



Burrington Spring

A Seminary Tale

Part 1

Robert Ward

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The late Fr. John de Satge, sometime Vice Principal of Chichester Theological College, published in 1978 a book entitled 'Christ and the Human Prospect: The Unity of Existence Here and Hereafter.' Pieter Wiesoslavski, a character in this story, is not John de Satge, and Burrington is not Chichester. Neither is it Malvern, nor Mirfield, though it might owe something to all three....

The author is keen to disavow any connection between characters in this story and any real person, living or departed - for reasons that should be clear to all who read it. He offers this tale to encourage engagement with this most serious of topics ... in the most light-hearted of ways.

Millicent and Winchcombe appear by kind permission of their creator, the writer Myrtle Lawrie.

'The little town of Burrington Spa, nestling at the foot of the hills, contains in one span all things necessary for the restoration of body, mind and spirit.' So claimed the tourist brochure she picked up at the local railway station, and broadly, Millicent thought, what it said was true. There were the waters, springing fresh from the roots of the hills. There were the steep but manageable hillside walks, leading to the tops where the air was clean and pure. There was the sunlight, there were the gardens, there was the abbey church with its ancient cloister and the new collegiate buildings clustered around it, providing a home these days for a community of scholars and the seminary where they studied and were taught. There were the restaurants which catered for the visitors, in season; and above all, for Millicent's purposes, there was the tea shop.

Quaint and unchanged for fifty years, it was here that she had come at least once every three months since his retirement to take tea with her old friend the Canon, who had returned in his latter years to enjoy again the place where he had spent his student days – 'not a student prince, but a student priest,' he would remind her every time they met, with a smile and a twinkle in the eye.

The proprietor of the tea shop, an unsmiling man who seemed little given to small talk, delivered a tray of tea four-square onto the table in front of them, as was his wont, and went away again without a word.

'Shall I pour or will you?' asked Millicent.

'No, you, please,' said the Canon, folding over on his knee a copy of the local newspaper, provided free for the use of customers at the tea shop - one of the incentives which drew them back to this place time and again.

The newspaper was full of advertisements for hotels, guest houses and bed and breakfast establishments in and around the spa. 'Listen to this', he chuckled. 'Perhaps this would do the trick.' He put on his highest, most affected manner as he read from an

advertisement: "The Healing House of Oz. Superior accommodation with Running Spring Water. Access at all times to the Healing Springs. Naturists welcomed." Oh, I hardly think that's us, do you?" He continued to chuckle heartily, growing redder under his moustaches by the minute. After a moment he added explosively, 'Breakfast brought – in bed!' His mirth became uncontrollable.

Millicent leaned over to look at the newspaper he had laid down on the table as his shoulders shook and he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "Elixir of life," she read. "Reverse the ageing process. Ancient recipe rediscovered by the proprietors of the House of Oz. Free sample to first time visitors."

'Preposterous load of poppycock!' the Canon expostulated.

'Rather fun all the same,' said Millicent. 'Do let's go and pay them a visit. We could say we were interested in staying.'

The owner of the tea shop had returned to bring the tea cakes they had ordered. 'Thank you,' said Millicent, and in spite of his sullen demeanour added brightly, 'I wonder, could you tell us the way to the establishment mentioned here?'

The House of Oz turned out to be just a short distance away, built against the side of the hills where they started to rise behind the town. Waters cascaded down the rock face and gathered in pools and rivulets at the rear of the building, a place peculiarly damp and dark. As they rang the doorbell Millicent and the Canon noticed by the front door a sign similar to one they had seen earlier by the door of the tea shop. 'The Burrington Round Table of Trade and Commerce,' they read.

'They're all in it together,' hissed the Canon, just as the door swung open and a burly bearded wonder appeared in front of them. 'Yes?' he demanded, in a tone not unlike that of the proprietor of the tea

shop.

'How do you do.' Millicent smiled as winningly as she knew how. 'My companion and I were thinking of coming to stay for a few days - later in the year. I wonder whether it might be possible for us to see some of your rooms?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On when you might be thinking of coming. We're fully booked throughout the summer. Regular clients.'

'Oh, I see.' Millicent was uncomfortably aware that the Canon was hanging back with an unaccustomed reserve, and that the bluff and burly monster of a man in front of her was eyeing the elderly clergyman with thinly veiled suspicion. 'Well,' she said with a determined brightness, 'could you perhaps give us some idea when you might have vacancies, and could we come in and take a look?'

With a less than easy grace the proprietor stood aside and gestured that they should step inside.

Reaching for a large red diary on a table in the hall he led them towards the bottom of a stair case. A stuffed bear reared up on its hind legs in the hallway, baring its teeth.

