

# Nothing, Sweet Nothings

*By Philip Goddard*

(May 1982)

## 1. In the Beginning Was the Pussy

Rodney fondled his Pussy. Pussy was gently purring in his lap and harmlessly clawing his thighs, the way pussies will when they're purring in your lap. Irrational and stupid, maybe, but that's how pussies are, thought Rodney for the umpteenth-thousandth time. Fickle, unintelligent and incomprehensible — that was the beauty of pussies.

A final reading from the Bible droned out from the Thanksgiving Service on the television.

Thanksgiving for what? Rodney vacantly wondered.

"In the Beginning was the End. And the End was with God. And the End was God..."

A late newflash appeared, interrupting the programme: "We have had an unconfirmed report that Crussia has just put the first-ever human-made satellite in orbit. The same report states that the satellite has been named 'Snutpik'. If this report is confirmed it will mark a truly historic event, and the beginning of the Space Age."

Something inside Rodney giggled. So the Crussians had put up a Snotpick, for the world to admire. So that was it. The Thanksgiving was to say to Him, Her, or Whatever, 'Thank you for sweet snottings'!

It, inside Rodney, giggled again.

"And you, Pussy? What would I do without you?"

The Service resumed. "In the Beginning was the End. And the End was with God. And the End was God..." And so it went on, followed by the final Hymn, Blessing and curtain music.

The Service now over, a short poetry reading by a new cult poet filled the interval before the next main programme. To keep viewers watching, the screen alternated between inane electronic doodles and grotesque close-ups of the reader's mouth and snotty nose.

## **THE WORD**

*I see an old woman  
who will die lonely.  
She has the Word,  
Always, hopefully, repeated.  
I, too, have the Word.  
Which speaks of things which could be  
Or could have been.  
Of unspoken splendours quietly hinted.  
Of a togetherness denied  
by past and present alike.  
With the Word I reach out.  
The next street, the next town;  
The sea, the planets;  
Stars even beyond our telescopic sights.  
Emptiness after emptiness,  
Yet always the Word.  
In the Beginning was the Word.  
And the Word was  
'Somewhere'...  
I see an old woman...*

The visuals evidently hadn't worked too well for Rodney, for he still perceived these baffling lines as 'rather deep'. And what would the Archbishop of Lanternbury say to such a heretical misquote of the Bible? 'In the Beginning was the Word', indeed!

"And you, Pussy? What have you to say to that? Oh, what a lucky Pussy! You have me and I have you, so we don't have to worry our lives with any of that at all!"

Now it was news-time proper. There followed the usual catalogue of terrorism, crime, protests and disasters, except there was something a little different this time. The stony-faced newsreader continued with an item about a peace demonstration held by members of the two warring factions in the blood-soaked land of Northern Briarland.

“The leaders of this visionary demonstration claim that their wildest hopes were realized. In their thousands people from the two factions mingled, embracing one another, many kissing and openly crying.”

A slight flicker at the corner of one of the newsreader’s eyes caught Rodney’s attention. Not a tear, surely? It became difficult for the newsreader to continue, for he was obviously starting to sob, though looking most embarrassed and trying hard to compose his normally stony countenance. Pictures were shown of people of all ages hugging together, laughing and crying.

A different reader finished the News in duly stony fashion.

It was now supper time. “It’s time for your Pussy Whiskers, your very own favourite! What a lucky Pussy you are!”

After they had both eaten, Rodney visited ‘another room’ to have a good carp. In this particular smallish room there was a hole in the floor, from which steam, fumes and sometimes even hot ash periodically emerged with all manner of rumblings, hissings, and exploding noises deep down inside. A Ventair fan had been fitted for use when a lot of fumes were emerging. In fact Rodney always switched the Ventair on when he was doing his ‘business’ into that hole, for the smell of burning human waste was appalling. He could just remember a time when there was a white porcelain bowl, with a hinged lid and water pipes. One day he’d come in and found just this angry, temperamental hole into which presumably the bowl had fallen.

How far did the hole go down? There was no telling, for probing seemed too dangerous, when the hole could spit pieces of red-hot material and hissing clouds of choking fumes at any time. Sometimes a red glow was visible deep down when the hole was more active. The ejected material cooled to blackish, porous lumps rather like clinker. Once there had been a good soft crapet covering the floor around the bowl, but after ‘The Fall’, holes were quickly burned in the crapet by the ejected lumps while they were still red-hot. Eventually Rodney had tipped the tatty remains of it into the hole, the bare floor being easier to sweep.

Pussy snuggled into bed with Rodney. They slept together. *Now, this is what life is really about*, thought Rodney for the umpteenth-thousandth time.

## 2. *That Word* And Other Apparitions

Pussy was purring in Rodney's lap as he fondled her. A science programme on the television was giving an up-to-the-minute report on our latest space expedition, which was to observe at close quarters a special kind of black hole known as a naked singularity. The discovery of a naked singularity had caused both interest and deep concern, for it had been theoretically reasoned that such an object must lead to a breakdown of the order and physical laws of the Universe as currently understood. This was because its intense gravitational field would distort and disrupt the space-time continuum generally considered to be the fabric of the Universe: the distinction of past, present and future, as we know it, would break down and chaos could ultimately reign.

The astronauts were heavily protected against intense lethal radiations, and were allowed only a brief glimpse of the object through special shields.

"The shutter is now being withdrawn, so let's hear from the astronauts themselves."

An uneasy pause followed as the two heavily-shielded and helmeted figures fiddled with controls, looking at a small blank panel. Suddenly it turned into something for which words don't exist; the astronauts' screams were by far the most electrifying Rodney had ever heard, far outclassing those of the victims in the regular torture programmes. The screen blanked-out for a moment, followed by the next item in the programme, which presented evidence that the Earth may actually be round, revolving around and around the Sun.

"What will the Pope say to that? For that matter, what would he say about you? Are you a sinful Pussy?", crooned Rodney.

Lethargically he got up out of the chair and gazed out of the window. A terrace of houses stood opposite, joining on to a parade of shops to the left. The shopkeepers were competing with each other for the most eye-catching use of their names on their shop fronts. For example a little way down there was Pukey & Ransett, the local dairy products shop. Nearer was the butcher, a Mr Salt. Somebody who didn't like him had put up a board outside the shop, saying 'SALT THE BUTCHER!'. Mr Salt thought it funny and had replaced the original board with a posh-looking neon display saying the same thing. His neighbour — the nearest of the shops — sold bathroom fittings and gave a general plumbing service. Now Mr Callaway had replaced the wording 'BATHS UNLIMITED' with 'CALLAWAY THE PLUMBER'.

