

YOU AREN'T ON OATH AT A PARTY

by Dennis
McEldowney

THE Party, such as it was, had got under way before I arrived. There was already a haze in the room and people sat around dimly with glasses in their hands. The hostess bustled me in.

"Now," she said, "you haven't met James Sayers, have you? You'd have a lot in common, I know you would."

She looked around and discovered that James Sayer's flank was already occupied. "Do you mind?" she said, and with a gesture of her finger she removed this guest from her chair. The dispossessed scuttled away into the fog with a startled upward glance, and spilt some of her drink on the carpet. I took her vacated chair.

I was now too close to James Sayers to have a comprehensive view of him. All I could see at first was the red and uneven skin of his face, the pits and bumps. In some of the hollows hair lurked, having escaped the razor, but he was for the most part respectably shaved. When I could reduce this mass of uneven skin to a face I found nothing startling in it. The hair around it was gingery, the ears small, the eyes pale, and the spectacles rimless. There was nothing for it but to hope for the best; which I would have been prepared to do if I had not lately read his poems. I recalled the rows of little dots where the feeling became too intense for expression. I recalled the sentiments, so infinitely in tune with nothing in particular. I wondered what to say. But he started.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said. He had begun the conversation with a mechanical phrase, and as if he had put a penny in the slot, out popped another from me.

"That remark always makes me feel nervous," is, I regret to recall, what I said. I give him full marks for the

fact that he didn't follow it up. Instead he said:

"Betty's been trying to keep this place clear for you for the last hour. I'm afraid she wants to make history by bringing together two geniuses or genii." He laughed, but did not seem to show any of the qualms I was feeling.

"Well, you never know," I said. I was surprised to hear myself say it, and so early in the evening, too. I resolved to be more careful.

"I can't imagine you'd find anything to interest you in my little things,"

he said, "but I've been wanting for a long time to thank you for your book." I wasn't exactly enchanted by this, coming from him. There are some people from whom praise is an embarrassment. The thought of having written something they would enjoy is enough to make you look at yourself with a jaundiced eye. Nevertheless I went on listening while he told me he had read my book twice, the first time at a sitting, the second time more slowly to savour the style. And I reflected that perhaps I was being a little hasty in dismissing his opinion; that because a person writes bad verse he is not necessarily disqualified as a critic. He may have a blind spot about his own work and yet be able to see that of others quite clearly. There have been instances



of it in the past, I was sure, although I was not able on the spur of the moment to recall any actual names. I began to hope it was so with James Sayers for he was not only continuing to praise my book, becoming quite animated about it indeed, but he was giving the most praise to those parts of the book which I was sure myself were the best.

"But I didn't think," I said, "that I'd expressed myself clearly enough in the second to last chapter. I don't know if readers grasped my meaning. I'm sorry now that I didn't do something about it at the proof stage but I was too close to it then to see it clearly."

"I didn't have any difficulty with it," he said. "I don't know what you intended to convey, but if it was what you did

convey to me it would have been a crime to meddle with it."

Then there was a pause and he finished what he had in his glass, while I watched him and felt friendly. He had evidently said what he had to say about my book: the natural development in the conversation would be for me to say something about his. The more I thought about it the more I thought it would be churlish not to. There is no harm in a few kind words to a pleasant person. One is not speaking *ex cathedra* at a party.

"I've just been reading your poetry," I said.

"That does surprise me," he said. "I'd be interested to know what you thought of it, if you thought anything. Don't pull your punches—I can take it."

"I thought," I said, choosing my words, "there was great intensity of feeling behind it."

"I'm pleased to hear you say that. That's the impression I most want to convey. In my opinion, most poets nowadays tend to be emotionally inhibited."

Inhibited! I thought. What about those little dots? But what I said was, "I gather you think most of your contemporaries are too cerebral."

"That's precisely what I do think. Why can't they be content once in a while just to feel?"

