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JILLY COOPER

The Common Years

With illustrations by Paul Cox



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*To George Humphreys
with love
because he always believed in me*

By Jilly Cooper

FICTION

Riders
Rivals
Polo
The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous
Appassionata

NON-FICTION

Animals in War
Class
How to Survive Christmas
Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with Patrick Lichfield)
Intelligent and Loyal
Jolly Marsupial
Jolly Super
Jolly Superlative
Jolly Super Too
Super Cooper
Super Jilly
Super Men and Super Women
The Common Years
Turn Right at the Spotted Dog
Work and Wedlock
Angels Rush in
Araminta's Wedding

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Little Mabel
Little Mabel's Great Escape
Little Mabel Saves the Day
Little Mabel Wins

ROMANCE

Bella
Emily
Harriet
Imogen
Lisa & Co
Octavia
Prudence

ANTHOLOGIES

The British in Love
Violets and Vinegar

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INTRODUCTION

For ten years, sometimes two or three times a day, I walked my dogs on Putney and Barnes Commons. Often my children, Felix and Emily, who were two and a half years and nine months respectively when we moved to Putney in 1972, came with me. Occasionally on Sunday, I was accompanied by my husband, Leo. But normally I set out alone.

Because I spent so much time on the Common, and because when the children were young, it was really the only quiet place to think, I started taking a note book and pen out with me, and jotting down random thoughts, impressions of people I met, and any changes in the seasons.

To begin with the entries were sporadic. There were periods when I was writing a book or working on some *Sunday Times* piece, during which I didn't write a word in the diary for weeks. But gradually it became a fascination to see that the same chestnut tree, two down from the slide in the children's playground, was always the first to turn gold in the autumn; or that one year the snowdrops would appear much earlier than others; or that certain muggy kinds of weather brought out flashers and undesirables like a rash.

This book is based on that diary but many of the main characters who appear in it are fictitious, although modelled in part on the people I met on the Common in those years.

Putney and Barnes Commons are situated five miles from Hyde Park. I should also explain that, although merging into one another, they are run by different bodies. Barnes Common is looked after by the London Borough of Richmond and Twickenham.

Putney Common, on the other hand, which consists of some forty acres, belonged to the Earl Spencer, whose ancestors over the centuries repeatedly tried to enclose the land. Happily the local people resisted and, in 1871, a Bill was passed which vested control of the Common in the hands of eight Conservators, who were to be elected every three years by the people who lived within three-quarters of a mile of the Common. It is still the same today. Each year Common rates are paid by people living near the Common and every three years they elect eight Conservators, who meet regularly to decide how the Common should be run. (They also control Wimbledon Common.) Part of the money raised by these Common rates pays the salary of a ranger, who takes care of Putney Common, mowing, picking up litter, supervising the planting of trees, reporting undesirables to the police and refereeing fearful squawking matches between dog walkers.

During the ten years we lived in Putney, I mainly took two routes round the Commons, usually walking anti-clockwise, but sometimes clockwise – so as to avoid and fox those people and dogs I didn't want to meet. Both routes are shown on the map on pages 12 and 13 and described in the following pages.

Ten years is a long time to walk over the same small area. I still miss the friends I made on the Common. They were a merry, gallant bunch, who braved tempests, hail and the bitterest cold rather than let their dogs go unwalked. Some of them, as will be seen from the pages that follow, drove me demented, and I them. But a diary is a convenient dumping ground for one's grievances, and, having once dumped them, I would usually be falling on my temporary foes' necks within twenty-four hours.

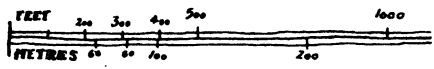
I think even now, eighteen months after we've left Putney, I could find my way along those routes with my eyes shut, guided by the raw soapy scent of the hawthorns, or the rank smell of the elder, or the sweet elusive fragrance of the wild roses. I never got bored with the Common – each day there was something new to look at, violets suddenly appearing by the railway line, or the return of the toadflax by the football pitch. Each day, however badly I or my

dogs behaved, the Common, given the chance, would restore my sanity. Familiarity never bred contempt. I can only look back on the ten years we were acquainted with love and gratitude.

J. C.

Gloucestershire 1984

PUTNEY COMMON



NOT QUITE TO SCALE

WALKS
BOROUGH BOUNDARY



Playing Fields

Barn Elms Playing Fields

BEVERLEY BROOK

Lurkers' Paradise
Second Bridge

Five Elms

To the Thames →

Football Pitch

Three Pylars Corner

The Milllocks

The Bridge

Cal Corner

Tennis Courts

Barnes Ground

Flashers Point

Beo Corner

Flower Garden

Chestnut Avenue

Flower Garden

Dagger Bank

PUTNEY LOWER COMMON

Bowling Green

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

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Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Flower Garden

Meadow

LOWER HIGHWOOD ROAD

FAIR TRIANGLE

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

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Van Buren Cottage

Van Buren Cottage

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

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QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE

QUEEN'S RIDE



Cricket Ground

FIRST COMMON

Lower Common South

All Saints Church

Spencer Arms

All Saints School
keeper's lodge

Alwayn Villas

Eglishan Rd.

Common
Duke Adams
Houses

The French
Residence

Putney Hospital

Willow Tree

Rangers Hut

28 Bus Shelter

28 Bus Shelter

All Saints Church

Spencer Arms

All Saints School
keeper's lodge

Alwayn Villas

Eglishan Rd.

Common
Duke Adams
Houses

The French
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Putney Hospital

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28 Bus Shelter

28 Bus Shelter

All Saints Church

Spencer Arms

All Saints School
keeper's lodge

Alwayn Villas

Eglishan Rd.

THE TWO WALKS

On my favourite walk, you set out to the north down Egliston Road, passing on the right a group of modern houses, known as 'Alimony Villas' because at one time there were so many divorced women and their children living there. Through an archway formed by two huge plane trees lies the first Common. It is divided into two squares by a little road up the centre. The left-hand western square is occupied by the cricket pitch. On the right-hand square on the south-east corner stands All Saints' Church, a solid Victorian pile consecrated in 1874. It has a little white bell tower rising out of the trees like a Cape Canaveral rocket, and several very beautiful windows designed by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. The churchyard has no tombstones and is framed by a square of limes, a straggling privet hedge and, on the outside, an iron spiked fence.

Leaving the church, you pass All Saints' School, the 22 bus shelter, and the Spencer Arms public house (named after Earl Spencer) on your right, and cross the first Common, until you reach the fork where the Lower Richmond Road splits in two and continues under the same name on the right, but becomes Queen's Ride on the left. In the fork between the two roads, lies a stretch of grass known as the 'Fair Triangle', because in May every year the Fair arrives and parks here for a month.

Crossing Queen's Ride and the Lower Richmond Road (both busy main roads) at the tip of the Fair Triangle, you reach the Big Common, a stretch of open land, divided by a line of plane trees, and bordered on the boundary by a sluggish overgrown stream called Beverley Brook.