At the house opposite, Hieronymus Bate was returning home, thoroughly drunk. He was currently most aggrieved, for he'd been sacked from his job by Mr Callaway, allegedly for exceeding his duty and fumbling a few one-eyed trouser-snakes as well as the water pipes he was supposed to be helping to mend.

Rodney switched the Teletext on for the newspaper headlines. The Bum led all the rubbish papers in splashing great headlines: "NEWSREADER BREAKS DOWN"; "UNSOOUND MIND? — SPECIAL BUM PROBE"; "BBC SCANDAL"; "NO PLACE FOR SOFT HEADS" — and so on.

"Well, you're soft, Pussy. Is your mind unsound? If you've got a mind, I mean."

Rodney continued fondling Pussy as she purred and harmlessly clawed his thighs, the way pussies will when they're purring in your lap. Presently he visited a back room and looked out of the window. Workmen were just starting to lay the bricks on the building site. It seemed to have taken ages to reach this stage, and the crane was almost as familiar a sight as his navel.

'WARNING: DO NOT PROCEED WHEN CRANE PASSING OVERHEAD', announced the bold red-lettered notice in the adjoining road. A little plume of fumes blew up through a crack in the road, with a deep vibrating thump and rumbling grating noise somewhere below the house. Rodney hastened to 'another room' to switch the Ventair on, for undoubtedly fumes would be issuing there.

In his haste he tripped and almost fell over a bone. With the Ventair now purring away he returned to his find, and put the bone of contention carefully into a sack of other bones in yet another room.

He found bones periodically. When he'd collected enough he would pay a visit to one of his most remote and secret places: the room of the purple shroud.

On his way back to the living room he nearly tripped on another long bone. There were a few others, mostly small, scattered around the doormat. It was time he found a skull: that just about completed the set. He looked in the larder. Sure enough, right in the middle of the larder floor was the calcareous, fossilized grin of a deliciously toothy skull. Undoubtedly this was a bumper breeding season for *Necrophorus gigantissimus*, the awesomely large burying beetles that disposed of the soft parts with such aplomb. Rodney was looking forward to his visit to the room of the purple shroud.

Back in the living room, he was fondling Pussy, watching the television. A play was showing. A character appeared who was unlike the others or anyone else.

“Pussy — not that you’d understand — look! A man with a straight back! No hump!”

Even before Rodney could take in such a weird apparition, the screen went blank and a solemn announcer came on with a prepared statement. “We apologise for the fact that this play has evidently been written and produced by a group of mentally deranged people subject to certain paranoid delusions. We wish to reassure viewers that all possible measures are taken to screen out material produced by such people, and to help them towards normality. Inevitably very occasionally something slips through, and we are sorry about any distress caused by what appeared in the last few minutes. The Controller of the BBC has announced that the people responsible are now undergoing treatment.”

Rodney felt his hump and lateral bends, as if to remind himself that he was normal. True, there was a little secret elsewhere in the house....

It was becoming prematurely darker outside. Mrs Muttob was hurrying with her shopping, then trying to run. Mr Gleeblob, next door, was quickly putting away his gardening tools, then he dashed inside, slamming and locking the door, closing windows and drawing the curtains.

“Look, Pussy, it’s the grey snow again! Maybe we’ll see some skeletons in the road when the cloud clears.”

After an hour or two it gradually brightened and a jaundiced sun began weakly to show through. On the thin layer of grey dust covering the pavement, the flesh was still falling off a prostrate human skeleton. Quite a normal, humped and crooked skeleton, of course, unlike....

News-time on the television. It was Mr Stony-face again. Actually his name was Tom Dickenharry. “Questions have been asked in Parliament about the soundness of mind of the BBC newsreader Tom Dickenharry, following his breaking down during a news programme yesterday. The Controller of the BBC has announced that a full investigation is under way, but as yet we do not know how significant any mental derangement may be.”

Tom Dickenharry continued the commentary, as stony-faced as ever, showing interviews with people in the street, and with his colleagues at the BBC, obtaining opinions and comments about his possible weakness of mind.

“There were incredible scenes this morning as Mrs Dickenharry was besieged by reporters as she left her house.”

The scene was shown: “Mrs Dickenharry, how do you feel now that...”, a dozen reporters were all shouting at her in a jostling bedlam of voices.

She was doing her best to keep walking fast, pushing aside the crowd of reporters. You could just hear “Shut up and leave me alone!” and “Get stuffed!”, as they thrust their microphones at her.

“Our reporter, Belinda Smirch, is now waiting in the shopping precinct, outside the public convenience near Sainsbury’s: Mrs Dickenharry is about to reappear. Over to you, Belinda.”

As Mrs Dickenharry emerged from the toilet, reporters popped up from everywhere, once more besieging her. “Mrs Dickenharry, why won’t you answer our questions?” “Mrs Dickenharry, what do you think of your husband’s...” — the words becoming lost in the shouted jumble; the reporters poked microphones at her again.

She spat on the one just in front of her mouth, and replied loudly, for everybody to hear, “For the last time, leave me alone, and excuse me, sir, but are you a squedd—”

At this point both screen and sound blanked-out for about ten seconds. Without a doubt she had said ‘squeddle’! Enough of the word had slipped through for anyone to realize what she’d said. What would happen now? On came a dark-suited announcer of solemn bearing, with a grave voice. “The Controller of the BBC has issued the following statement. ‘We apologise to viewers for the embarrassment and distress caused by our inadvertent broadcast of an obscene word during a live relay in our news programme. I am sure you will appreciate that this is a hazard intrinsic in live broadcasting, so it will always be with us. In fact we do have a four-second delay system, with vetting of the material before it is broadcast. Unfortunately, on this occasion the vet was otherwise occupied, dealing with a dirty dog at the unseemly instant. Additional measures will now be taken to ensure that this unfortunate lapse is not repeated.’”

The rest of the news programme was spent with a blank screen and solemn music.

“It’s time for your Pussy-Whiskers, your very own favourite. What a lucky pussy you are! Second thoughts, there’s an extra-special treat: we now have a large brain in the fridge. I’ll share some of it with you. There, what a lucky pussy you are!”

“I feel energetic!”, exclaimed Rodney: “Let’s do something this evening.”

So, after eating, they settled back to watch the television.

