How Will You Weather an Eternal Night?

by Diane Alimena

Harriet smacked her egg spoon on the top of her first boiled egg. "Mark my words, Belinda, when Henry and Agatha get back from this Edward Young festival we are in for a series of the most depressing sermons ever. As nice as it will be to have them away for a few days, it may not be worth the aftermath." Harriet liberally salted and peppered her egg and attacked it with her first toast soldier.

"Yes", agreed Belinda, "The Night Thoughts are very sobering. Perhaps he'll pick up some new insights. That would be a nice change." It was almost impossible for Belinda to criticize the Archdeacon. "And maybe a few days away together will be refreshing for them both. Though the bus trip to Welwyn will be tiring."

Emily had entered with the morning post and spoke up. "No Miss. Mrs. Hoccleve isn't going after all. She tripped this morning and sprained her ankle. Just the Archdeacon is going now. The postman told me."

And indeed, just across the way, Agatha was hobbling with a cane and hurrying the Archdeacon toward the waiting cab.

"Agatha, this is most inconvenient. I was counting on your help to take notes and manage the luggage. You really should have been more careful," complained Henry.

"I would think you could just be grateful to me for having booked you.… I mean us….for this. A night reading of Night Thoughts standing by Edward Young's grave at St. Mary's cemetery. What could be a nicer way for you to honor your favorite poet on the 250th anniversary of his birth. I am sorry to have to miss it." Agatha countered.

Henry settled into the taxi and waved goodby with an exaggerated gesture. "Hmph" he thought, "I will have to make the best of it….. or perhaps the most of it," as he realized he would be free from his admirable helpmeet for two days.

Agatha hobbled back to the house. When she shut the door her cane joined the umbrellas in the stand and she strode to her large armchair by the fire. Settling in she put her feet up on the hassock and called for Florrie to bring her a tray of coffee. Then picking up her knitting bag she pulled out a hidden box of chocolates and Agatha Christie's latest mystery*, Murder at the Vicarage*, and smiled.

Henry arrived at the bus station and managed to find a bench where he parked his suitcase. Then, spying a tobacconist and off-license a few doors down, he strolled over. It was an unseasonably cold June and he knew that Agatha would have been fussing about his health so he would take care. The bell tinkled pleasantly as he entered and sounded even more delightful to him as he left with a pint of brandy and half a dozen cigars.

The bus arrived and Henry choose a window seat, first lifting his case to the rack above then piling his coat and hat on the aisle seat to discourage any fellow passenger from disturbing him. He settled back and took out a cigar, rolled it between his palms, and lit it. "Ahh", he thought, "Agatha will never know. How disagreeable some women can be about the aromatic fragrance of tobacco." And, as if they read his thoughts, the women in the seat in front of him turned to him and glared. Then the woman by the window raised it with a bang and let the cold, damp air blow in his face. Henry countered by exhaling the smoke a bit more forcefully than necessary in her direction.

When the bus arrived in Welwyn, Henry was delighted to find the White Hart Inn was close to the church and very comfortable looking. "Reservation for the Archdeacon and Mrs. Hoccleve", he announced to the clerk. "However, Mrs. Hoccleve was unable to come so it will just be one in the room." "Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Would you prefer a single then?" asked the young man. Henry considered and replied, "No, no I'll keep the double," delighting in the fact that he could sleep in the comfort of a large bed by himself. The room turned out to be beautifully furnished, large, and the central heating made it feel as though it were really summer. It was wonderfully warm.

There was time for a preliminary visit to the church cemetery so Henry donned his coat and hat and walked over. "This is remarkably fine", he thought, "I will have to be careful to remember each of my impressions. How my sermons on death will come to life," he chortled sardonically. But at St. Mary's churchyard he was dismayed to find he was not the only person there. The ghastly women from the bus were reverently standing at a gravesite. There was nothing to do but beat a hasty retreat back to the inn.