To reach the Brook you pass, on the right, first the ranger's hut, with its little garden, then Putney Hospital rising from a sea of green grass like a great pink-liner, then the nurses' home, the bowling green with its crinkly red-roofed pavilion, and finally a block of council flats known as the Ranelagh Estate, past which, to

the north-east, Beverley Brook continues its meandering way down to the River Thames.

Between the Brook and the Thames lie the fenced-in Barn Elms Playing Fields. At the extreme north-east corner of the Common, just before the Brook reaches the Ranelagh Estate, grows a clump of trees and nettles known as 'Cat Corner'; this clump swarms with stray cats and also cats from the estate, who become the target of every passing dog. In the early days, before the two footbridges across to the playing fields and the two paths were built, you could not walk along the north side of the Brook, which was lined with elms. Instead, you turned left when you reached Cat Corner, away from the council estate, and walked along the south bank of the Brook, which was lined with willows, poplars, hawthorns and lush vegetation.

To the south as you walk lie the 'Hillocks', two undulating swells of grass under which piles of bomb rubble were buried after the Second World War. At the end of the Hillocks, you come to the football pitch, and leaving Beverley Brook you swing left along the side of the pitch. Ahead lies an enchanted square of land known as the 'Flower Garden', because it was once allotments, and today is crammed with wild flowers, brambles, dog roses and oak and sycamore saplings. But, instead of entering the Flower Garden, you turn right again, with the football pitch on your right, and a splendid colonnade of plane trees, which border the Flower Garden, on your left, and walk down the grassy path until you reach 'Oedipus Corner' – so named because it is marked by three tall Lombardy poplars, where three paths meet. To the left here, on the north-west corner of the Flower Garden, lies a dense sycamore copse, known as 'Flashers' Point', because so many flashers lurk there in high summer waiting to startle unsuspecting lady dog-walkers.

Leaving Flashers' Point, you can take a right path through low hanging oak trees, or the left path known as the 'Nettle Tunnel', because it is flanked by treacherous beds of nettles, which close over the top in summer.

At the end of both the oak path and the Nettle Tunnel, you come to the grassy boundary of Putney and Barnes Commons. As you carry on westward onto Barnes Common, on the right lie the tennis

courts, the putting green, with its little thatched pavilion, and the children's playground. To the left is Barnes Graveyard, which is unfenced and open to the public and every passing vandal. Many gravestones have been broken, stone angels lie battered and armless in the long grass. Most of the more august female statues have black eyes or broken noses. Untended, except (rarely) by morose Richmond council workers, it remains a place of haunting, if desolate, beauty, a forsaken garden beloved of film crews.

On the far west end of the Graveyard, you come to a triangle of parking space, flanked by chestnut trees, known locally as the 'Eternal Triangle', because so many lovers – usually adulterers who can only meet during the day – park their cars there during the lunch hour.

Beyond the Eternal Triangle lies a stretch of rough grass, leading to Rocks Lane, another main road, which crosses the Lower Richmond Road, and later Queen's Ride; but our walk turns left past a stretch of marshy ground, known unromantically as Barnes Bog, and curving back round the other side of the graveyard into the 'Squirrel Wood'. Filled with oaks, thorns, sycamores, and one very beautiful poplar, the wood is inhabited by dozens of grey squirrels and usually rings with the excited barks of dogs chasing them.

Emerging from the Squirrel Wood, you reach the Barnes-Putney boundary again. On the right lies a magnificent avenue of chestnuts. We, however, go straight on, crossing the blackthorn copse on the boundary into the Flower Garden. On the right, beyond the Chestnut Avenue, lies Putney Cemetery, which is framed by an ancient russet wall, and which (in contrast to the lush wilderness of Barnes Graveyard) is beautifully kept.

At the end of the Cemetery wall, the Flower Garden merges into the Big Common down a gentle slope known as 'Dogger Bank', because it is pitted with holes, made by all the dogs frenziedly burrowing after voles and shrews.

By Dogger Bank, you can either cross the Big Common diagonally which will bring you back to the ranger's hut again, or turn right along the Cemetery wall, until you reach another wooden hut on the edge of Lower Richmond Road.

Known locally as 'the 'Ut', it is the place where Putney Cricket Club have their tea and booze-ups with opposition teams after

cricket matches. The 'Ut is always a good place to catch recalcitrant dogs, because, while they investigate the dustbins for the remains of last Saturday's cricket tea, you can often sneak up on them and catch them by the tail.

From the 'Ut, you cross the Upper Richmond Road and Queen's Ride at the base of the Fair Triangle, which brings you back onto the first Common but on the cricket pitch side. On the right of the pitch lies Chester Close, a row of modern houses. Ahead, to the south, stretching the length of the first Common stands a row of solid, handsome red-brick Victorian houses, called Lower Common South. Each one has its own individual character, because they (like the houses in Egliston Road) were all designed completely differently by the same imaginative architect. They are splendid family houses, with big gardens filled in the spring with apple blossom and bluebells.

Turning left along Lower Common South, you reach Alimony Villas once more, and turn right back into Egliston Road. This walk, depending on whom I met or on the caprices of the dogs, or whether the muse struck, would take between thirty minutes and an hour and a half.

A variation on this route, but one I took less often, was to cross the first Common and turn left along the Fair Triangle, across the Putney-Barnes boundary, which is marked here by an oblong copse of grey poplars and silver birches.

From the boundary, you enter the 'Yarrow Meadow', which like most of Barnes Common – as opposed to Putney Common – is made up of sandy heath, covered with bracken, gorse bushes, oak trees, silver birches and beautiful grasses. In late summer, this stretch is dotted with white yarrow, hence its name.

From the Yarrow Meadow, you cross Common Road to 'Peter's Meadow', so named because, when I first explored it on a glorious summer morning, it reminded me of the meadow Peter goes out into, to the accompaniment of that haunting theme tune at the beginning of *Peter and the Wolf*. Once again this area is dotted with gorse, bracken, oak trees and long lush grass, which is mowed in summer for the local children's school sports. Since we left Putney it has been used in winter as a football pitch.

Along the south side of Peter's Meadow runs the railway line, and on the south-west corner, through a hawthorn copse, you enter a red-brick tunnel, known as 'Mugger's Tunnel', because it contains a blind corner, where bag snatchers lurk and jump out on unwary passers-by.

Through the tunnel, on the left, stands Barnes Station: a Gothic folly with its four mulberry red chimneys. Turning right, you plunge into a chestnut wood, which gives way to more open heathland. Ahead lies a group of splendid houses in the middle of the Common, called Mill Hill.

Turning left towards home, you can either cross Rocks Lane, then bear left over the Lower Richmond Road and follow the route of the first walk home past the Eternal Triangle and Barnes Graveyard, or turn right across the bottom of Peter's Meadow, back into the Yarrow Meadow and home across the grey poplar boundary and the Fair Triangle.

1972



Sunday, February 27th

Tomorrow we move to Putney. Fed up with our smart friends telling us we cannot live south of the river. Go over to the new house to talk to the plumbers. They inevitably don't turn up, so I go upstairs onto the balcony and gaze down Egliston Road – soon to be *our* road. At the bottom lies Putney Common, a glorious stretch of rain-rinsed green. Suddenly out of the gate opposite comes a Thelwell child on a gleaming skewbald pony, followed by a golden retriever. They all set off briskly towards the Common. Putney seems to combine the best of both town and country. Feel convinced we are right to move. Make momentous decision to get a dog.

