

An aerial photograph of a large, multi-story building complex, identified as Burrington Spring Seminary. The building features a mix of red brick and light-colored stone or plaster. It is surrounded by dense green trees and foliage. In the foreground, there is a small, circular garden area with a central fountain. The background shows a residential area with houses and a green field.

Burrington Spring

A Seminary Tale Part 2

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.

A fire roared in the grate of the masters' small parlour just behind the screen separating them from the Hall. Winchcombe shifted his feet uneasily in new, highly-polished shoes, bought purposely for the visit. He felt awkward, now, as though he were playing gooseberry - or chaperone - to the tete-a-tete about to be played out between his young friend and the smooth-pated elder statesman of the seminary. The port decanter and glasses glowed richly on the elegant table between them. The Principal's voice was smooth, rich, hypnotic, rather like the firelight and the fire-warmed port they were cradling.

'Father W. was a brilliant man. A great scholar. Something the college badly needed to restore its reputation. He came to us out of the blue quite recently. The Bishop steered him in our direction as a way of bringing him back into public ministry.'

Winchcombe boggled in incomprehension.

'He'd been unwell, you see. Some kind of breakdown. But as Vice-Principal here he began to find his feet and his published works brought a new credibility to the college.' He lowered his voice confidentially. 'The Catholic dunces' college, they used to call us, you know.'

Winchcombe looked uncomfortable. Millicent contrived to look surprised, and did her best not to look in the least amused, although she was, extremely.

'After a very short time we elected him Vice Principal,' the Principal continued. 'His teaching skills were remarkable. He had a very distinctive teaching style, and books to his name. He set his students alight in quite a new way. Burrington started to be a name to reckon with. And then - quite suddenly, one Saturday evening - we'd dined together at High Table, we'd talked I remember about the college magazine, and about a review someone had written of his latest book. I invited him that night to take port with me, and he declined. He said there was work to be done.'

Millicent regarded her half-empty glass. The Principal regarded his for a moment, and then looked Millicent in the eye. 'The next morning one of our ordinands went to raise him for the early Mass. There was no reply. The poor boy found him in his bed, just as he had lain all through the night, with the light on. It must have been very sudden. Very peaceful. In many ways, quite beautiful.....' The Principal seemed quite lost for a moment, and then smiled again, and sighed. ' "In the midst of life, we are in death." St Paul, you know.' He looked up. 'Let me re-fill your glasses. Canon Winchcombe...?'

'Ah... yes. Yes, thank you.'

The visitors allowed what seemed to be a decent time to pass in silence, and then exchanged glances, each as if to urge the other to ask the next question.

'And then?' said Millicent, eventually. The Principal evidently found it difficult to move on, so she prompted him, casting a glance at Winchcombe. 'The stories in the papers....?'

'Ah,' he sighed, motioning dismissively with his fingers. 'Yes. Those stories.' After a few moments, he continued. 'The body lay in the chapel for three days and three nights. We kept a vigil, you know, until the funeral. Then we took him to the Cathedral and afterwards there was a private committal. But one of the boys - we call them boys, you know, although in reality, some of them are thirty or forty years old - one of the ordinands, a younger man, started a tale, and several in his year group began to pass it on. Jocelyn - his name was Jocelyn - said he'd seen the old man in the chapel the night after the funeral. He'd spoken with him and he'd told him some tale about an unfinished manuscript. Something he wanted to complete. And Jocelyn and one of the older boys took this quite preposterous tale to the Church Press. Quite irresponsible. Quite reprehensible... Hence, you see, all the interest. But you must understand, these closed communities breed a kind of intensity. Tales become true

because they're believed to be true. Perhaps because they have a need to be believed...'

Millicent had a sense that the port was beginning to take its effect. She looked across at Winchcombe, who shifted in his chair and looked ostentatiously at his watch. 'Good heavens, is that the time? Miss Lake, I fear we must show you to your room. Forgive me, Father, your hospitality has been most kind, but I'm afraid we must, as they say, call it a day. You will excuse us?'