Henry entered the bar area where a roaring fire invited him to sit. A distinguished looking man his own age was perusing the pamphlet on the Edward Young Festival. "Alywin Forbes", the man said, extending his hand to Henry. "Are you here for the night of doom?" "Archdeacon Hoccleve", Henry replied. "Well, certainly here to pay homage to one of our greatest poets. I quote from him extensively in my sermons." Henry opened his jacket where the remaining cigars were pocketed but as he removed one Alywin's eyes stared at them in a manner that forced Henry to offer one to his new companion. "Marvelous cigar," Alywin said, "Let me get us something to drink." Thus Henry felt his generosity was amply rewarded. However, an hour later he was still having to listen to a treatise on an obscure contemporary of Young. "I have never heard of this Edmund Lydden," he objected. "Are you sure these fragments are not a hoax?" Henry blustered. "It takes a big man to admit to ignorance, I assure you my

research has been extensive. Let me tell you about Lydden's winter sonnet," replied Alywin.

An hour later Henry retreated to his room to change for the evening. "Pompous ass," he mumbled. "Why would anyone want to listen to him drone on and on like that." He looked for a glass so he could fortify himself with a bit of brandy. Deciding against the bathroom glass he swigged from the bottle. His mood lightened and he almost felt like he was back in his university days at Oxford.

So began the evening. Twenty or so people gathered around the buffet in St Mary's parish hall. The food was adequate if uninspired. He was amused to see Alywin cornered by the ghastly women. Evidently they knew him. "Serves them right," he thought. "Now they can be bored by the fragments." Steering clear he sought out the Vicar and the president of the Edward Young Society. They fell into easy conversation mostly made up of quotations. It almost became a game where one would begin a sentence only to have the others finish it.

It was ten p.m. when the main event was to begin. The June day was light until then and Night Thoughts had to be read in the dark. Everyone walked solemnly to the grave and gathered about and Alywin Forbes began to read. The two ghastly women were standing close to Alywin listening with rapt attention. Henry was forced to admit the man had a good reading voice but it was hard for him to concentrate on the words when he knew he would be doing such a better job himself. He began to picture himself as narrator, carefully enunciating and dramatically bringing the piece to life. He pictured Agatha and Belinda looking at him, listening with respect, really hanging on his every word. Then the cold and damp began to penetrate his coat. The discomfort brought him back to the present and as he listened again to the familiar words he froze with horror. "Oh, no", he thought, "It's still the first night!" How could everyone else seem so interested and intent when his feet were turning to blocks of ice. The wind picked up and though it did not rain the air was heavy and damp. It was misery, misery. "How will I weather this eternal night?" he thought, paraphrasing one of his favorite lines. And the misery went on and on as the words went on and on and his mind turned to Dante and he felt he was in a new level of hell.

It was midnight before the ordeal ended. The applause broke out and cheerful voices congratulated Alywin. "Thank you, Dulcie. Thank you, Viola." said Alywin as he acknowledged the praise of the ghastly women. But Henry was already halfway back to the White Hart. He mumbled to the night clerk that he needed breakfast in his room the next morning at 10. Then Henry stumbled up the stairs. From his suitcase he pulled out a hot water bottle, filled it at the tap, shivered into his pajamas, took another swig of brandy and fell into bed.

He woke up at 9:50 slowly coming to a conscious state, first thinking, "I am warm." There was sun pouring in at window and it filled the room with light and heat. There was a gentle rap on the door and a waiter entered with a tray. There was wonderful hot coffee, cream, and a full English breakfast. Henry had the presence of mind to pour a large swig brandy into his coffee. He had had a bad chill the night before. He relished the bacon and sausage, the eggs and mushrooms. It was a delight. Delight, light, illumination and epiphany. Sunshine flooded his soul as he lit an after-breakfast cigar and he thought, "I hope I never hear that poem again."

On Sunday Henry's congregation took their usual places the pews. There was no need to guess at the sermon topic. They were so used to hearing about Lorenzo in Night Thoughts, they almost thought there was a book in the Apocrypha of that name. The Archdeacon rose and gazed down at his flock.

"Today my text is from Psalm 30." Henry began, "Weeping may endure for a night" and the congregation sighed collectively. But then the pages of the open prayer books ruffled with an unexpected breeze. The breeze caused by the collective intake of breath from the gasping congregation as the Archdeacon beamed and shouted, "But Joy cometh in the morning!"