First there was a report on the AGM of the RSPCA, with the usual demonstrations, counter-demonstrations and fighting between factions. At one point a section of the assembled membership held up great posters showing pictures of a strange animal, at the same time chanting in unison "We demand freedom for the Straight-backed Bastard! Freedom for the Straight-backed Bastard! They're dying in their thousands to maintain your standard of living, dear Viewers! You're stained with their blood! It's genocide!"

The TV cameras zoomed in to show full detail of the animal pictures on the posters. "How many real humans have died today, so that you can watch the telly with your hump?"

As they shouted out this last, by some sleight-of-hand they changed the photos on the posters to pictures of real people with straight backs and no humps. Even their arms and legs were straight (apart, of course, from the joints)! Predictably the sound and vision stopped, followed by the usual announcement, which Rodney knew well by heart now.

Obviously this was part of a very effective conspiracy by these mentally deranged people, somehow to subvert or unbalance the whole population. Soon they would be causing interruption or premature termination of all television programmes. Anyway, who did they think they were going to convince of what? Of course people didn't have straight backbones or limb bones: everybody knew that. Except, of course, there was....

The RSPCA report now over, a short poetry reading by a new cult poet filled the interval before the next main programme. The screen showed extreme close-ups of the sumptuous bogey sitting in the poet's left nostril, to entertain the viewers as he theatrically delivered one of his apocalyptic visions.

***"THERE'S NOTHING TO BE FRIGHTENED OF"***

*Upstairs parents' bedroom in silent, waiting, wartime night;*

*I'm a little baby sitting on Mummy's knee of rigid fright.*

*Blackout windows, darkness outside;*

*Darkness also inside in spite of the light,*

*and I hear IT's started coming up the stairs.*

*Stern threats of huge warning silence outside*

*And solid terror creeping visible darkness all around up here,  
and it's coming up the stairs.  
Nothing outside that blackout but the silence and the warnings  
absolutely nothing  
There's not much up here either but a half-existent Mummy holding me  
on her rigid knee  
and sometimes utter icy reassurance of still greater fear—(it's coming up  
the stairs)  
and the sproses and the sprouses  
and still more impossible forms of twilight frozen menace  
Just waiting to come out when Mummy puts me down.  
It's coming up the stairs and I wish there was more light.  
Perhaps it's safer with back to the wall,  
But now I'm held by Mummy's rigid ice of creeping twilight  
and it's coming up the stairs.  
TEMPESTUOUS PANIC AS DOOR BURST OPEN  
and Daddy rush in, eyes wild with fearful scenes and worse!  
His back to loud-slammed door, quick!  
QUICK! It's coming up the stairs! QUICK! QUICK!  
IMPOSSIBLE cataclysm of streaking twilight  
and screaming eyes as DOOR BURST OPEN ABSOLUTE  
AND*

"I always said that drurb's a bogey-man", quipped Rodney as the left nostril faded from the screen.

Rodney's giggle faded too. He and Pussy were supposedly the only occupants of the house. Yet as well as the occasional subterranean rumblings and concussions he could now hear the unmistakable sound of footsteps creaking down the stairs, accompanied by a woman's moan. A weird sort of tingling filled Rodney's body as his hair stood on end. It felt as though the air were now solid; he couldn't move. This would be Crawlia Stuffins again, he thought. Pussy's back was arched, her hair standing on end, she growling and hissing as she intensely, wildly gazed at the door.

Stealthily at first, the door started opening, then something hard knocked it right open, and a tea tray with silver tea service, cup, and plate of sandwiches, entered as though carried by somebody. The

nothing placed it carefully on the coffee table, then pulled up a chair and started sipping tea and eating a sandwich.

It was by no means the first time this had happened. Indeed Rodney already knew Crawlia Stuffins affectionately as Nanny Crawlia – a name that had a funny, appealing sort of ring about it. He wondered where the silver tea service and the sandwiches had come from; not the larder or kitchen, he was quite sure. Presently Crawlia would get up and take the tray away to some mystery destination upstairs, again with a woman's moan.

Despite his seeming paralysis, Rodney thought the sandwiches looked good, and, knowing that, if true to previous experience, Nanny Crawlia would eat only two of the six, he started moving towards the coffee table. It felt as though he were swimming his way through an elastic thick treacle, but nonetheless he made progress. Meanwhile Pussy continued to growl and tremble underneath the television.

He was going to grab suddenly at a sandwich, but it didn't quite work that way, for not only was he pushing through thick elastic treacle, but also he had to reach out much further than first appeared, just as in a dream. With a final thrust he managed to catch hold of a sandwich, pulled it up to his mouth and took a bite.

At that instant the air became violent, a tempestuous whirlwind of nothing. The cup from which the nothing was sipping crashed down on the tray, which shot out of the room with a piercing woman's scream receding up the stairs. A little surprised, Rodney looked at what he still held in lieu of the sandwich: a huge live black-and-orange burying beetle, of the kind he occasionally met in the more remote parts of the house. Undoubtedly *Necrophorus gigantissimus*. A bite had been taken out of it.

After Rodney's return from 'another room', Pussy was once more purring in his lap in front of the television. They were watching a science programme in which scientists described preparations to launch the first-ever close encounter with a type of black hole known as a naked singularity. The journey would take some thousand years, so that the astronauts would have to be frozen down for most of the time.

The programme continued with a visit to the parasitology laboratories at the National Institute for Incredible Research, at Mole Hole, N.W. London. Inevitably the blood-sucking bugs caught Rodney's attention. Not the endemic weeny bed bugs that infested their animal breeding units, but the great big ones that scuttled like cockroaches. The camera turned its gaze on a collection of the bugs feeding on a human hand. They were flat and leaf-like to start with.

Each extended a long proboscis and placed the tip on (presumably into) the skin. Slowly the bugs became bloated, and a light was shone on them to show the dark red translucence of their bulging abdomens. One bug was cheeky enough to be feeding from the bloated body of another that was feeding off the hand. What really amused Rodney was the name of the bugs: they belonged to the genus *Rhodnius*, which they pronounced 'Rodneyus'. How flattering!

The camera view slowly zoomed out, showing more and more of the bugs, all feeding on a naked human — with a straight back, no hump, and straight arms and legs! Sound and vision stopped. Solemn announcer. "We apologise to viewers..."