Saturday, July 22nd

Drive down to Maidstone to collect new English setter puppy. He has a black patch over one eye, and is beautifully marked like a baby seal. I fall totally in love with him, which is a good thing, as he is sick fifteen times on the way home.

The minicab driver sits behind the wheel phlegmatically peeling off one page of the *Sporting Life* after another and handing them to

me in the back. Having exhausted the *Sporting Life*, he starts on the *Daily Mirror*. Despite this early setback, the puppy perks up the moment he gets home, and endears himself to everyone. He is to be called 'Smith'.

Thursday, August 10th

We all dote on the new puppy, but have gone off the name Smith. Everyone calls him 'Puppy' which is ludicrous, as he is getting larger every day.

Tuesday, October 10th

Puppy still called 'Puppy'. Together we have started exploring the delights of Putney Common. The only problem is that he will not come when he is called. Hardly surprising when he hasn't got a name yet.

Thursday, November 2nd

Puppy is finally named 'Maidstone'. Nervous of his escaping across Queen's Ride and the Lower Richmond Road, which are both main roads, I walk with him on the lead half-way down the Big Common past Putney Hospital and the bowling green before letting him loose. He promptly rushes off and plunges into Beverley Brook. Fortunately it isn't deep, but he emerges with thick black stockings of mud, like a tart, and whisks about, refusing to be caught.

Suddenly a tight-lipped woman with a Persil-washed West Highland terrier puppy on a long training lead comes over the hill. Scenting sport, Maidstone flattens. Imagining a little dog, the West Highland puppy approaches until she is nose to nose with Maidstone, who promptly rears up to his full height and pounces. The Westie screams her head off. Maidstone gets inextricably caught up in the long training lead. By the time he is extracted the Westie is also thickly covered in black mud.

Her tight-lipped mistress is understandably incensed. Can I not control my dog, she snaps; don't I realise that setters need proper training, and stalks off.

1973



Friday, February 23rd

An exquisite morning. Notice crimson blur on the five tallest elm trees on the north side of Beverley Brook. On closer examination, I am enchanted to discover the blur is made up of tiny rose-pink flowers. Maidstone takes advantage of my studying nature to vanish. I comb the Common yelling. He is nowhere to be seen. In the end, as I have a *Sunday Times* piece to finish by the afternoon, I give up in despair and go home.

On the doorstep, I find the Persil-white West Highland terrier and her owner, who, I have discovered, is called Rachel. She has brought Maidstone home, using her mackintosh belt as a lead.

'How dare you let your dog roam the streets?!' she says furiously, her face twitching like milk coming up to the boil. 'What happens if a lorry swerves to avoid him and crashes into another car, or mounts the pavement and knocks down a little kiddie?'

Escape inside the house muttering apologies and feeling deeply depressed. I know it is entirely my fault Maidstone is so ungovernable, and that, instead of working out the plots of novels and brooding on the beauties of nature, I should spend my time on the Common training him to sit and walk to heel. But as the children

are only four and one and three quarters, and neither of them is yet at school, the din at home is so frightful that the only time I get to think seems to be on the Common.

Tuesday, June 12th

Woken up by Maidstone licking my face, which means he wants to go out. I put on my dressing-gown and take him out into the garden. The birds are singing their heads off, the roses brim with rain from a recent storm. Maidstone, perfidious creature, takes advantage of my Wordsworthian reverie to escape through a hole in the fence, and, dodging the milkman and the postman, who make valiant attempts to stop him, is now hell bent for the Common. I chase him, trying to keep my dressing-gown within the bounds of decency. People walking their dogs look at me incredulously. Naturally I bump into Rachel. Such is her disapproval, I am forced into telling the frightful lie that I've actually been up for hours, writing. Finally I corner Maidstone in a neighbour's garden, where he is giving heart attacks to two hamsters in a cage.

By the time I get home, my Irish housekeeper who comes in daily has arrived and been told Maidstone has broken down the fence again. Muttering and armed with hammer and nails, she goes off into the garden.

Later, as it is quite hot, I take my typewriter into the garden. Maidstone buries an old pork chop he had found in the dustbin. My Irish housekeeper has now mended the fence; it looks like some sort of *objet trouvé* – nailed-on orange boxes, prams and the remains of an old typewriter blocking up the holes. Maidstone inspects it with interest; I suspect he's working on a book on great escapes. Any moment, he'll have all our cats vaulting over a wooden horse.

Just as I am leaving for lunch, my Irish housekeeper screams that Maidstone has bashed the fence down again. We all surge out onto the Common, including the mini-cab driver who's come to collect me, and finally corner him under a plane tree.

Later I arrive home from lunch to find six children having tea. The din is hideous. My Irish housekeeper informs me proudly that Emily, who is nearly two, has just spoken her first full sentence.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Puppy get out on the Common,' replies my Irish housekeeper.

Saturday, December 8th

Maidstone is now eighteen months. Utterly devoted to him, but cannot pretend his behaviour is improving with age. He is still impossible to catch if he doesn't choose.

Today I receive a delightful letter from a fellow setter owner, who says all setters are deaf on a walk. The only answer is to go out on the downs, lie down on the heather and enjoy the larks singing, and wait for your setter to exhaust himself. He will then come back. Feel this is impractical in the middle of winter in Putney when the main roads and Rachel are so near.

1974



Tuesday, February 12th

Two years ago, just before we moved to Putney, I left 50,000 words of a novel about show jumping behind on a bus after a drunken lunch. I hadn't taken a carbon and I never got the 50,000 words back. So great was the trauma that only now do I feel able to start re-writing it. As all the main characters in the novel live in the country, I need to get the rural details right. I will look an idiot if I have my hero chasing through a field of cow parsley in the middle of winter. Since I have so much time on my hands when I go out, waiting for Maidstone to come back, in future I am going to take a notebook and a pen onto the Common every day, so that I can jot down the changes in the seasons.

Today I notice once again the rosy blur on the five tallest elms along Beverley Brook which I noticed last year. Thank God it means spring is on the way. Also coltsfoot is out, a sudden explosion of sulphur yellow, on the second hillock by the football pitch.

Thursday, March 21st

Take Maidstone out at dusk. In the copse near Barnes Graveyard a hawthorn is putting out leaves like tiny green flames.

Down by the Brook, I find the first yellow celandine on the bank. Above, the starlings are gathering in my five beloved elms, blackening them against a soft lilac sky. In and out and round about the starlings wheel, with a high-pitched buzz, that can be heard for miles around. Maidstone runs down to the Brook, and gazes up at them with his mouth open and his speckled head on one side.

Thursday, March 28th

Creeping cold and damp. Yellow crocuses, like blackbirds' bills, and mud-splattered daffodils are out in Barnes Graveyard. The blackthorn is also out, and looks as though its sooty branches have been dipped in flour. Coke tins litter the ground after the mild weekend. Maidstone charges about, guzzling chip paper.