'My dear Canon, of course. Do forgive the ramblings of an old man. These have been such sad and difficult days. It's easy I'm afraid to get carried away. It's very good to talk to you both. And now, as you say, I will show you both to the Guest Wing.'

'It was evidently a relief to him,' said Winchcombe later, 'to tell us his side of the story'. The old Principal had left them each at the door of their respective rooms. They made as if to retire for the night, and as soon as his back was turned, they gestured furiously to each other and made a silent compact to liaise in Millicent's room once the other was out of sight.

'This is just like being a college boy all over again,' said Winchcombe in a gleeful whisper, perching on the edge of the bed, whilst Millicent pulled up the single wicker armchair and lent towards him, her hands clasped under her chin.

'Yes,' she whispered back, 'but why do you suppose Father Mervyn was so reluctant to talk about his late Vice Principal over dinner?'

'A very natural sense of decorum, I would have thought,' said Winchcombe, somewhat po-faced.

'No, no, Reverend, it was more than that. Did you see how he looked around him, at the Fellows, at the students? He didn't want

anyone else to hear what he was going to say to us.' She looked pensive for a moment, and then said, 'I want to see that boy in the morning. The one he mentioned. I'd very much like to hear what he might have to tell us.'

Winchcombe was of the opinion that they 'should let sleeping dogs lie,' as he put it to Millicent more than once that evening. And the following morning. 'It's a lot of fuss and nonsense over nothing,' he said. Nevertheless, Millicent had the bit between her teeth, and immediately after being served kippers for breakfast at High Table she took off at a rate of knots down the corridor towards the student rooms. She hailed a group of ordinands as they disappeared down the mouth of a tunnel which led to the main accommodation block and one of them, tall and dark, the one she recognised as the one who had offered grace in Hall the previous night, turned back to answer her call. 'Can I help you?' he asked.

Millicent beamed at him. 'Well, actually yes, I do hope so,' she said. 'I'm looking for a young man called Joss something-or-other. A student of the late Vice Principal?'

'Joss? Jocelyn, I expect. I'll take you to his room.'

Millicent fluttered her thanks as she was swept along with the gaggle of trainee priests, down through the tunnel and up into the tiled corridor of a Victorian accommodation block. The walls were adorned with Madonnas and severe-looking church fathers. Outside one door was a small table from which a statue of Our Lady arose, her feet smothered in flowers. A circle of candles was burning on a stand before her. Stuck to the door was a picture of a young female saint swooning in ecstasy before a naked Christ with outstretched arms, hovering over her, spookily detached from any visible means of support. It was here that they stopped, and Millicent's guide knocked at the door.

'Jocelyn! A lady to see you!' called one of the others. Two more jostled one another and giggled.

The door was opened by a pretty blond youth, with tousled hair and a soft white dressing gown, who blinked at them as though he had just climbed out of bed. 'I'm so sorry, I must have overslept,' he said. He stepped back and invited them in with a sweeping gesture, 'I'm so sorry, Barrett,' he said again to the boy who had led the way. 'It won't happen again, I promise.'

'Don't be silly,' smirked the other, knowingly. 'Of course it will. Don't make such a fuss.'

With that, the posse turned and was gone.

'What can I do for you?' the young man asked, turning to Millicent, who had taken up position by the window and was looking out through the creepers into the garden beyond. She turned to face him. 'You're Jocelyn, aren't you?' She would have extended a hand to him, but felt inhibited by the young man's state of *deshabille*. 'I'm Millicent Lake. Forgive the intrusion. I did so want to talk to you. About Father Pieter.'

He motioned to the standard-issue wicker chair, inviting her to sit, and sank into a graceful position on the bed, his hands buried deep in the large dressing gown, his legs drawn up beneath him. 'What can I tell you?' he asked.