There followed a feature entitled 'Ghosts I have seen', which seemed to be mostly about ones that people had *not* seen, and followed a largely predictable course. There was Swirley Bogg, the nothing that flushed people's lavatories in the small of the night in the remote Somerset village of West Bogborough. A butcher described a fright he'd had with a poultrygeist while chopping a large turkey in his cold room at the end of Mutton Road, in the not-so-remote town of St Albans. Mr and Mrs Cheeping next door described an occasion when a nothing clomped noisily up their stairs and vanished, succeeding in scaring the cat so much that it stayed trembling under the shed till noon the following day.

Still in St Albans, the famous organist Lillian Weird talked of the whisperings, mutterings and rustlings in an empty St Albans Abbey at two o'clock in the morning, following her rendering of one of Messiaen's roaring dark monsters on the organ. Mrs Grislier Killing described a blurred whitish column that sometimes appeared in a house in Spookey Hill, Guildford. There was a live broadcast from Lower Fottop, which had a house claimed to be very haunted. The ghost there was known locally as Jude the Nude, for reasons that were not gone into. Of course, what appeared and so much terrorized the occupants turned out to be an apparition of a stark naked person with a straight back and no hump. Blank screen. The traditional bland apology. End of programme. A moan from somewhere upstairs, with creaking of a floorboard

The following morning's newspaper headlines on the Teletext were all gunning for Mrs Dickenharry.

The Bum said 'WIPE YOURSELF, MADAM, AND COME CLEAN (Today's tits P.3)'

The Daily Scar: 'WHAT MONSTER BROUGHT THIS ONE UP? — DISGUSTING!'

The Daily Midden: 'CALL THAT LIBERATION? DON'T BOTHER ABOUT HER BRA — BURN HER!'

And the Daily Rail: '*THAT WORD* — YOU KNOW WHAT SHE IS!'

Rodney crooned away to Pussy: "I don't have to worry about those things, do I! I've got you, my very own Pussy. You silly softy good-for-nothing! What would I do without you?"

Pussy purred.

### 3. From Under the Purple Shroud

Two months passed particularly uneventfully, for there was no movement to see out of the windows now that everybody was staying indoors for the mandatory two months following the passage of the dust cloud.

Perhaps during this time the satanic gnashings below the house were becoming a little stronger and more frequent. Additional small fissures and holes had appeared in gardens and roadways, issuing fumes and sometimes loudly ejecting lumps of solid. Occasionally the disturbances amounted to earth tremors rather than just noise, shaking the house.

Of course Rodney made his pilgrimage to the room of the purple shroud, carrying his sack of bones. On his way, in one of the darker passages a great black-and-orange burying beetle was lolloping along the floor, seeking corners or things unknown. Rodney was reminded of a brown juice, a certain flavour, and a hasty visit to 'another room', about a month ago. Thank you for sweet nothings, Crawlia Stuffs!

The going became difficult — like that elastic thick treacle again. Even though Pussy went everywhere with him, in this most secret and remote of places his companion was somehow almost nonexistent.

He gently put down the sack in the middle of the dimly lit room. Having spread the bones out on the floor he put them together. It didn't take long, really, for he was quite practised by now. With the aid of string and adhesive he reconstructed a fine skeleton. He had been right: he had collected the complete set. His heart warmed to see this fruit of his labours, which he now stood back from and admired. Finally, at the

far end of the room, he ceremoniously lifted the purple shroud. Another large burying beetle fell out and scurried back underneath everything.

Goodness, there were *six* now! Rodney knew for a fact that the last one he'd put there was No.5. Well, what a bonus to find!

Carefully, he lifted out No.6 and put it on the floor next to the new one, then took out each of the others, laying them out in order. Standing back and admiring the beauty of his collection of human skeletons (or, indeed, could you really call them human?), he felt that little thrill he always felt at their grotesquely exquisite bilateral symmetry; at the unthinkable straightness of the limb bones and backbones, without the slightest trace of a lumbar hump.

Glowing with satisfaction, he re-stacked the collection and replaced the purple shroud, while somewhere far below, 'another room' was having one of its fits of explosive sulphurous coughing, and somewhere else a floorboard creaked.

As Rodney returned to more familiar territory, Pussy became absorbingly real once more. She purred and rubbed against his legs.

## 4. On the Horrors of Strange Men, Rhubarb and Budding Intellectuals

It started, as most do, with vague jumbled images. Throughout, Rodney was a small boy. Mummy was trying to coerce him into eating semolina pudding, which nauseated him. "It'll make your hair curl", she taunted. Then he was in church, taken there against his will by Mummy; the Vicar was preaching about helping people and being very 'good'. Rodney didn't like the Vicar, with his silly, artificial way of speaking. In fact it seemed that nobody in the church was very nice: they never did the good things they talked about in church, except as little token gestures.

Another image was — surprise, surprise! — an apparition of a straight-backed man, without a hump, in the street. Rodney was sure the man needed help and friendship, and started to reach out to him, only to be dragged away by a frantically yelling (and smacking) Mummy.

A clearer picture emerged. It was the Church Fête. Rodney hadn't wanted to go, but had no choice, for Mummy was going to make sure that he had no further opportunity to encounter 'strange men'. Of course that horrible Vicar was there.

An hour after the fête opened, an 'official opening' took place, during which several 'important' people made speeches. There was Madame LePet, as always with her two poodles called Oui-oui and Pou-pou respectively (French pronunciation). 'LePet' and 'Pou-pou', of course, had rather interesting meanings as French names. She wore a great hat like a gigantic pink bird's nest full of ribbon bows and artificial flowers. Her voice and speech were quite as hideous and incomprehensible as that hat.

Rodney sighed with relief as she finished her speech and trod in Oui-oui's fresh poo-poo, while all the grown-ups looked around and pretended they'd not seen anything. "Shh, Darling", curtly whispered Mummy, hearing a quiet giggle from Rodney.

"There goes Madame and her also-stanks! Or perhaps we should call them her private farts!", tittered a podgy old gentleman, seemingly a little drunk.

To which another added "It shouldn't be allowed, people showing their private farts in public."

While everyone was busy pretending they hadn't heard those private remarks, Professor Sir Raphael Loudbottom — bore of bores — rose at the front to make a speech. He went on and on in a very learned tone, using long words and sounding for all the world as though his mouth were half-full of semolina pudding. Rodney thought perhaps he might be easier to understand if he spoke out of his bottom — especially as he had a loud one. Actually the only person who spoke from the bottom this time was Mummy, and she glared at the woman next to her, pretending that that woman had done it. "SHHH, Darling", curtly whispered Mummy again, hearing another quiet giggle from Rodney.