'Don't you ever feed him?' asks Rachel as she passes me. When she is not biting my head off, she assumes an arch, slightly hectoring manner, like someone out of *The Archers*.

I have discovered her dog is called Bridie, and that she is the highly efficient part-time secretary of a local solicitor. She is about forty, with a blonde curly perm, blue eyes and flicked-up spectacles. She has the permanently discontented, beady look of a baby bird whose mother is late with the worm.

Monday, April 1st

Very warm – out without a jersey for the first time. Notice the poplars by the bowling green are thickening with scarlet catkins and bronze leaves. All the young greens are so beautiful: the saffron of the oaks, the buff of the planes, the pale jade of the willows, the acid green of the limes, and the darker inky green of my five lovely elms. But most beautiful of all is a pear tree in one of the back gardens of Lower Common South, which I can see from my study, moonlit green just before dawn, or dancing in the noon sunshine, its white garlanded arms rising and falling.

The blackthorn is already over and the colour of old lace. Progress round the Common is very slow, as Maidstone keeps getting plugged into vole holes.

Saturday, April 6th

Dandelions and coltsfoot already have clock heads. And cow

parsley is swathing Beverley Brook with white. The pink flowers on the elms have been supplanted by new acid-green papery flowers with crimson hearts. On studying my tree book, however, I discover that these paper flowers are actually the fruits of the elm – and the equivalent of acorns on an oak tree, or sycamore keys.

Friday, April 12th

Very cold. Along the banks of Beverley Brook, the east wind is scattering the papery green elm fruits like confetti. Notice they are heart-shaped with tiny rose-pink centres. The hawthorn is about to flower, white buds rise from each branch like tiny clusters of balloons.

Today the Common is deserted except for a girl with a Peke. She seems to wander aimlessly. Approaching closer, I find she is dark and extraordinarily beautiful, with huge haunted, violet-ringed eyes. She starts, seems about to speak, then runs away.

I am reminded of Ezra Pound:

She would like someone to speak to her,
And is almost afraid that I will commit that indiscretion.

Wednesday, April 24th

Birds are nesting – each tree is a noisy green musical box. Today I bump into the beauty with the Peke a second time. I admire the Peke. She says he is called Michelin, because of his rolls of loose skin. Walking on the Common with another person is rather like having one's hair washed, or sitting behind a taxi driver: there is no eye contact, so people tend to talk about themselves more than they would normally.

The beauty, whose name is Rosie, tells me she split up from her solid reliable husband a year ago, to run off with a handsome lover, who was starting up a garden centre. The garden centre was a flop, all the plants died and so did their passion for one another. Now she lives in a pretty flat off the Upper Richmond Road, with no one pretty to put in it.

She says she is working for a degree in physics at London University. Find this hard to believe, like one of those claims made by prospective Miss Worlds, or nudes in *Playboy*, that their chief



interests are archaeology and Japanese court poetry. But there is a vulnerability about her that is very appealing.

On the way home, Maidstone and I pass a single blue suede glove hanging forlornly from the wire fence surrounding the Common ranger's hut. It reminds me of Rosie – no good without a partner.

Tuesday, April 30th

Exquisite day. Every chestnut candle blazing. The hawthorn blossom is out at last, exploding like white-hot stars from a rocket. Charmed by the piping of birds in every tree, mare's-tails are pushing up their snaky heads all over the Flower Garden. The newly mown Hillocks are a dazzling white-green in the sun, with the tracks of the mower disappearing into the inky-blue shadows cast by my five elms. A very late game of football is being played on the football pitch. A starling keeps imitating the referee's whistle. Maidstone is running everywhere after it. Wish he reacted to my summons with such alacrity.

Wednesday, May 1st

The Fair has arrived, and is set up as usual on the triangle of grass lying in the fork of Queen's Ride and Lower Richmond Road.

The scarlet and yellow merry-go-rounds, and the pink and hyacinth-blue turret of the helter-skelter rise out of the angelic spring-green trees like a fairy city.

Thursday, May 2nd

Torrential rain. Hellish, hellish morning, searching for Maidstone. In the end, Patty, my kind next-door-neighbour drives me round Putney looking for him. We finally track him down at the Fair. He is not buying a bunch of blue ribbons, but has been laboriously losing his virginity to a plump geriatric ginger bitch. He evidently took forty-seven minutes to do so. All the stallholders had bets on how long he would keep going. Appropriately the youth who mans the Big Dipper came closest. Maidstone is nearly black with rain and exhaustion. When he gets home, he sleeps for the rest of the day. Perhaps sex is the answer.

Saturday, May 11th

Sex is not the answer. Yesterday, Maidstone bashed another hole in Patty's fence, dug up some carefully tended regalia lilies, then chased Patty's cat back into the house through the cat door, and got stuck. Extracting himself, he brought the entire cat door with him, and charged around the garden, cat flap flying, like a galvanised sandwich-board man.

Sunday, May 12th

With the warm weather, the season of sleeping out has begun on the Common. Every night visiting tramps stretch out on the vaults in Barnes Graveyard. Pursuing Maidstone, I discover Rachel clicking her tongue over a splendid orgy that must have occurred last night. A copy of *The Sunday Times* is spread as bedding under a great holm oak, and on a nearby grave lie two chewed raw onions, a ball of yellow wool, an empty bottle of VP wine and a suspender belt.

'Disgusting,' snorts Rachel, then adds that she can't understand why I cannot catch Maidstone, when she finds it so easy.

Refrain from replying that in his new Lothario role, Maidstone is determined to seduce Bridie, who never leaves Rachel's heels – so now he doesn't either.

Monday, May 13th

A splendid row has broken out over the Common. In the middle of this perfect spring, the gas board has suddenly decided to lay a huge pipe, under Barnes Common, the Flower Garden, the two Hillocks, Beverley Brook, and down to the Thames. A big red crane already hangs like a malignant stork over my five tall elms. Today the workmen moved their bulldozers in, crashing through speedwell, buttercups and cow parsley, knocking down little hawthorns and oak trees in their green prime.

Even though I've only been walking on this Common for eighteen months, I feel all the outrage of a mother whose child has been raped. The workmen – who are Irish – come in for a lot of flak from the dog walkers, particularly Rachel, who seems to regard them as additionally responsible for all the troubles in Northern Ireland. Every time she passes them a flurry of 'Disgusting's or 'Trust the I R A's fall from her pursed lips.

Tuesday, May 14th

Walk with Rosie, who says she has been mugging up on the quantum theory, the meaning of which she tries but fails to explain to me. Say that I'm too cross about the bulldozers to concentrate. Rosie says gas boards don't even have to get planning permission. It's like *Alice in Wonderland*. Action first, permission afterwards.

Wednesday, May 15th

Out on the Common, I find all the Irish work-force in a high state of dudgeon. All their bulldozers have been wrecked by an overnight saboteur. Work will be held up at least a week.

Sunday, May 19th

Bulldozers still inoperative. Meet Rosie. She asks me with a smirk if I've noticed anything odd about the bulldozers. Then confesses she was the saboteur. On Friday, she crept out at twilight with wire cutters. Jolly brave of her, considering the bulldozers are parked on the edge of Barnes Graveyard, which is not only reputed to be haunted but always swarming at night with undesirables.