"Why, indeed?" I said. Our host came around with a bottle and gave Sayers a refill and when he had attended to that he turned back to me. His pocked skin had begun to glisten.

"You know," he said, "I'm enjoying this party a lot more than I thought I would. Plenty of people have told me they like my poems, in general terms, but most of them are totally inarticulate. It's refreshing to talk to a person with some literary perception now and then. I've had a few hard knocks from the academic critics, as you know."

"Haven't we all?" I said.

"They sometimes object to my use of *points de suspension*," he said. He said it as an isolated statement, but he obviously hoped it would lead somewhere. Cravenly, I obliged.

"I must confess to a prejudice against them myself," I said. He looked a little downcast, while trying to look merely interested. "But," I went on, "after all, rules are made to be broken and a good writer can get away with anything. For example there's usually nothing more maddening than a novelist who keeps forecasting the catastrophes that are going to happen a few chapters further on. 'The had-I-but-known school of fiction' a friend of mine calls it. But Dostoevsky does it all the time, and because it is Dostoevsky you accept his right to do it." What possesses me to babble on like this? I wondered, but Sayers seemed to be enjoying it.

"In my use of it," he said, "it isn't merely a typographical device. It's a direction to the voice of the person reading the poem. I don't know if you remember how I end a poem to a thrush: 'I heard his cry of wonder, and I knew...?'"

"I remember it well," I said. "If it weren't for the points no one would read or even see that line as it ought to be seen."

"Few of us," I observed, "realise the importance of punctuation."

Fortunately at this point, just as I was beginning to wonder how much longer I could keep up the farce, he tired of his work and went back with new vigour to mine. And I was even more convinced that, incredible though it might seem, he was perceptive. This

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 972)

P	A	P	E	R	F	E	S	T	O	O	N
O	E	A	I	T	P	I					
T	E	N	S	I	O	N	R	E	E	V	E
H	A	N	I	A	N	C					
O	W	L	S	E	S	T	I	M	A	T	E
L	A	H	G	I							
E	L	A	P	S	E	C	H	O	R	A	L
B	P	M	T	A							
S	P	U	R	I	O	U	S	E	T	O	N
Q	S	R	T	L	Q	C					
C	H	I	N	A	T	R	A	I	P	S	E
K	V	N	E	T	E	R					
S	W	E	E	T	E	R	E	A	R	L	S

Clues Across

- One result of faulty net play? (7).
- "Men have died from time to time, and — have eaten them, but not for love" ("As You Like It," Act 4, Scene 1) (5).
- I'm not disposed to be a playful Athenian (5).
- Something no single man will ever be... (7).
- ... and this is no single solution of the fuel problem (4, 4).
- 22 across loses his head, and also his identity, apparently (4).
- Ran into Mussolini, with this, perhaps as the 1 across? (7).
- An old Spanish coin, obviously genuine (4).
- Neat arrangement in dumb-show in the interval (8).

Clues Down

- Father under canvas? No, just the reverse, it's clear (6).
- Calling a man topsy-turvy over a mixed drink (6).
- A kingly beast and a stubborn one, both upset and trodden underfoot (8).
- Broad term for 8 across who has lost the top half of 5 down (4).
- Suitable sport for quarrelsome people? (6).
- It occurs not only in Leap Year (6).
- Their clients are sometimes bare-headed, and what they make could look grim, askew! (3, 6).
- A source of Dutch courage? (8).
- Mocking, but most of it could be used to smooth things over (6).

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Remarks, frequently on board? (7).
- It is without rhyme, but not necessarily without reason (5).
- This member of the chapter is a hundred soon! (5).
- Espy among the cinders (7).

R.W.H. wishes to thank those who so kindly wrote or sent cards to her during her recent enforced spell off-duty. These messages were greatly appreciated

- The vehicle is overweight, so naturally it could not be packed in this (6)
- Hairy (6).
- River cut off to the north (6).
- 21 across won't (4).

No. 973 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