Finally, Lady Miriam Horsefart made a great performance of what she called 'unveiling' a memorial plaque. What a lot of words and silly acting, when all she actually did was to pull aside a silly little curtain that Mr and Mrs Sheepdip had put up that morning just for her to pull aside. The memorial was to the previous Vicar, whose main good deeds, it seemed, were inviting the Horsefarts to his occasional garden parties and dying at 65. Rodney hoped the worms and burying beetles were duly grateful for that gift from God.

There was actually one event in the fête that Rodney enjoyed. Supposedly commemorating a bloody event in Briarland some centuries

ago, it was called the Battle of the Boing — a competition to see who could produce the best ‘boing’ in the opinion of a panel of posh-looking but rather drunk judges. It was won in a blaze of glorious prewdity by Mr Prewd on a Victorian bathtub. An atmosphere of embarrassment spread among the crowd, for there were rumours that Mr Prewd was in fact a wigamist — something that all the grown-ups talked about in hushed whispers and then pretended they hadn’t talked about. Grown-ups do behave in such complicated ways!

Mrs Violet Withering-Glance quickly finished the embarrassing business of the prizegiving to make way for the ‘Boing’ procession. In this all the ‘Boing’ contestants paraded around and around the fête ground making a great din with all their different boings. The procession seemed to be full of Prewds.

At the end of the fête Mummy proudly announced “I’ve got a little surprise for you, Darling.” Rodney hoped it was a pleasant one.

It wasn’t. Madame LePet, Professor Sir Raphael Loudbottom, Lady Miriam Horsefart, and of course that Vicar, were all to come back with them for supper. Ugh!

A shock awaited Mummy when they arrived home. A small congregation of policemen was hanging around outside their house, some of them going in and out of it. The Police had raided the upstairs flat as part of an operation against an international gang of rhubarb smugglers.

As the bewildered group entered the house they saw a policeman standing at the top of the stairs, crying. Apparently he had found people in the upstairs flat committing rhubarbism, a crime hideous beyond description. Mummy was most distraught: “What will the neighbours think?”, she kept on whining.

“But Mummy, it’s all right, isn’t it? You haven’t committed rhu —”  
“DARLING! Don’t say that word!”, she cut in urgently.

Gradually Mummy and the four other grown-ups calmed down and pretended there weren’t policemen tramping all over the place. The table was already set out, and the six sat down and started eating. Mummy made sure that Rodney sat next to her, facing the Vicar, for that would be ‘good for him’.

Hopefully good for the Vicar, thought Rodney.

For some while it went quite reasonably, for all the grown-ups were talking together and ignoring Rodney completely. Boring, certainly, but not much worse. Conversations ranged from wondrous things in the Bible and the honourable pronouncements of Rabshaketh,

to the deeds of the little Horsefarts and the role of the Good Samaritan in 17th Century French boudoir literature.

Trouble was to come once Mummy had brought in the great bowl of dessert. Coo, it looked quite nice, even if rather silly. Whatever it was, it was covered with all sorts of coloured decorations.

"Ohhh, how lovely! Really, Mrs Squotpot, you shouldn't have!", declared an untidy unison of grown-ups' voices.

Mummy cut through the decorations with her serving spoon — into a great whitish cesspit of SEMOLINA pudding. Rodney's eyes pricked with tears and his stomach trembled. The cruellest person on earth had done it again.

"Lancashire squotpot!", bitterly exclaimed Rodney.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!", savagely snapped Mummy.

"Thank you, Mrs Squotpot! Oh, I say!", each visitor exclaimed reverently in turn.

"I've had enough: can I get up now?", whimpered a squirming Rodney.

"I've told you before, this is good for you, and I've made it specially for you. There you are, now eat it up."

She turned to the visitors and put on a silly voice: "I keep telling him it'll make his hair curl, but he still won't believe me!"

Rodney prodded and dabbled with the semolina, putting off the evil moment of eating it. The Vicar started talking to him in a slimy, cooey voice that made his back creep: "How old are you, little laddie?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me how old you are."

"DARLING! Don't speak to grown-ups like that!" And Mummy continued in a harsh whisper: "It's rude to ask grown-ups their age. Never do it again! You're behaving very badly and making me quite ashamed of you. Now come on and eat up: I'm not having all this performance in front of visitors!"

Watched by all the grown-ups, Rodney was silent for a few seconds, then his eyes brightened and he let out a little giggle. Rather a naughty one, Mummy thought. The Professor, his mouth three-quarters-full of semolina this time, spoke: "Now I wonder what makes the young Master Squotpot laugh. Perhaps he would like to share his thoughts with us in these difficult times!"

Rodney giggled slightly again, then ventured, a little too boldly for Mummy's liking, "It's just a little story I'm going to write."

The Professor waffled on: "He's going to write a story! So we have a budding young author in our midst!"

All the grown-ups cooed at that and made Rodney's back creep some more. The Professor continued: "Well, is the young Master Squotpot going to write a true story or a fictitious one, or what sort will it be, I wonder!"

"I don't know yet. You see, if it happens it'll be a true story, but I won't know if it's true until I know if it's happened."

"May the Lord save us!", exclaimed Lady Horsefart, "I do believe we have a budding intellectual in the house!"

"Quel horreur!", gasped Madame in mock alarm.

"Well?", the Vicar slimily chipped in, "What's the story to be called, then, little laddie?"

Rodney giggled, then hesitated. Boldly, he announced: "It's to be called 'Semolina meets the Vicar'."

The visitors roared and screeched with laughter. Mummy wasn't amused. Rodney hadn't said anything exactly naughty that she could tell him off about, yet it seemed that he was being naughtier than he'd ever been before: for the first time ever she was sensing a hint of open rebellion in the air. Oh dear, if only the visitors realized and would stop encouraging him!

Rodney turned to Madame: "Are your Oui-oui and Pou-pou always so funny and little? Do you always leave your Oui-oui and Pou-pou under the table at mealtimes? I'd be told off and smacked if I left mine there. I leave my wee-wee and poo-poo in the—"

"RODNEY! All right, all right, now hurry up, Darling, and eat that. I'm not letting you get up till it's finished."

She turned to the visitors: "I'm awfully sorry he's behaving so badly today. I think he'll calm down if you don't pay any more attention to him. Now, Lady Horsefart, you will have some more, won't you."