Suddenly, she says, she fell in with a posse of thugs, full of beer and bad intent, who were shambling towards the Graveyard, hell-

bent on bashing up the stone angels. Catching the eye of the leader, Rosie asked him if he had any idea how to immobilise a bulldozer.

After several 'Yer wot's, the penny dropped, and, seizing the wire cutters, the youth led his troops on the three bulldozers. A good time ripping out wires was had by all – no one bothered to bash up the stone angels that night and everyone, including Michelin, the Peke, ended up in the pub.

I am so impressed by Rosie's daring, that I ask her to dinner next week, rashly promising that I will find a delicious man for her.

Monday, May 20th

Out on the Common, an Irish workman tells me that, on account of the vandalism of bulldozers, the pipeline will be diverted round rest of the hawthorn copse. Highly delighted, but wish I could think of a delicious man for Rosie.

Sunday, May 26th

Spare man proving most elusive. Perhaps it's the weather, and the lush bosky greenness outside, but all the spare men I know seem suddenly to have got hitched up. They'd all love to come to dinner but can they bring Caroline/Fiona/Georgina/Rowena? The result is a colossal dinner party, but, alas, no one for Rosie.

In despair, I telephone an impossibly good-looking, jet-setting art dealer, who has such an exquisite house in the Boltons that I'm convinced he must be queer. By some miracle, he happens to be in London and is delighted to come. Perhaps Rosie can detach one of the single men from Caroline, Fiona, Georgina or Rowena.

Tuesday, May 28th

Disastrous dinner party. Jet-setting art dealer takes no interest in Rosie, who is looking stunning. He leaves early. Everyone else stays until three o'clock in the morning until we run out of drink. Feel I have utterly failed as Cupid.

Out on the Common holding my aching head together. Notice the trees are changing, the acid-green variations of spring are giving way to the uniform dark green of high summer. Next minute Rosie bounces up saying thank you for a super evening and a frightful hangover. I say I'm sorry about the art dealer.

'He was perfect,' says Rosie in surprise. 'He took my telephone number in the first five minutes, so we didn't have to bother to talk to each other for the rest of the evening, and he's taking me out on Thursday night.'

Add cautiously that I still suspect he may be queer.

Friday, May 31st

Dying to find out how Rosie got on with the art dealer. Walk out on the Common, slap into Rachel in her most belligerent mood. Maidstone, she says, broke into her neighbour's garden yesterday and leapt on her cocker spaniel bitch who is 'in season'. Rachel's lecture is fortunately cut short by Rosie, who has black rings under her eyes.

'How was last night?' I ask.

'I went to a lecture on Rutherford,' says Rosie firmly.

'But I thought. . . ' I blurt out.

'It was excellent,' Rosie goes on, and proceeds to describe a lecture in such abstruse detail, that eventually Rachel stalks off to examine the progress of the wild roses on the Flower Garden.

'I'm not going to let that cow know what I'm up to,' says Rosie. 'Now about last night. Your art dealer friend is definitely not gay.'

Evidently he took her back to dine at his exquisite house, and her suspicions about his masculinity were aroused not only by the perfectly arranged flowers, but also because he cooked new potatoes dripping in mint and butter, but never touched one. Nor did he touch her – all evening – until, positively beady with desire, she started picking on him. Whereupon he told her not to be a bloody bitch. She was about to flounce out of his exquisite house (without the taxi money home) when he gathered up all eight stone of her, carried her upstairs without panting, threw her on his Jacobean four-poster, and took her, added Rosie with a shiver of delight, most gloriously.

As bonus points, Rosie goes on, he didn't even bat an eyelid when he had to drive her home afterwards, because she doesn't like leaving Michelin alone all night. Feel I have played Cupid with consummate skill.

Ahead we see Rachel, making Bridie sit for five seconds, before

they cross the Lower Richmond Road. I ask Rosie if she knows anything about Rachel's home life.

'Three children and a husband called Alastair who thinks he married down because he went to a minor public school,' says Rosie. 'Alastair has great charm but doesn't believe a gentleman should work, so he spends his time walking round his estate, which in his case is a three-bedroomed house off the Upper Richmond Road, which leaves him unoccupied and under Rachel's feet for most of the day. Rachel was once very pretty, but is now soured with life's vicissitudes. They are evidently very poor.'

Feel I must be nicer to Rachel in future.

Saturday, June 1st

Dull, gentle, sweaty day. Young bracken is uncurling under the trees in the squirrel wood. Wild roses are out on the Flower Garden. Dotted pale pink over the bushes, they hang like faded rosettes in a tackroom. Also find knapweed, and clover, and bird's-foot trefoil, known as 'bacon and eggs', because of its orange and yellow flowers. Just trying to describe a bank of fat white cumulus clouds gathered above Rocks Lane, when Henrietta sails into view.

Henrietta lives in one of the big houses in Egliston Road. A Virginia Wolverine with a long, pale predatory face and light brown hair drawn back in a bun, she has great organising ability, and considers herself very well bred. Her husband, Ned, who is a stockbroker, always insists on telling everybody that Henrietta was a Wilson-Twickenham before he married her. Henrietta insists on telling everybody that Ned never stops talking in bed. She is very clever, with a second in English, but chooses to stay at home discontentedly, and bring up her five pale, tremendously clever children. If she hadn't made such sacrifices for Ned and the children, she is fond of implying, she would by now be editing *The Times Literary Supplement* or writing definitive biographies. I suspect that, if put to the test, she wouldn't have come up with the goods. People who can write a book usually do.

As with Rachel, I think her bitchiness stems from deep unhappiness. One is reminded of Browning – a 'bitter heart that bides its time and bites' – but this doesn't make her jibes any less painful. Because she has read somewhere that it is good for children to be

brought up with animals, she owns a depressed field spaniel called Lady Glencora, after the Trollope heroine, who is walked on the Common about once a fortnight. Today Henrietta is trailing Lady Glencora, and two of her pale children (who always bury their faces in her crutch when one speaks to them).

‘What are you writing down in that notebook?’ she demands.

I reply brightly that I am studying cloud formations.

‘Isn’t there going to be too much weather in your novel?’ asks Henrietta.

She then goes on to say that she is thinking of buying a horse and stabling it near Ham Common. Why don’t I buy a half-share in it, then I can have first-hand experience of horses, which would be far more useful to my novel than rabbiting on about cloud formations?

Mutter that I’ll think about it, but that with producing *Sunday Times* pieces every other week, as well as the novel, I don’t think I’ll have time for a horse.

‘What are you working on for *The Sunday Times*?’ she asks.

‘A piece on housework,’ I reply.

‘But you never do any,’ says Henrietta with a snort of derision.

Gritting my teeth, I break off a plantain.

‘Oh look,’ I add, admiring its domed brown head with the Saturn ring of white seeds, ‘It looks like Lord Longford.’

Henrietta snorts with more derisive laughter, and, putting on a broad West Country accent, says: ‘Aaaaaaah, this way they be known as Lard Larngfords.’

