told everybody, "Apply for unemployment right away. 'Cuz ya never know, an' things don't look so good."

The darkly ironic aspect of what is commonly known as the unemployment office having the nerve to publicly term itself the "Employment Office" is generally lost on people who have hungry children or are about to be evicted, or both. Again, too, the stultifying quiet of the place is something only unconsciously perceived.

You seem to hold your breath as you wait, listening. Listening to the static buzz of the lights, to the scrap of the shoes against the floor as the endless lines shuffle forward, to murmured half-heard conversations, beside you or far-off behind blurred glass partitions, to the intermittent ring of telephones . . .

There is, however, the occasional outburst to perk things up. It will be noted (everything is noted) that the outraged individual creating this ruckus, this momentary blip on the screen of bureaucratic bliss, this gratuitous disturbance of the

Elizabeth had happened upon me while I was on my knees, and instead of immediately quitting the room out of respect for my devotions, she had begun opening and closing drawers, saying, "I beg your pardon, Mary, but could you defer your prayers for the present? Jane is to accompany Papa to London, and she is in urgent need of black gloves and ribbons and a great many other things. Could you not try for once to make yourself useful?"

I got to my feet, but before I could ask in what way I might be useful, she went on: "You will be thirteen soon, Mary. You are old enough to anticipate the needs of others — to offer help without being prompted. You know that our mother's nerves prevent her . . ." (Shutting a drawer with more than necessary force.) "You must know that everything falls upon poor Jane."

I was shocked that she could speak so to me — as if I were an unsatisfactory maidservant. "But I shall not turn thirteen until May," I reminded her. "And that is almost five months away."

She smiled then — one of her sudden smiles so like our father's — but as I failed to see what she could find amusing, I made to leave the room, saying: "I am afraid I have no black gloves or ribbons. But Jane is welcome to my black onyx cross — the one that Mama gave me to wear at the concert. It is in my trinket box."

She called after me then — to apologize perhaps — but I was determined not to stay to be bamboozled. I had done trusting Elizabeth.

Downstairs, everything was bustle and confusion. Mama had been thrown into hysterics when the news of Susan's death was broke to her, and those of the servants who were not engaged in soothing her with sal volatile or taking her tea and toast or chicken broth, were busy getting up mourning clothes for Jane and Papa. Gil Pender, red-eyed from weeping — Gil had been very attached to Susan — was cutting up black crepe to fasten around Papa's hat, and the younger of the two kitchen maids was running up and down the stairs with armfuls of freshly pressed linen for Jane to pack.

Kitty and Lydia meanwhile were waiting for Gil to take them to call upon the Lucases, and as there was no peace to be found at Longbourn and as I wanted very much to see Maria Lucas, I made up my mind to go with them. But even as I put on my pelisse, I felt guilty. I knew very well I should be helping. And as it turned out I was properly punished, for when we arrived at Lucas Lodge it was to find that the whole family had gone out, and on returning to Longbourn, I learnt that Mr Knowles and his mother had called during my absence. But there was a worse surprise in store. When I walked into Elizabeth's room I saw that a book had been placed atop my bureau. There was no mistaking the red leather cover, the gold scroll about the title. It was of course the first volume of *Renata*.

Elizabeth had followed me into the room — ostensibly to collect a black fur tippet for Jane to take to London. “Oh, Mary,” said she, her colour heightened. “I found that book when I was looking for your trinket box. How did you come by it, pray?” And when I did not immediately reply: “Did he — did Mr Coates make you a present of it?”

I could not help remarking: “You told me yesterday that Mr Coates was not to be spoken of. You told me that he was to be forgot.”

It must have galled her to be caught out in so flagrant an inconsistency, and she gave me a furious look before snatching up the tippet: “I am sure it cannot be a proper book for you to read.”

She had left then, banging the door behind her. And for the remainder of that day and for several days thereafter we hardly spoke. No doubt she hoped that I would offer her an explanation, but this I steadfastly refused to do. The book meantime remained where she had placed it — a reminder of our mutual mistrust.

The strain of sharing a bed-chamber now became intolerable. I was increasingly nervous about saying my prayers or reciting my nightly portion of scripture, fearful lest she find me on my knees. I cut short my devotions as a consequence, and yet I had never felt the need to commune with my Maker more urgently. I had expected her to remove to Jane's room after Jane

## Snow Job

A man needs to work. And this is not just a matter of survival. It's through this work that a man knows, or at least feels, that he's going somewhere. Now, when he arrives at that place — there is no “finally” — he may pause and take a breath or two — but then he just pushes on.