While Mummy was dealing with the four visitors, at last Rodney stealthily commenced on the semolina. The Vicar was pestering him in his hideous, slimy way: "Now, you are being such a good little boy: your mummy will be so proud if you're always so good! You know, good little boys grow up into good, happy men, who go to Heaven when the Judgement comes. There's a good little laddie."

It was a little late by the time the Vicar realized that Rodney wasn't swallowing the semolina but merely filling his mouth very full with it.

"BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBTHH!" With a tremendous raspberry noise, Rodney sprayed the Vicar all over with globs of sticky semolina. Before Mummy had time to realize what had happened,

Rodney sat up and triumphantly announced to everyone, "There you are! I know now. It's going to be a true story."

As Mummy roughly dragged Rodney out of the room, he crying and laughing at once while she yelled and screamed at him, he had a last glimpse of a speechless Vicar looking down ruefully at all the sticky whitish spots, splodges and streaks down his new black surplice. For that sight it was worth being smacked and sent to bed!

Rodney's bedroom looked out of the front of the house, on to the road. Among the various cars parked both sides there were still police cars, and a small group of policemen continued their vigil around the garden gate.

Still giggling and chuckling at what he'd done, Rodney was looking out of the window. In the space of about two seconds he recognised the straight-backed man, without a hump, who he'd tried to help, who now stepped with an unnerving straightness out into the road and was smashed by a fast-moving car coming from the right. So much blood! The policemen rushed out and one spoke into his radio, no doubt to call an ambulance — but the man must have been well-and-truly dead.

Rodney rushed out too, but the body was hidden by a black-uniformed crowd of policemen. "Get back! Go away!", ordered one of them.

"But he's my friend!", wailed Rodney, beginning to cry.

"He wants his Mummy", said the same policeman, more gently.

"All right, all right, wait a moment", responded another in an almost pitying voice.

The crowd parted as two of the policemen lifted up the normal, humped and crooked mummy they had made of the body with a lot of bandages and sheets.

Flies were arriving on the scene. One settled on Rodney's nose. The funeral procession was disappearing in the distance, but that fly was persistent in returning to tickle his nose.

## 5. Grand Awakening to a Naked Singularity

“Pussy! It’s you!” — Rodney found Pussy gently pawing at his nose to wake him. He giggled. What an exhausting dream! Just fancy doing all those things! Well, today would have to be a lazy day to make up for that.

Actually it wasn’t lazy, because, two months having passed since the last dust cloud, there were new things to see out of the windows once more. From the living room he saw that the skeleton on the pavement had gone. A police car was outside, with two policemen ringing at the door of the house opposite, where Mr Bate lived. No wonder, too, for a signboard now had pride of place above the front door, boldly announcing ‘DON’T CALLAWAY THE BUMMER BUT MASTUR BATE THE PLUMBER’S MATE’. Tut tut!

Mr Bate gave a drunken lecture to the very patient policemen, his arms waving all over the place, while periodically one of the policemen spoke to him, pointing at the signboard. Eventually Mr Bate removed the board with the help of the policemen, then accompanied them sheepishly into the car, which sped away down the road.

A brief subterranean rumbling, accompanied by a slight shaking of the house, brought Rodney’s attention back into the room. The regular torture programme on the television was nearing its end. The victim was already unrecognisable for the blood and injuries, and was nearing death. This was where, according to tradition, the victim was left to his or her own devices, and what happened next was a sort of ritual that was the bit that all viewers waited for, rolling on the floor in paroxysms of laughter when it happened. At least, so Rodney had to assume.

The victim, making faint coughing gurgling sounds, fumbled with a bloody stump of a hand to try to find a piece of string with which to hang himself. While fumbling, with a weak frothing croak he uttered his last words: “Death, where is thy string? Grave, where is thy nectary?” He then gave up the quest for string, and bit open his grargular vein, quickly passing out. At this point he was drowned out by title music and the list of credits.

Rodney went to ‘another room’ to have a good carp. While he was squatting over a suitably narrow part of the hole he was counting the spiders on the walls and ceiling. Resilient animals, these, considering the fumigations they often received. “Pussy! Do you have to?” Pussy

was distracting him from doing his 'business' by rubbing against his legs, purring, and sometimes playfully pouncing on imaginary spiders or the dangling end of his trouser belt.

Having wiped himself, he stood up and kicked aside the lumps of clinkery material, then proceeded to a back room to look out of a window. There was bright sunshine, but otherwise nothing new yet. But wait a moment — high up, on the end of the horizontal gantry of the crane, there was something pale... Somebody sunbathing! In the nude!

A more detailed glimpse was called for: Rodney found his binoculars. Of course, it could be a dead body up there. But no, it was two people copulating! "Now, that explains it all: it's the naked singularity! It's Mr and Mrs Newd. They like being seen in their glorious newdity — not that a sappy pussy like you would understand things like that." Actually Rodney didn't understand, either.

Pussy was purring and rubbing against his legs.

The familiar notice in the roadway was still there, but something about it made Rodney stop and re-read it.

'WARNING: DO NOT PROCREATE WHEN CRANE PASSING OVERHEAD'. Was that different from before? Rodney couldn't quite decide.

A woman was walking, carrying her shopping. Suddenly she dropped down a hole in the pavement, uttering a little squeak, quickly followed by PTHOOFFF!, as a cloud of steam and smoke shot up from the hole. A few wisps of the same steam and smoke, with the smell of burning hair, then of burning flesh, came up between the floorboards around Rodney.

## 6. A Scheme for Nervous Wreckage

That bogeyman poet again, a dream, or something more sinister?