'Well... how can I put this? I suppose I'm a sort of private investigator.' She looked at him appealingly. 'I've come here with a friend, who was once a student here himself. You see, we saw a report in a not very reputable newspaper.' She gave a short, embarrassed laugh. 'We rather thought that you, being I understand quite close to the late Vice Principal, might be able to shed some light upon it all?'

The young man uncurled his legs from beneath him and, placing his bare feet squarely on the floor, gazed fixedly up at her. 'There are a

great many people,' he said, 'who have a vested interest in the story of the late Vice Principal. I think when someone dies there can be a kind of battle fought out over their memory. The family say one thing about him, the college says another. There's a kind of jealousy. I think that's why he came back to us. To set the record straight.'

'You saw him? After the funeral?'

'I saw him. We all did. Of course the others won't tell you about it because they think we'll be shut down. It's too much for the Church of England, you know. Resurrection. The communion of saints...'

'Tell me about it. Where did he come to you?'

'In the Chapel.' The boy looked past her, his eyes wide and suddenly misty with tears. 'We all saw him. Just as he had been in life, only more so. Somehow ageless. Shining. Sitting in his stall. And then a week later, here in this room...' He broke off, gazing around him. 'He came to me. There was a book, you see. He was writing about the last words of the Creed. The Communion of Saints. The Resurrection of the Body. Only he never completed the manuscript. He wanted the college to see to it and make sure it wouldn't be forgotten. He told me where to find it.'

'Were you particularly close? I mean, before...?'

'I was particularly *attached*. Lonely. Isolated, I suppose. Father Pieter made me feel... noticed. If he could exist here, I suppose I felt that I could.'

'You have friends here, surely?'

The young man gazed up at her with a faraway look in his eyes. He seemed lost for an answer - and then started as a knock came on the door. A voice called him from outside.

'Joss! Get dressed! The Principal wants to see you. Now! Are you up?'

'I think I'd better go,' said Millicent quickly, aware suddenly that her situation alone in a room with a partially clad seminarian might seem a little odd. Gathering herself together, she got up from the chair as Jocelyn uncurled himself from the bed and went to the door. 'I'll be down in five minutes, Barrett,' he said, through a narrowly opened crack, and then shutting it firmly. 'I'm so sorry,' he said to Millicent, suddenly a picture of anxiety and neurosis. 'I'm afraid I have no choice but to go.'

'Of course you must. Don't let me delay you.' Millicent hurried to her feet. 'Please don't worry. I'll see myself out.'

'You entertained this woman *in your dressing gown?*' Father Principal was incredulous.

'Our founding fathers must be spinning in their graves.'

And judging by the censorious expressions on the faces looking down at them from the portraits on the walls of the Principal's study, the boy could quite believe it.

'Whatever is the world coming to? And Jocelyn: this story really has gone far enough. The Bishop is deeply concerned for the future of the college. We have enemies enough without these lurid developments; stories in the press, and that kind of thing. This woman is probably some kind of journalist. A 'psychic investigator', they tell me. I really think it would be better if it all stopped here. Now... suppose we signed you off for an early Easter break. The college is expecting guests for Holy Week. I honestly think, given the strain you've clearly been under since this time last year, it would be better if you were to take a train home as soon as possible. Don't you think that might be best?'

The boy's room was stripped of all his things by the time Chris Marten - 'Doctor Chris Marten,' as the Principal liked to call him - the youngest fellow elected to St. Cedd's, was shown in with his suitcase a week later. Millicent Lake and her reverend companion encountered the newcomer over dinner. The elderly clergyman eyed the younger man suspiciously. Just a touch too much of the cad about him, thought Winchcombe, and said as much to Millicent later, in the privacy of the Guest Wing. Millicent, on the other hand, was clearly smitten with quite a different impression. She had sat almost opposite the young academic at supper and had been dazzled by his smile, his flashing eyes and overwhelmingly physical presence. 'He's a media man, Reverend,' she pleaded, in extenuation. 'He's used to putting himself across, getting himself over.' She stumbled over her words, conscious that she was propelling herself onto difficult terrain.