Resist temptation to push her into a wild rose bush.

Sunday, June 2nd

White valerian flowering by Dogger Bank. Despite its rather boring exterior it has a beautiful smell – mignonette crossed with wild roses. Along Beverley Brook, I notice young emerald green dock leaves growing by a bed of nettles. Reflect that people can be divided into nettles and docks. Nettles sting and provoke you, like Rachel and Henrietta. Patty, my dear next-door-neighbour, and Rosie, on the other hand, are both docks, because they’re soothing, kind, and always leave you feeling happier after five minutes in their company.



Monday, June 10th

Patty once more proves that she is definitely a dock. This morning Maidstone took a running jump at her patched-up fence, landing sideways on all fours. Next minute thirty feet of fence collapsed, flattening my gentle neighbour's newly planted herbageous plants. Having made our gardens open plan, Maidstone proceeded to disinter several guinea pigs and rabbits which were buried at the bottom of the garden. I wish the gas board would give him a job digging trenches for the pipeline; I'm sure he would be infinitely quicker than the bulldozers.

Over several drinks in the evening, Leo and I promise Patty we will instal new fence to contain Maidstone.

Thursday, June 13th

Lovely walk with Emily. It is her third birthday today, and her pace round the Common is about as slow as Maidstone's. We blow dandelion clocks, and look for the two pairs of fairies' shoes, which lie neatly together under the lid of the white dead-nettle flower.

Emily's favourite games, however, are to wash 'the Lady', and put flowers in the Fairies' Swimming Pool. 'The Lady' is the lovely

bronze of a woman's profile set in a broken-off tombstone, lying in the long grass on the edge of Barnes Graveyard. The lady's name is Maria Kathleen Ayoub. According to the tombstone, the bronze was cast by her husband, an artist who outlived her by twenty-five years. She has a fine, long-suffering face, not unlike a kind Henrietta. I always have the fantasy that she was one of those high-principled Edwardian ladies, married on impulse to this talented but feckless Middle-Eastern gentleman, who gave her a hard time when she was alive, but missed her when she died.

Rain-water often gathers in the hollows of the bronze. Emily likes to wash Maria Kathleen's face with it, then give her a muffler of grass or leaves to keep her warm – although she hardly needs keeping warm in this weather.

Our other ritual is to float flowers in the Fairies' Swimming Pool, which is a six-inch hollow in the fork of the huge holm oak on the south of the Graveyard. In wet weather it fills up and overflows like a rain gauge. Today we float two white dog daisies in the pool.

Thursday, June 20th

Rosie is still madly in love with her art dealer. He appears to have given up jet-setting in favour of staying in London and sleeping with Rosie. It's so sweet, she says, the way he folds up both his clothes and her clothes before getting into bed.

Monday, July 1st

The Common has reached the tatty stage when it needs sun. All the long grasses are turning yellow. Lime tree wings litter the churchyard. Emily and I collect some today and float them in the Fairies' Swimming Pool, in case the Fairies need spare pairs.

Thursday, July 4th

Oh dear, oh dear. Leo went off to the country to play cricket today. I went to a local party, and drank too much wine on no breakfast, then Henrietta asked me back to lunch. She always makes me feel such a lousy and superficial writer, and after three hours in her company, she really convinced me that part-owning a horse would be the only way of bringing authenticity to my show-jumping novel.

In the afternoon we went to see a charming chestnut gelding and I was horrified to hear myself saying what fun it would be to buy him.

Now back home I am feeling depressed and deeply apprehensive. When will I have time to exercise and look after a horse every day? I can't afford it, and he's bound to bash the stable door down like Maidstone with the fence and cavort all over Ham Common. Darling Leo returns from cricket. I confess that I have given Henrietta the impression I will buy a half-share in the horse.

'Well, you'll get the back half,' says Leo. 'Ring her at once and say you can't.'

Telephone Henrietta. Can tell she's absolutely livid.

Five minutes later she is on the doorstep trailing five pale children and Lady Glencora. Leo answers the door and blocks Henrietta's entrance. She insists on having it out with me.

'Well you can't,' says Leo.

'Well fuck you,' says Henrietta, all in front of the pale children, Lady Glencora and Maidstone, and storms off.

Sunday, July 7th

After sleepless night, I spend the day not answering the telephone. Alas, the perfidious Maidstone keeps escaping through the hole in Patty's fence, always along Egliston Road, so I have to crawl after him on my hands and knees in front of Henrietta's house, so that she won't see me over her wall.

Monday, July 8th

Crawling on my hands and knees after Maidstone, I go slap into Rachel's stockinged kneecaps. If she's so broke, I think irritably, why doesn't she wear trousers and save on the expense of tights?

'What *are* you doing?' she demands.

'Going to Canossa,' I mutter

Wednesday, July 10th

Beautiful warm day. My five elms arch in the sunlight like dark green paperweights. Sorrel, rusted the colour of dried blood, stabs the cool green, newly mown Hillocks like murderers' daggers. Why do poplars always shiver – even in high summer? Meet Rosie who

tells me that Henrietta has bought the horse with another Putney housewife. They have found livery stables near Richmond Park, and the horse is to be called Phineas, after the Trollope hero.

Monday, July 15th

Solid new fence is installed between our garden and Patty's. It is both hideous and hideously expensive. Take Maidstone out to admire it. Within minutes, he has bounded onto the rubbish heap, and is tightroping gaily along the wall at the bottom of our garden. Now he looks into neighbouring gardens, with the triumphant air of some mountaineer who has scaled the peak, can see into five counties and is making up his mind which to drop into. He chooses a garden on the far left and lands on a lot of rhubarb, to the outraged shrieks of the garden's sunbathing owner.

Monday, August 5th

Very depressed. The moment we finish impreguably barricading off Maidstone's access to the rubbish heap and the back wall he starts examining the fence on the left-hand side of the garden, trampling down clematis and plants at 50p a throw. We go out on the Common not speaking. Maidstone chases butterflies and gets covered in burrs.

It is extraordinary how our attitude has changed towards the Irish workmen on the Common. Over the past months, we have become firm friends, they always talk to the children, and help me catch Maidstone. One of them who drives a gas board van has even become my admirer. He has a squint, brushed-forward black hair and a fund of stories about previous conquests. As he sweats round the Common after me, reeking of Brut, he keeps saying: 'Why are you so scruffy, Jill? I cannot understand why you're so scruffy.'

He might be echoing Rachel.

Today he tells me that last night he scored with a barmaid who had nipples which stuck out like acorns. Feel he may have taken the simile from the acorns which are already crunching underfoot at the entrance to the Flower Garden.

On the way home, I meet Henrietta's husband coming home from the City. To my relief, he is very matey.

'You're well out of it,' he says gloomily. 'Phineas has already tossed Henrietta off fifteen times,' which sounds most dubious.

Saturday, August 10th

Go out early on the Common. I am accosted by Old Dick, a local stalwart, who winter and summer wears a black beret like an onion man, and who lovingly tends the garden round the ranger's hut. Today he gives me a bunch of yellow roses, and asks me if I'm coming to the meeting tomorrow.