*did you hear the News this evening?*

*the scene now set for various breakdowns,*

*a final hospital bed silently preparing to be ready for maximum security;*

*i'm wondering, did you hear the News?*

*this evening did you hear the radio newsreader once the air was dark?*

*did you wonder with me what happened to the poor, poor newsreader  
whose voice wavered trembling through the black views of night,  
announcing we still don't know what happened to the poor, poor  
scientists  
who discovered our air and space is occupied by Something Else as well?  
did your radio like mine then switch itself firmly, knowingly, dangerously  
off,  
leaving you wondering from whence this black night of Something fell?  
i wonder, are you still thinking of me as my frantically locked doors unlock  
themselves and outside all is not quite well?  
deep in the ground below me in my room maybe satanic gas mains are  
exploding,  
or is it the sound of volcanic national health torture chambers  
administering social tranquillity too far below the surface of the  
earth for me to hear above the thuds the melodic strains of  
crackling electricity or dripping trickling splashing pouring, pouring  
liquid i'm thinking of you and wonder where you are.  
i'm wondering could you possibly have seen what crawled out of the  
dustbin in the garden while my back was turned to the wall.  
are you too being driven to the black, black fall?  
is there a black mass of policemen's uniforms violently knocking on your  
floor too right now,  
likewise carrying great cylinders with long pipes to fire mysterious gases  
of watery civil correction at the remains of your mind?  
i thought to go to bed and lose the night in sleep.  
are you still thinking of me  
as the light goes off just before my hand turns the switch;  
as the bed now angry at my disturbing its peace stands up loudly hissing  
vitriolic hate right in my space;  
as i fight through grappling black air to the light switch and turn it on  
with a faint glow of vitriolic phosphorus the lamp flaps hissing fright  
and angry fate around the room;  
as the first bump in the hissing night crashes the ceiling dropping plaster  
all over and around my diminishing sight a scene of murderous  
breakage?  
are you still able to think of me i wonder,  
on the second day of christmas?*

## 7. Nothing, Absolutely Nothing Wrong

Rodney fondled his Pussy. Pussy was gently purring in his lap and harmlessly clawing his thighs, the way pussies will when they're purring in your lap. Irrational and stupid, maybe, but that's how pussies are, thought Rodney for the umpteen-thousandth time. Fickle, unintelligent and incomprehensible — that was the beauty of pussies.

"My One and Only! What would we do without each other? My silly softy Pussy!"

Pussy was licking his hands while still purring.

It was News time on the television, presented as usual by Mr Stony-face. "Following two months of detailed examinations, it has been decided that the BBC newsreader Tom Dickenharry is shortly to star in the Torture Programme. A replacement will presently be announced." His face and voice remained stonily detached.

"The Gremlin has announced the death of Dr Vladimir Suslik, Head of the Soviet Academy of Nausea. Official circles insist that his death was from a prolonged heart condition, and they have hotly denied reports published in the Daily Rail that he died of a ruptured stomach, following inadequate attempts to regurgitate hard-line propaganda.

"Now to home news again. There have been angry demonstrations by people in an undisclosed area of the country, alleging that volcanoes are beginning to develop under their houses, gardens and roads. We understand that the authority in such matters, the geologist and volcanologist Professor Sir Horace Pigginbottom, is about to issue a public statement. Over now to our reporter, Jacob Hears-Rider, on the steps of the Department of the Environmental Colic."

"As you can see, there's a large crowd here: mostly housewives and all very angry. They consider themselves at special risk, the weight of them plus their heavy shopping loads making it particularly likely that they'll fall through weak spots in the asphalt. Of course, we mustn't take for granted the accuracy of their claims, for we have yet to hear Professor Sir Horace Pigginbottom's statement, which will be based on a scientific appraisal of the facts. Now the door is opening... Yes, here he is."

A tide of angry calls rose from the crowd. Eventually they quietened to let him speak.

"Good afternoon. I understand you are worried about a volcano under your homes. Is that correct?"

A wave of angry noises again from the crowd. After a minute or two it was quiet enough for the Professor to continue.

“Let me explain. Here is a map showing all the volcanic regions of the world. You will see that they occur where the margins of plates of the earth’s crust are moving against each other or pulling away from each other — or occasionally they can occur in the middle of a crustal plate where there is an underlying convective plume in the Earth’s mantle. I have to point out that the nearest such places are in the Mediterranean, Italy and the Alps, to the south, and Iceland and the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, far out on the west side. We are not in a tectonically active area, and I know you will find this difficult to believe, but there are no volcanoes in or near Britain.”

A shocked gasp arose from the crowd, then a furious tumult of questions and demands. “What’s this, then?”, howled one tearful fat woman wielding an umbrella and throwing chunks of a familiar clinkery material.

“Is it an underground fire, then?”, many people were demanding to know.

“Let me explain further. There are only two significant rock formations which could theoretically catch fire: the Coal Measures, of course, and the much more limited oil shales. Here is a map showing the extent of coal and oil shale strata which could conceivably catch fire. Even if they did, this could not produce the sort of symptoms you’ve been reporting.”

“Well, what is it, then? Do something about it!”, angrily cried the crowd.

“Look, I know you will find this difficult to accept at first, but you must trust me here. I can assure you, there is nothing wrong. Nothing wrong at all. You have been worrying a lot, haven’t you. That is all. Now you must stop dwelling on it. Worrying about it is your only problem. Go back home, get out and enjoy life! That’s all. Good-day to you. Oh, of course, if the trouble does recur, don’t hesitate to come to me again so that I can just check that all is well and reassure you. And I shouldn’t go reading any books on volcanoes if I were you, for it’ll only reinforce your worrying and make it reproduce all the symptoms in the book. Good day.”

At this point the crowd surged angrily forwards, many of the indignant fat women hitting the Professor over the head with their umbrellas. He was helped away by a group of policemen trying with little success to protect him from the umbrellas as he repeatedly flinched and ducked.

The News now over, a short poetry reading by a new cult poet filled the interval before the next main programme:

**NOTHING?**

*Darkness! Roaring, roaring Darkness,  
Where are you rushing in such a hurry?  
Mystical stormwindy surging of catastrophic silence.  
Tumult of talking, flickering ideas;  
Whispery mutterings of a million nothings,  
Each with its story to tell.  
Whirlpool of fluid suction time,  
out of dimension,  
caterpillar tracks tingling throughsome,  
Sometimes uptight.  
Darkness, you're saying so much already,  
I can't hear your answer to my question.  
Darkness rips in crashing lightning chunks of heavy silence;  
Detonations in every fingertip,  
Hair roots also;  
Ears and others stand up ready,  
Just in case;  
Living timestorms warp dimensions,  
All crawling up.  
Fuzzy presence, violently nonexistent,  
Not really upsetting the currents.  
Solid wind of fuzzy present, past and future  
Talking in fiery wraiths,  
Crowning surrounding nonchalance.  
Buzzing solitude altogether too close, too present.  
Multiple shouts from long-past dimension  
Lost in sudden twirly time downwarp  
Separating stars from rushing planet ground.  
Darkness, roaring Darkness, when will you answer me?*

*Crawling up, crawling up, all over you,*

*It is.*

By this time Pussy was back under the television, growling and hissing, and the air was thick elastic treacle. Yes, once again Nanny Crawlia was having tea. At the exact point at which Rodney had snatched a sandwich before, that same sudden feeling of furious whirlwind erupted, the cup crashed down on the tray, and the whole lot shot out of the room, with a piercing scream receding upstairs to places unknown.