'Dining room's in there,' he said, motioning to a door off to one side. 'Bedrooms up here.' He started to mount the stairs, Millicent and the Canon following at a short distance, taking in everything as they did so. There was a drab and faded air about the whole establishment. The fixtures from the days when gas lamps lit the staircase were still in place, although the lamps were long gone. The staircase creaked as they ascended and it seemed to Millicent that her feet stuck slightly to the carpet with each step that they took. At the top of the stairs their guide took out a large bunch of keys and unlocked one of the doors. He waved them in, and they followed his instructions to

enter the bedroom, furnished with a large double bed, a wardrobe, two bedside tables and a writing desk and chair.

‘Yes, well, thank you.’ The Canon had clearly seen all he wished to and was backing hastily out of the room even as he spoke. ‘We’ll think about it and let you know.’

Outside on the pavement Millicent asked him, ‘Why the hurry? You obviously couldn’t get out of there fast enough. And what have you got there?’

The elderly clergyman had a piece of yellow paper in his hand, something he had picked up from a table in the hallway on his way out. He unfurled the paper, studied it, and rapped it several times with his forefinger. ‘I knew it! I knew it! I recognised that man. After all these years and behind all those whiskers. I knew he was familiar!’

‘You knew him? How?’

‘From the theological college forty years ago. He worked in the grounds when I was first a student there. Left under very dodgy circumstances. Something to do with Black Magic, and of course the college council couldn’t be doing with that right under their noses. Hah! Look!’ He rapped the paper again. She looked where he was pointing and read: “Pieter Wiesoslavski invites you to partake of the Waters of Eternal Life.” ‘The elixir of life! Hah! Humbug!’

Whether the oils and ointments of the House of Oz could restore youthfulness or promise eternal life was a question which paled into insignificance in the minds of Millicent and her friend the Canon when, a few weeks later, a report appeared on the front page of a certain sensationalist newspaper, which forced all else into the shade.

“Back from the Dead,” read the headline, over a grainy photograph of a bearded cleric, the Vice Principal of the Theological College at Burrington Spa. Millicent saw the story on a news stand at a London railway station and against her better judgement bought the paper. She read the story as she travelled from London to Burrington, with a growing sense of incredulity. By the time she met her elderly friend in the station buffet at the end of her journey she had read the article from beginning to end a number of times.

“A Church of England college in the sleepy town of Burrington Spa claims a miracle of Biblical proportions. Father Pieter Wiesoslavski, Vice Principal for just three months, was found dead in his bed on 8th July following a heart attack. After three days mourning, his body lying in the college chapel, now say the college authorities, Fr. Wiesoslavski has been raised from the dead.

The extraordinary claim, made by a member of the college community, was denied by the College Principal during an exclusive interview with this paper.”

Burrington, by the time they issued forth from the railway station, was buzzing with people. A television crew had staked out their pitch on the High Street at the gates of the college. The Canon brushed them aside as they tried to question him, and he ushered Millicent in. He had secured an invitation to dine at High Table in college with the Principal. As a generous benefactor of the college he was determined to find out what lay behind the extraordinary cavalcade.

‘My dear Miss Lake,’ began the letter which had called Millicent back to Burrington Spa, ‘you have been kind enough on many occasions to express your appreciation of the little I have been able to offer you in terms of guidance and advice on matters ecclesiastical. I wonder now whether I might presume upon our acquaintance to ask of you a favour in return. That is to say, as you have sometimes found yourself in need of advice from one who

understands the theological and social conventions of the established church, so I now find myself all at sea in a world in which I have reason to believe that you would be more at home than I.

In short, a situation has arisen in which I would value your considered opinion. If you were able to dine with me at the college I would very much like to introduce you to the Principal and some of his colleagues. I am sure that rooms can be provided overnight, which would allow us some time to investigate. All will become clearer, indeed I hope clearer to you than it is at present to me, when we are able to converse more fully.

You'll excuse me if I sign myself

Your very dear friend,
Alfred Winchcombe

'Dear Canon Winchcombe,' came the reply, 'Sincere congratulations on your elevation to the rank of Honorary Canon. How splendid that your work for the diocese has been recognised after all this time' - privately, she was surprised that when he'd retired, anyone had noticed the difference - 'and, in particular, your part time involvement since you retired at the Theological College. I should be delighted to accept your kind invitation to join you for dinner at the college, although I'm afraid I shall be awfully tongue-tied when it comes to conversation over dinner with a company of learned clerics.' Again, she wondered how he rose to that himself, but added, 'Provided you promise to cover for me, I shall be delighted. Just one thing – must I really call you Canon all the time? It sounds so terribly grand!