This, and maybe nothing more, is what it means to be a man.

Which brings us to Jim Hardson, who, like any man, just wanted to work. The problem, however, was simple: there was no work to be had.

Jim had, since graduating high school, worked in a small machine shop. But Mitchell's Tools, along with a lot of other small businesses, had been slowly squeezed out, or, better put, choked to death, by the big corporations that had moved in. The pattern was always pretty much the same: first, new orders slowed, then fell off sharply. In this lean period, an

unused warehouse might be closed, or an extra truck sold off. But it wouldn't be enough, and so the lay-offs would start.

These lay-offs would be thought of as temporary. In a few months, when things picked up again, everybody would be hired back. So you tried to stretch a dollar, and took whatever happened to come along. Even a couple of part-times, whatever.

But things didn't pick up, and small businesses went from the red into closure. And local people's lives went from bad to worse.

Old man Mitchell said he felt like a bum when he closed the place. He'd never been so ashamed in all his life as having to put 24 people out of work. And in winter, too. His own son, with two kids of his own, had been shop manager. Now, like the rest, out of a job.

The old man's paternal granddad had opened that shop

Eight maids a-milking,  
 Seven warts on women,  
 Six geezers laying,  
 Five golden rings,  
 Four calling birds,  
 Three French hens,  
 Two turtle doves,  
 And a cartridge in a pantry.

Yes, I know: are all the above genuine mistakes, or are they concocted? They all *claim* to be fair dinkum, but your guess is as good as mine.

After all, a mondegreen should be an unintentional mishearing rather than conscious word play. Nevertheless, the temptation to make an artificial mondegreen is sometimes too hard to resist. This is the sort of thing we looked at in our musical puns column in *Bikwil* Issue 18 (March 2000), where some examples might well be called premeditated mondegreens. A couple of my favourites:

Stompin' on the Saveloy

Shake My Gland — I've Got Strange-looking Parasites.

In a way, the mondegreen resembles the malapropism. As you will know, the malapropism is named after Mrs. Malaprop in

Richard Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals* (1775). She's the one who uttered immortal lines like

I have since laid Sir Anthony's preposition before her [proposition]

He is the very pine-apple of politeness! [pinnacle]

Sure, if I reprehend any thing in this world it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs! [apprehend, vernacular, arrangement, epithets]

It's worth keeping in mind that neither malapropisms nor mondegreens would be possible without one key factor.

I'm referring to the slurring of consonants so prevalent in spoken English, which is exaggerated by sound recording/broadcasting or one's distance from the person singing or speaking.

Hence what occurs when you're in the lounge-room, say, and someone calls out from the other end of the house. You catch the vowels, but mishear the consonants. Happens all the time at our place — senior moments galore.

— Harlish Goop

1. <http://www.write101.com/>

2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

3. <http://www.sfgate.com/columnists/carroll/mondegreens.shtml>

4. <http://www.fun-with-words.com/index.html>

5. <http://archiver.rootsweb.com/th/read/GENBRIT/2001-07/0993978908>

and Papa left for London, and when that did not happen, I offered to move myself.

“Why Mary,” said she in the cool arch tone she adopted whenever anything threatened vaguely to unsettle her: “I had no idea you found my company so oppressive. But have you forgotten that Charlotte Lucas is to come to us on Christmas night? She has kindly offered to help whilst ever Mama remains indisposed and will naturally wish to have her own apartment.”

She had turned back to her book then — to *Camilla* not *Renata* — putting an end to further discussion. But I was not prepared to continue in this way. And without much thinking what I was about, I went downstairs and put on my cloak and changed my shoes for thick boots and quit the house. Even though the light was fading, I had decided to set out for Lucas Lodge; there to pour out my troubles to Maria.

It was not snowing when I set out, although very soon afterwards a few flakes began to fall. But I did not regard it, and the cold in no way incommoded me. In my overheated state I even

found it exhilarating. The blessed relief of being alone! Of being able to recite the words of the twenty-third psalm as I walked along: *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . .* I spoke the words over and over, mindful of little beyond the reassuring steam of my own breath and the tears running down my face. Anybody passing would have thought me quite mad.