The television, which by now was a monochrome set, was showing a late newsflash: "We have had an unconfirmed report that Crussia has just put the first ever human-made satellite in orbit. The same report states that the satellite has been named 'Sputnik'. If this report is confirmed it will mark a truly historic event, and the beginning of the Space Age."

"Gosh, Pussy, I wonder if they'll manage to put somebody on the Moon!"

'Ends' was the title of the next programme, which was one of a series on British place names. This programme was about the places called '(something) End'. There were many strange ones. For example there was Ouch End. Research showed that it was so named because the founders of the village were arthritic, eventually regretting that they had settled on top of a small knoll, all approaches to their homes then being painfully uphill.

Then there was Hind End. Possibly it was at one time on the edge of the territory of a particular herd of deer? The researchers weren't sure.

"You'd like that one! Look! It's Pussy's End!"

Nobody had any particularly historical interpretation of that name.

Rodney fondled Pussy. Pussy purred and purred, and with a sudden but purposeful lunge bit Rodney's hump right open. Wisps of steam and smoke hissed up between the floorboards as the stream of blood ran through.

"*Et tu, Pussy?* ...Now we have Rodney's End", murmured the collapsing figure of Rodney.

He bled to death.

## 8. In The End Was the...

She knelt among spring flowers at the little grave where her five-day-old daughter had been buried a year ago along with several other dead infants from the hospital. Her eyes were blurred at first with the wind and perhaps a little crying, as the gardener came up to her. She could just see a friendly smile.

“Good woman, what is past is nothing and nothings and memories. And memories, what are they but springboards to a better Present, through the Sea of Learning! Stand up to your full height! Go, walk up a mountain, lift up your soul and be cured through your own positive actions.”

As he turned to go, she noticed that he bore signs of quite severe injuries. Poor man: he must have had a rough time in his earlier days.

Just before her departure three months later — as if knowing that this was something special — the family cat had given her a rapturous send-off by presenting her with a large freshly mauled rat. Strange how something seemingly so loathsome is revealed as being made of flesh and blood so similar to that of those who do the loathing!

Musings on that theme gradually lifted and dispersed with the clouds as mountains came into view through the train windows. How the larger mountains stealthily crept up, peeping out at her from behind the lower ones in the spookiest of fashions! What a spine-tingling invitation!

The months of careful homework and hectic preparations were now serving her well. Breathless with anticipation as much as with the exertion, at last she was ascending her chosen mountain. No, not going up the simple but monotonous track on the west slope, which would suffice instead for her descent, but instead by a more exciting route from the east side. She'd started through a lightly wooded gorge full of the roaring of small waterfalls among the boulders at the bottom. Further on, this had opened out into a great bowl carved deeply between dark crags thrust out from lofty mountains that stooped ogreously over her.

At one point she'd halted with astonishment, admiring a ground beetle that was running and then had paused on a stony section of the valley track at her feet. *Carabus nitens* it had to be, but until she saw this beetle here in the flesh she'd had no idea how incandescent the metallic

copper colour of the thorax and ridges on the wing-cases would appear in the sunshine, nor the metallic green of the wing-case grooves; nor how stunningly beautiful would be the match of the two fiery colours. For a moment she'd looked around, wanting to share this wonder with somebody, but of course there was no-one.

Then ascent began in earnest once she was past all the awesome crags on the left, up a long grassy slope which rose invitingly that side, eventually into a remote steeply-cut hanging valley, a stretch of whose bottom was so flat that the meandering broad stream appeared to be running eerily uphill.

Remote, yes, but no, lonely it wasn't. How could it be, with the crags all around looking like gigantic broken teeth poised to gnash at the sky and filling the silence with the whisperings of their tumbling streamlets and mini-waterfalls? And there, at the head of this overshadowed valley was the deep col where she would turn steeply up the left-hand ridge and truly on to the mountains.

Some hours later she was on top of the highest of them all. Surveying her new domain, she looked down upon the surrounding snow-capped summits. Out to the east spread a great moor with broader hills and a multitude of blue pools and lakes, beyond which distantly rose yet more mountains. Her gaze lowered: down below was that huge, dauntingly narrow, acute-angled ridge whose crest she had followed from the penultimate summit to join the final, alarmingly steep snowy slope up which she had finally toiled to where she was now. Indeed on part of that knife-edge ridge she had briefly wondered about the sanity of this venture, for her traverse had become crawler and crawler, with much ducking and precarious clinging among the rocks on account of a localized ferocious cross wind, channelled by the valley beneath her on the right, which had threatened to pluck her off and unceremoniously convert her into carrion somewhere far below.

The subdued pink, brown and steely-grey hues of the ubiquitous broken rock, with its contrasting splashes of lichen colour, looked dark here against the dazzling snow. Above, an incredibly deep blue gave the sky a disconcertingly solid appearance. How could such a strange world, such an alien lair, seem yet so friendly, so welcoming? To think, too, that hundreds of millions of years ago these rocks were part of a volcano!

Strange lichen growths and unfamiliar plants abounded. In the snow somebody had traced out doodles and words with an ice-axe

handle, but these were partly obliterated by deep footprints; the most that could be made out was 'IN THE BEGINNING WAS TH...'.

Close by, a pretty little bird — could it possibly be one of those Snow Buntings which people had talked of? — was nervously flitting about, almost as though waiting for her to sit down and start dropping crumbs. The little pussycat! Ah, well...

For a laugh she had carried up here in her rucksack her silver tea service with its tray. Now, courtesy of her new miniature portable stove, she prepared and set out her tea, with six thick sandwiches on a plate. Did they look and smell good!

Thinking again of that gardener, she still hadn't worked out how he could have injured himself that way with his gardening tools. She'd clearly seen a hole right through each of his wrists, and he'd shuffled as though his feet were hurting. His forehead was hurt too: it looked as though perhaps he had fallen head-first into a thick bed of roses.

Anyway, undoubtedly she was being greatly effective in curing herself — that man knew what he was talking about! A ptarmigan uttered its eerie wooden croak in the pure air over the snow-covered scree slope, which fell steeply away for some 1,200 metres in front of and below her. The little 'Snow Bunting' bird was excitedly edging closer, and she marvelled at its neat colour pattern. Her sandwiches had never tasted so good. Apart from a few dropped crumbs for the bird, she ate them all.

**The End**

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