When I look blank, he says the Putney Improvement Society, backed up by the local cricket club, are planning to build a second cricket pitch on the Big Common. Tomorrow at the local Methodist hall, the Improvement Society will reveal the findings of their working party. Dick is dead against another cricket pitch, and says he needs my support.

Sunday, August 11th

Leo and I attend meeting in the Methodist hall, together with assorted dog walkers, including Rosie, Rachel, and Henrietta, who has brought along her daily woman, Mrs Bond. Henrietta nods frostily at me and Leo. Sitting beyond Henrietta are Old Dick in his black beret breathing fire, and Ken, the ranger of Putney Common, a charming, gentle, blond young man, who dropped out of advertising, and who now spends his time watching out for flashers, picking up litter on the Common and mediating between the dog walkers. Presumably he will now be expected to look after a second cricket pitch as well.

Also present, but sitting on the other side of the hall, are a depressed-looking curate, representatives from the Scouts, a militant lobby from the local cricket club, and a posse of vigorous lady botanists. Leo and I are not speaking to one another because he is supporting the local cricket club, and is in favour of a second pitch.

Feelings run high, as a handsome grey-haired man with a commanding manner, looking not unlike Gary Cooper, gets up onto the platform. 'That's Judge Hamilton – high Tory,' snorts Henrietta, disapprovingly.

Judge Hamilton then outlines the proposals of the Putney Improvement Society's working party.

After a preamble on how the working party was set up, which sends Mrs Bond, Henrietta's daily woman, fast asleep, the Judge produces a map of Putney Common.

Pointing with a stick to the two Hillocks south of Beverley Brook, he says: 'We feel there is much room for improvement here, for more interesting trees and shrubs to give the area an appearance of natural beauty as on Barnes Common.'

This is a red rag to a bulldozer. There is colossal rivalry between the two Commons, and although Putney Common may lack the rather stylised lushness of Barnes Common, no one who has seen the sun slanting on the newly mown Hillocks or my beloved five elms rising out of the Brook could call the area deficient in natural beauty.

Judge Hamilton's stick then passes over the lovely green stretch of the Big Common, rumoured to be the site of the second pitch.

'Now this area,' he says with deep cunning, 'could never become an area of natural beauty.' He then becomes as lyrical as Edmund Blunden: 'But what better sight here than lots of people in white flannels playing cricket?'

'And losing matches,' chorus the dog walkers.

He then points to the section of the first Common next to the church.

'Nor is there any facility for young people to play football. A properly laid out football pitch for boys – and if necessary for girls,' he adds hastily, 'is a reasonable thing.'

He then proceeds to stun the meeting by saying the working party intend to turn the Common into a sports arena, with not merely a new cricket pitch, but two football pitches, a putting green, and two kiddies' adventure playgrounds.

'There'll be balls everywhere,' says Henrietta in a ringing voice.

'Bloody Wembley,' shouts Rosie.

A coffee break follows. Cabals gather in every corner muttering furiously. For once Rachel, Henrietta, Rosie and I are on the same side. After the interval the fun becomes fast and furious.

Now it is the turn of the residents of the adjacent flats to kick up a fuss about the noise from the proposed Kiddies' Adventure

Playgrounds. A bright spark suggests putting the Adventure Playground near Beverley Brook so it won't disturb anyone.

'Won't the kiddies drown in the Brook?' asks an anxious mother.

'Not the sort of children we have in mind,' says Judge Hamilton blandly.

'Inflatable ones,' mutters Leo.

With feelings running high, we move on to the cricket pitch.

'Why do the cricket club need a second cricket pitch?' asks Rosie.

Because, she is told, the clubhouse (which everyone else in Putney calls the 'Ut) is too far away from the present pitch, and it means that the little colts have to cross dangerous roads to get to it.

'They'll be allowing horses on the Common soon,' snaps Rachel, earning a filthy look from Henrietta, who is obviously hoping to be tossed off by Phineas nearer home.

'Why not move the 'Ut then?' suggests Rosie.

'The reason they want a pitch near the 'Ut,' says Old Dick, 'is because they drink so much Red Barrel beforehand, they don't like to have to run across two main roads every time they go to the toilet.'

Rousing cheers all round, counterpointed by loud snores from Mrs Bond. Someone then asks Judge Hamilton to show how far the proposed playgrounds and pitch will reach. To howls of derision, he draws two minute football pitches, and a tiny cricket pitch.

'A mouse could hit a six on that,' says Leo, who appears to be changing sides.

'And there's plenty of room for a hockey pitch in the middle,' adds the Judge with a placating laugh.

The audience gaze at him stonily.

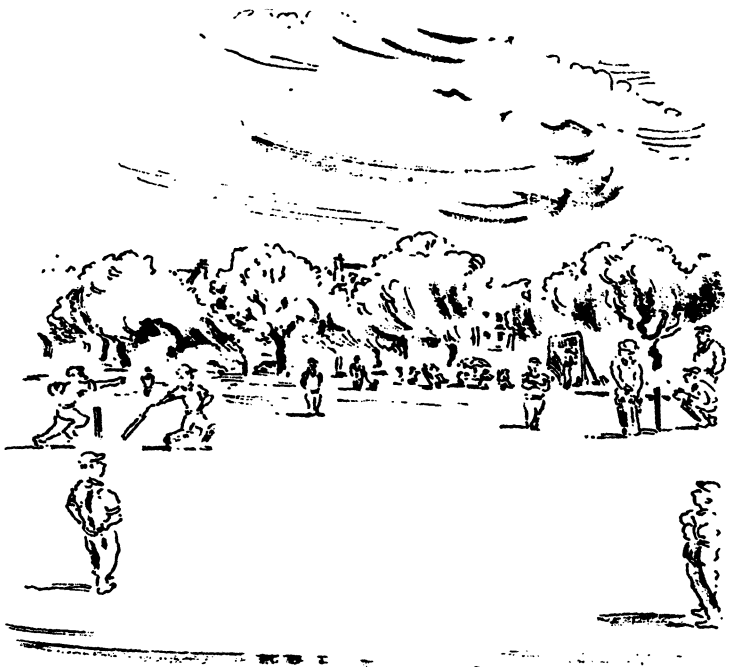
Mrs Bond, having been nudged sharply in the ribs by Henrietta, wakes up suddenly, and says: 'Let's get up a partition.'

'Let's have a vote,' yells Old Dick.

Judge Hamilton then says quickly that it isn't the aim of the meeting to have a vote, and that the working party's proposals will be put to the Conservators, who run Putney and Wimbledon Commons, in the autumn.

'But how will the Conservators know the strength of the opposition unless we vote?' protests Henrietta.

Judge Hamilton shrugs.



'Then what was the point of our coming here?' demands Rachel indignantly.

'I don't really know,' says the Judge.

The meeting breaks up in disarray. Walk home with Rosie who says her art dealer has given her a Picasso drawing.

Tuesday, August 20th

Having written a piece for *The Sunday Times*, describing the protest meeting, I have become the temporary heroine of the dog walkers, and particularly Old Dick, who talks to me over the netting every time I pass, and offers me bunches of roses, or whatever is blooming in the ranger's garden. Today he offers me a huge marrow. Ask if I can collect it on the way back.