'Getting himself over. Yes, yes, I suppose that's what he does,' agreed Winchcombe, nodding. 'I couldn't have put it better myself.'

So the next day at lunch, Millicent contrived to sit beside the interesting new arrival, and to tap him for information whilst they waited for dessert.

'Tell me about your work,' she suggested. 'That *is* why you're here?'

'Yeah, kind of,' he replied, with American drawl which struck her as affected. 'I've been working with the community here on the liturgies for Holy Week for a year or so. That's to say, the music. The relationship between the sounds, the intervals, and the way the brain works.'

'You're a scientist; a neurologist? A musician? Or a theologian?'

He shrugged. 'I guess none of those. Or all of them. I'm your original polymath. Like John Dee, or Isaac Newton. Before the eighteenth century no one ever dreamt of this whole *compartmentalising* thing.'

Astrologers and alchemists, musicians and scientists, mathematicians, physicists. No one drew the line between one discipline and another. Today you have to specialise to get credibility. And you need *credibility* to get published. So there's a kind of monopoly on thought.' He paused to finish a glass of wine. A pale dessert in little dishes was passed down the table towards them.

'Creme caramel,' hazarded a bemused-looking Alfred Winchcombe, sitting beside her. 'There's cream coming down in a moment. As though anyone would eat cream with their creme caramel.'

'Oh, I always would,' rejoined the American. 'Give me excess over frugality any time. I'm afraid, Father, I'm no medieval ascetic.'

'No indeed,' said the clergyman, passing on the cream jug. 'So I see.' For the doctor was helping himself to it generously, the Muscadet having evidently whetted his appetite for something sweeter to follow.

After a decent interval, Millicent set out to recover the initiative.

'So, Dr. Marten: you are staying for the whole of Holy Week?'

'If I can stand the meagre fare, yes. I gather we go into fasting mode from tomorrow.'

'And you're advising on the music for the liturgies?'

'I'm observing and participating in something never before attempted. This college community is quite unique, you know, Miss Lake. The music we're trialling here derives from manuscript sources dating back to medieval times, and put together even earlier than that.' He leaned over the table towards them and lowered his voice. 'We're dealing here with stuff depicted in the House of the Mysteries at Pompeii and on the walls of Herculaneum. Cult rituals. Dionysius and all that. In the context of

the Holy Week liturgies, it stimulates the human brain in quite unprecedented ways. Palm Sunday through Holy Thursday, the Last Supper... we're re-creating an experience preserved throughout the first millennium but lost to the world for eleven hundred years.'

Winchcombe gave him his dead fish-eye look. Millicent always said that it would quell enthusiasm at a thousand paces, but the American seemed not to notice. What stemmed the flow was not the canon's disapproval but the need to consume the creme caramel before the Principal cleared his plate. Winchcombe knew the ropes. At that point, ready or not, the whole company would stand. The Principal led the way to the parlour behind, and those poor unfortunates who had not quite finished dessert were left to steal a last hurried mouthful or to abandon the table and file out behind him.

'He thinks he can raise the dead by playing the pan pipes,' sniffed Winchcombe afterwards, priming his own pipe with tobacco. 'If it was that easy we'd all be doing it.'

Millicent mulled over the rich red colours of the glossy pages in front of her, a catalogue from Herculaneum the college librarian had sought out at her request. The volume had been lying in a corner of the library, surrounded by piles of papers. 'These are beautiful, Reverend,' she said, ignoring his remark. 'Amazing to think these people lived two thousand years ago, and here they are, dancing and piping and playing with snakes -'

'And drinking and smoking heaven knows what.' He flicked his lighter, applied a light and took a draft. 'Pagan revellers. Heaven only knows what they got up to. Or what they imagined.'