Your friend,
Millicent Lake.'

My dear Miss Lake,

You really mustn't worry at all about coming to dine at the college next week. The full-time teaching staff are very friendly and the

student community is always hospitable. Do let me know what time your train arrives and I will meet you at the station. With regard to my new title, I would very much rather you called me by my Christian name. 'Reverend' always seemed far too stuffy and I would like to think that our friendship had grown beyond such formalities.

I am your *sincere friend*,
Alfred Winchcombe'

So it was that Millicent made her debut on the Canon's arm in the Senior Common Room at Burrington Theological College, for sherry before chapel. She wore a dress of purple velvet, low slung around the neck to reveal three flashing strings of pearls; ear rings which sparkled discreetly, and her dark hair newly coiffured at the back of her head. Her smile, lipstick-scarlet, and pale make-up gave her an appearance of social confidence quite at odds with the way she felt inside, but she managed to quell her initial nerves as the Canon presented her to the assembled company.

'Whatever possessed you to think that I was the right person to help with all of this?' she would ask him later, looking back with amazement at the evening which was about to unfold. 'My own experiences with the Undead were a very long time ago. I rather thought we'd left all that behind.'

'But your books, Miss Lake. You've written books, after all.'

'Cornelius the Curious Cuttlefish. A children's book. I hardly think that would go a bundle at High Table.' She looked discomfited, adding *sotto voce*: 'Anyway, that was much later. It was withdrawn from the libraries for fear of upsetting the children. Copies were pulped.'

The college chapel towered high upon the ridge which topped the

valley, a massive red brick edifice overshadowing the community buildings scattered across the hillside below. Masters and students alike wore cassocks for evensong - Millicent and Winchcombe flowed with them through the wintry dusk and into the high vaulted chapel lit by so many candles that their shadows were cast up onto the walls and the vaulted red barrelled ceiling.

This was where the late Vice Principal had lain in state for three days prior to the funeral. This was where, three days afterwards, the first Resurrection appearance was said to have taken place. Winchcombe had appraised her of all this in advance. As she held onto the stem of one of the lamps which topped the choir stalls in front of her all through the singing of the evening office, her eyes ranged over the rows of cassocked youths in the stalls below and opposite, all male, mostly young; and over the rows occupied by the monks and other tutors who staffed the college, mostly considerably older. Millicent felt a strong sense of the continuity of this strange phenomenon, preserved by its traditions from one generation to another. As it was in Winchcombe's younger days, is now, and ever shall be... except that the chapel was built in 1900, and the whole experience she supposed was one which had been artificially recreated at about that time, as according to Winchcombe, none of the religious orders in England had survived the Reformation.

From Evensong they filed through the darkness under the trees to the Refectory further down the steep side of the valley. There were occasional whoops of high spirits from among the student body but the older men were for the most part silent as they walked, wrapped in their Benedictine cloaks, black from head to foot.

'Drat,' thought Millicent. 'Why didn't he warn me not to wear heels? If I'd known I'd have to engage in woodland mountaineering I'd have worn something more suitable...' but soon they reached the warmth and light and safety of the dining hall and she was ushered forward by the dons to the top table and a place of honour next to Winchcombe and opposite the Principal. A Latin grace was offered by one of the students, a soulful, dark, bearded youth with

cavernous eyes, and there was a scraping and creaking of benches as all were seated.

'Miss Lake,' beamed the Principal, inclining his head over the table towards her. 'I bid you welcome to our humble fare.'

'Thank you,' she replied. 'To me it all seems rather grand.'

'Our founding fathers set out to recreate old splendours,' said the Principal, by way of explanation. 'They believed that the church should play its part as a power among powers. They didn't intend in any way to underplay their role.'

Looking at the way the High Table sat on a dais at the head of the hall, the dining tables and the long rows of wooden forms arranged below them, Millicent could see that regarding the superiority of masters over students, the point was well made. 'Tell me, Father,' she ventured, after an opening course and a few light conversational entrees, 'the curious affair of the late Vice Principal...' She was aware of a startled sideways look from Winchcombe and an inscrutable smile on the face of the principal, opposite. 'What', he asked, 'would you like to know?'

'Just... what happened. All those stories, in the papers...'

The Principal's steely eyes ranged up and down, surveying the student body at their tables, and then from side to side, taking in his fellows at High Table. He continued to smile fixedly as he leant towards her across the table and said in an undertone, 'Miss Lake, Canon Winchcombe, perhaps you'd like to join me after dinner when we can discuss these things more freely.'

'How very kind of you.' Millicent looked sideways at her companion and added, 'We'd be delighted.'

To be continued in 'Part 2'