I am just admiring a clump of toadflax by the football pitch, with its lovely orange and yellow snapdragon flowers, when I see Judge Hamilton striding across the Common, no doubt to re-examine Putney's lack of natural beauties. I should have kept the marrow for protection. Bolt to safety into the Flower Garden, where the pipeline has been laid and covered over with earth. Notice dandelions are already growing over it. Nothing is indestructible. Pondering on mortality, I encounter an old lady in a pork pie hat and an orange wig, with a face as wrinkled as a dried-up river bed.

She tells me she was once a newspaper columnist: admired, controversial and widely read. Now in old age, she is bored, friendless and alone. Wonder, with a shiver, if this will be my fate.

Saturday, October 5th

So busy finishing a book that I haven't kept my diary for weeks. Out on the Common, the bracken ranges from hot red setter red to pale gold to labrador yellow. Chestnut leaves are much more systematic. They go brown round the outside first, then gradually the rust creeps inwards.

Everything looks glorious. I am delighted to hear from Old Dick that Judge Hamilton's plans to turn the Common into a sports arena have been scrapped.

In the afternoon, I walk with Emily. We cover the Lady with little gold oval-shaped acacia leaves. The Fairies' Swimming Pool is overflowing. Fill it with sycamore keys.

Friday, October 25th

Go out in vile temper. The children's Nanny, who replaced my Irish housekeeper a year ago, announced yesterday that today she was going for an interview for another job – in Leicester of all places. Today, to add injury to injury, she commandeered the services of the gardener (who only comes for two hours a week anyway) to drive her to Paddington, leaving me with a *Sunday Times* piece to finish, and two children to amuse. Find myself shouting a great deal.

Take the children out on the Common and shout some more. We take the path between the tennis courts and Barnes Graveyard, and I feel very ashamed when I read a tombstone, engraved with the words:

Jane Selwyn, died 1889 – her children shall rise up
and call her blessed. Her husband, also he praiseth her.

Very much doubt if the stone masons will chisel such a flattering epitaph on my tombstone and make a big effort to be nice.

Eventually cheered up, first by the beauty of the day. A soft west wind is turning all the leaves inside out. Leaves, on the ground, curl up like brandy snaps. Rain has stripped away the down from the thistles. Conkers litter the ground like Paynes Poppets.

Then Felix picks up a very spiky conker husk, and says: 'You're going to find a big prick in your bed, tonight, Mummy.'

Returning home, however, I work up new rage against incumbent Nanny for leaving me in the lurch. I'll give her several pieces of my mind for annexing the gardener.

Later she returns with a bunch of freesias, saying it was a bloody job and she doesn't want it at all. Feel so relieved, I decide not to mention annexing of gardener.

Monday, October 28th

Notice poplars keep their top leaves longest – as though their nails were painted with gold – but limes lose their top leaves first. A bare lime is an unruly ugly tree, spiky like Fuzzypeg or Struwelpeter. The poplar, on the other hand, stripped, dancing and pale silver in the half light, is a thing of frenzied, naked, decadent beauty. Pondering on beauty, I bump into Rosie, who looks a bit

sheepish. I ask after her art dealer. She says he's fine, but she does wish he wouldn't fold up their clothes every time he climbs into bed. It's getting on her nerves.

Thursday, October 31st

Deeply irritated to get telephone call from Rosie's art dealer. Poor Rosie has 'flu, and can't have lunch with him, could I possibly pop down to the shops and take her some roses and some grapes, and give her his love? Wonder crossly why he can't ring Interflora, and why everyone thinks writers don't work. Discover grapes are £2 a pound, and roses a good deal more. Wonder even more unworthily if I'll ever get my money back.

Go round to Rosie's and bang on the door. She answers it, reeking of scent, obviously just about to go out, and flushed not with 'flu but embarrassment. Sourly I give her grapes, roses and the art dealer's love. She looks sheepish, but also bursting with the desire to impart information. Then she admits she has gone off the art dealer – it's *so* boring and predictable to have someone who always rings and arrives on time. She has fallen madly in love with a doctor. Married? I ask. Yes, sighs Rosie, but utter bliss.

I suppose now the Picasso drawing will become the victim of a broken home.

Sunday, December 1st

Have just finished a great jag of writing. Endless rain for a fortnight has turned the Common into the Great Lakes. It is very beautiful. Misty grey skies reflected in sheets of water. Raindrops gleam on the flat clover leaves. Halfway down the path by the tennis courts, one of my favourite trees, a huge muscular chestnut, soars bronze and drenched as though it has been hewn by Michelangelo.

On the other side of the Graveyard, I meet an old lady called Mrs Woodward. She is eighty but still most attractive. She has a charming cairn bitch, who is being hotly pursued by a wonderfully vulgar mongrel with a smooth brindle coat, greyhound ears, and a curly tail. He has a jaunty battle-scarred face, and the outwardly relaxed air of the competent sexual operator.

Mrs Woodward says in her youth, those kinds of mongrels were

called 'butcher's dogs' because they always followed the butcher's van. I said at home we'd always called them tight-skinned-curly-tails.

Her one terror in life, Mrs Woodward says, is that her little cairn will outlive her and be alone.

Tuesday, December 10th

Maidstone escapes yet again. Discover him fornicating joyfully on the Big Common with the brindle butcher's dog. Rachel, as disapproving as ever, tells me the butcher's dog lives in one of the council flats on the Ranelagh Estate beyond the bowling green. He is called Rex, known locally as 'Sexy Rexy', and always out making a nuisance of himself.

Thursday, December 12th

I don't know who is more in love: Rosie with her married doctor, or Maidstone with Sexy Rexy. Have the feeling that both liaisons will end in tears.

Today I go on *Desert Island Discs* with Roy Plomley. He is an enchanting man, like a little elf, and an inspired listener. We have lunch first, and discover we both live in Putney. I drink wine, he doesn't. Afterwards the programme goes splendidly, and we get fearful giggles, mentioning Putney as often as we possibly can, in the hope that we can push the value of houses up.

Wednesday, December 25th

Our Happy Christmas is not helped by Maidstone escaping through the left-hand fence, because Leo and I are cooking Christmas lunch, and have not yet had time to take him for a walk. He stays out for four hours – longer than ever before. We are all desperate. At two in the afternoon, we decide to go ahead and open our presents, but it is all hopeless. Every present opened – a doll for Emily, a space ship for Felix, a silk scarf for me – has a card with 'Love from Maidstone' inside it. Emily, Felix and I are all crying when the telephone rings. I pounce on it. It is from a call box, and misfires twice. Finally a voice asks:

'Have you lost a 'uge grey spaniel?'

'Oh yes,' I squawk, making frantic thumbs up signs to Leo and the children.

'Where is he?'

'In Roehampton,' says the voice.

'That's three miles away,' I think in horror.

'E don't seem to want to come home,' the voice goes on. 'E's 'ad a turkey dinner, and he ate everything except the sprouts.'

Leo sets off grimly to collect Maidstone, and says we shall have to put up a new fence on the left side.