Millicent was spellbound. Just the response, according to Winchcombe, these rites were meant to evoke. A card from between the pages fluttered to the ground beside her seat and she reached

down and picked it up to use as a book mark. 'Just look at these colours, Reverend. Look at these outfits. All these paintings-

'Frescoes.'

'Well, whatever they are - buried beneath the earth when the city was lost. And now they're as good as new.'

They sat in silence for a short time, Millicent turning the pages, Winchcombe enjoying his pipe.

When she came to close the book, her eye fell on the card in her right hand.

'Well now, Reverend, what d'ye know.' It was a library card, for the borrowing of books, filled out in a spidery hand. 'The last person to borrow this was – guess who? None other than the late Vice Principal.'

Winchcombe snorted. 'He and the music man must have made a pretty pair.'

'All those years ago, Reverend, when you say you knew him, working here...did you know anything much about him?'

'Never paid him much attention, to be honest. Shadey character... dodgy customer. Always hanging around.'

'The Principal said he'd written books.'

'First I knew of it. About what, I wonder? Compost and manure, most like.' A visit to the college library very soon provided answers.

'The Unity of This World and the Next. There's a turn-up.' Millicent seized upon the volume on the top of the pile, brought to them by the librarian. She opened it randomly and began to read. 'If I go away, I will come again, to take you with me. So that where I am, there you may be too.'

‘That’s John’s Gospel. The Last Supper.’

Millicent raised an eyebrow.

The American academic gazed up in wonder at the picture towering over them. ‘Just look at that,’ he said, admiringly. ‘A bold statement of the Easter faith. That’s what it is.’

A six foot representation of a Florentine *Resurrection* hung on the north wall of the chapel, filling most of the space. A cool and monumental Jesus by Piero della Francesca, stepping out of a marble sepulchre, bearing the red and white standard of the Resurrected Lamb of God, signifying triumph. ‘Not an historical depiction, of course. Not what you might have seen had you been there. Just a statement of eternal truth. That Christ is risen. *We* are risen.’

Millicent stood beside him and gazed upon the image for a time.

The American continued. ‘Art, music, dramatic reconstruction, all within the context of a semi-closed community,’ the American continued. ‘Reinforcing a shared story. Not so different from the world Piero lived in. And look what *that* produced.’

Millicent turned half away. ‘Father Principal described the boy Jocelyn as a sensitive soul,’ she said. ‘Did you know him?’

‘Feel like I do, staying in his rooms, surrounded by his things. But no, not really. Being given to these flights of fancy, one wonders if he’s safe to be let out. Into a parish, that is.’

‘The Principal sent him home to be looked after for a while. After the holidays, I suppose he’ll be back?’

'I wouldn't bet on it. There's an inspection due next term'

'Triggered by all the publicity, I shouldn't wonder,' put in Winchcombe, gloomily, at Millicent's right elbow. 'Places like this are on the church's hit list.'

The young tutor gestured at the huge and empty chapel. 'Too expensive. Too old fashioned. Not really to the taste of today's "powers that be." Easier to run a correspondence course.'

'But the faith. Resurrection faith. Fostered and nourished in communities which make it possible to believe such things. What's to become of that?' The Canon was clearly becoming agitated. His voice was beginning to rise. "If Christ be not raised, it follows that the dead were not raised." The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter fourteen. "But the truth is, Christ has been raised from the dead. The first fruits of them that have fallen asleep".' He was evidently warming to his subject. Millicent made as if to calm him down, but he broke out into Latin with more emotion than ever, proclaiming more loudly, 'Fidere et Credere Aude!'

'Oh you *clerics*,' said Millicent, exasperated. 'Whatever's that?'

'The college motto,' Winchcombe explained, slightly mollified. 'Be bold and dare to have faith, and believe.'

They wandered out into the light of day.

To be continued in 'Part 3'