I still have no idea how it happened. Certain it was that I suddenly found myself to be nowhere near Lucas Lodge. I had all the time been walking in quite the opposite direction. I had taken one of the paths to Netherfield. And as far as I was able to make out — for the snow was by then falling fast — the house appeared to be occupied. But when they found me afterwards — chilled to the bone and still babbling of green pastures — they told me that it had been my imagination.

— Jennifer Paynter

## A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Have you ever misheard some of the lyrics of a song or poem? Perhaps as a child listening to nursery rhymes, biblical recitations or Christmas carols? Nothing to be ashamed of — almost everyone has had that experience, and most of us don't find out our error for years.

More to the point, did you know that there's a word for such a misheard lyric or spoken phrase? It's *mondegreen*.

I can hear your chorus now: "That's a helluva word. What's its origin? It's not in my dictionary." Well, it's not in my *OED2* either. Nor at AskOxford.com.

Why? Firstly: it goes back only to November 1954. Secondly: it's unlikely to be in any but a recent large dictionary or on the Internet (where "new" words are always proudly flaunted by those in the know). So here's the story, and for it I'm indebted to all such *cognoscenti* of neologisms — including Jennifer Stewart<sup>1</sup>, the mob at Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>, Jon Carroll at SfGate<sup>3</sup> and Daniel Austin and friends at Fun with Words<sup>4</sup>.

The term *mondegreen* is actually a coinage, almost certainly by

a writer named Sylvia Wright (1917-1981) in an American magazine article (*The Death of Lady Mondegreen*). There's some disagreement about her nationality, however: was she British or American? The magazine remains the subject of discussion, too: some say *The Atlantic*, other have it as *Harper's*.

As a young child, Sylvia had listened to an anonymous 17th century ballad *The Bonnie Earl o' Moray* (sometimes spelt *Murray*), which tells of the death of the disgraced but popular earl in 1592. Like many old ballads, it's very long — over 60 stanzas, but what concerns us here is the one line

They hae slain the Earl o' Moray  
and laid him on the green.

In *The Death of Lady Mondegreen*, Sylvia revealed that she had heard the line as

They hae slain the Earl o' Moray  
and Lady Mondegreen.

In adult life, Sylvia realised that this sort of error is quite common, and so in the article she suggested that a noun — *mondegreen* — be coined for all such mishearings. The name has stuck, so much so that we now have the series of

books by Gavin Edwards: (a) *'Scuse Me . . . While I Kiss This Guy (And Other Misheard Lyrics)*, (b) *He's Got the Whole World in His Pants (And More Misheard Lyrics)*, (c) *When a Man Loves a Walnut (And Even More Misheard Lyrics)*, (d) *Deck the Halls With Buddy Holly (And Other Misheard Christmas Lyrics)*.

Here are some examples of pop music mondegreens reported on the Internet.

First, the line

Waterloo, Couldn't escape if I  
wanted to [Abba]

has been mistaken for

Portaloo, Couldn't escape if I  
wanted to,

while

Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, Peggy  
Sue [Buddy Holly]

has been misinterpreted as

Britches, britches, britches,  
britches, Baggy Sue,

and the words

I am a rock, I am an island [Simon  
and Garfunkel]

have been understood as

I am a rock, I am an onion.

Finally, the phrase

Constant craving [k.d. lang]

has been variously misheard as:

Can't stand gravy,  
Constant gravy,  
Constipated,  
Cross dress craving,  
God said gravy,  
God send gravy.

Mind you, mondegreening isn't confined to popular songs:

Have you got a CD with *Bronze Lullaby* on it? It's classical, I think.

A little further afield, many a bookseller or librarian has had to stifle a giggle when asked by a schoolkid something like

Have you got a copy of the Charles Darwin classic *Oranges and Peaches*?<sup>5</sup>

American readers should remember this recitation:

I pledge a lesion to the flag, of the  
United State of America, and to the  
republic for Richard Stans . . .

or perhaps in this form:

I led the pigeons to the flag . . .

Here are some Christmas mondegreens:

Get dressed ye married gentlemen,  
Let nothing through this May,

Good King Wences' car backed out  
On the feet of heathens.

On the twelfth day of Christmas,  
My tulip sent to me:  
Twelve drummers drumming,  
Eleven pipers piping,  
Ten lawyers leaving,  
Nine lazy Hansons,