Manna From Heaven

by James Craven

Since the old cat Snowy had died, leaving an indelible (but odourless) stain on her mother's best feather mattress, Marcia had not objected to occasional "dog sitting" on days when she was not required at the office. She had been introduced to this form of casual employment by Harold and Lil and Chang their Peke who lived in the old red "pre-fab" at the end of the road. On their safe return from three days in a Thorpe Bay caravan park - ("Please! NO DOGS!") Harold had proffered a ten-pound note by way of payment, wrapped around Lil's offering of a stick of pink peppermint rock. Marcia was unaccountably scandalised by this and put the money safely out of sight under the soiled feather mattress. The sticky pink rock seemed somehow more acceptable and was added to Marcia's well-tended food stores where it rubbed shoulders with Chang's cans of minced chicken *en gelée*.

So that when the chirpy young couple Nigel and Priscilla next door asked Marcia if she might kindly consider "sitting" their chihuahua Violet, she showed unwonted spontaneity in consenting. She then locked Violet in the outside lavatory for most of the weekend; and was appreciative of all the chihuahua's rations, brought along by Priscilla neatly wrapped up in Violet's new calico bean bag. The six miniature pork pies ('FAMILY PACK : ideal for snacking') and the chocolate drops Marcia ate herself, saving considerable expense over the next two days. In fact, she needed to do no shopping at all.

Violet seemed to manage very well on soaked biscuit: besides, the tiny dog's spartan diet helped to limit the number of times Marcia had to let her out of the lavatory, tethered securely by a length of clothesline. Violet's mauve leather leash (as supplied) was surely "too good" to use.

The retired vet who had once occasionally attended old Snowy held the unusual - even "cranky" - view that cats and dogs could live healthily on tinned vegetables alone. But Marcia preferred not to disturb her stores of inventoried canned goods; she carefully slid half a soggy biscuit under the outside lavatory door, affecting not to hear the high-pitched yelps and furious scrabbling of tiny claws within. Or maybe she was genuinely unaware of Violet's protests.

Nowadays, for reasons unknown, a somewhat frostier Priscilla and Nigel apparently chose to waste their money lodging Violet at the "Pampered Pooch" boarding kennels (fifty miles to drive there and back; electric blanket and TV set supplied to each resident). Consequently Marcia was obliged to do more of her own "real time shopping" and very inconvenient she found it.

Marcia remembered the days of her youth: when you wanted a piece of cheese you went to the cheesemonger. He made a little obsequious bow as he said "good morning, Mrs Taylor" to Marcia's mother. Then he'd cut an exquisite wedge of Red Leicester, wrap it like an origami masterpiece and lay it tenderly in Mum's woven raffia basket. Then you moved on to the greengrocer, the butcher, the fishmonger. For a long while now Marcia had bought sparingly at her local MR MACE Convenience Store but that was now replaced by a "Vape Salon" ('WE ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT VAPING!!').

Marcia was incensed.

Now Marcia stood amazed in the foyer of the brand-new supermarket feeling like Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough that the whole empire of the world was being laid at her feet. And also like the Duchess Sarah, Marcia was strangely unmoved.

Blue orchids, huge frilled roses and golden chrysanthemums were wired into a fragrant (if slightly wilting) arch leading into the vast brilliantly lit grotto of delights. Marcia was impressed by the array of sternly worded notices pinned up everywhere warning against abuse of staff; the most emphatic need for "respect"; the inevitable apprehension and savage punishment of shoplifters and the stringent "safeguarding" of minors. Marcia thoroughly approved the imagined keelhauling of thieves; but "safeguarding" remained a mysterious concept in her mind though lately it had been mentioned several times at the office. She and her colleagues had even been offered "safeguarding training" and other similar courses but had rejected all with contumely. The HR lady had tried to insist on their cooperation but then thought better of it: it might lead to "a scene," and it was surely wiser to leave the ageing quartet well alone. "Resistance is to be expected at their age… and, after all, they're not likely to be here very much longer…"

If Marcia been blessed with a sense of irony she might considered she could have benefited from some "safeguarding" (not to mention "risk assessment") over half a century before. For she remembered herself as a very little girl staying with Granny; and Granny giving her a particular glazed brown jug and sending her right across the village to have the pot filled at the "jug and bottle" hatch at THE GREEN DRAGON.

"Ask a grown up to help you if the DRAGON people won't serve you. And mind you don't spill it coming home or I'll smack the back of your legs. And don't forget Granny's Woodbines…"

Granny yapped out her orders like an ill-tempered terrier. Some people today might think that this memory was "not very nice", and even ask suspiciously,

"What on earth was a 'jug & bottle'?"

But Marcia was not given to analysing the past and there was work to be done here and now. A grinning youth offered her a trolley. For a moment she thought he meant her to climb into it like some kind of bath chair. But even at 11pm there were quite a few customers about, and by copying their gyrations Marcia more or less contrived to manoeuvre her vehicle along the endless aisles.

Old songs of Granny's came into her head. "There's a Long Long Trail A-Winding (into the land of my dreams)" and "Keep Right On To The End of the Road". And as she hummed, Marcia gawped at Fajita Kits, Haunted House Cake Kits, Caterpillar Cakes, Fiendish Fancies, Sautéed Brussels Sprouts With Bacon (*limited Christmas edition*), Peri Peri Sauce, Peshwara Naan, Dragon Fruit, Manuka Honey and Plant-Based Meat-Free Bacon. She also saw the prices and could make neither head nor tail of any of it. The bizarre names sounded like arcane spells.

Having fortuitously stumbled on the "HEAVILY REDUCED" shelf, Marcia bought a pack of over-ripe tomatoes which looked and felt like tiny deflating balloons. If that old vet had been correct, she could perhaps make these her staple diet, animal and human nutritional needs being surely the same. Look how Violet's pork pies had used to suit her.

She slung her shopping trolley aside in the foyer. It cut cruelly into a woman's ankle. The woman swore vigorously at Marcia who, like Felix the Cat, kept on walking. And as she walked, eyes on the ground, she saw a sheet of cheap note-paper patterned with pink roses and the printed heading "DON'T FORGET!" It was a discarded shopping list.

When she got home, Marcia put the tomatoes in the lounge for safety's sake and sat down at the kitchen table to study the pink paper. She was mystified and enthralled. Fish Nugget Shapes, Magnum Classics, What the Cluck? - more and more the grotesque and garish phrases spoke to her like stanzas of a late-Victorian poem. The crabbed handwriting (rather like some regional Chinese demotic?) in green biro only added to the strange enchantment that now welled up in Marcia's nominally virgin bosom.

Collecting shopping lists became a pastime, then an obsession bordering on addiction: ('PASSIONATE ABOUT LISTS' - if not vapes). Marcia fished lists out of supermarket trolleys, from puddles, even from rubbish bins - and once peeled one (it seemed to be the menu for some anniversary party) from the floor of a cubicle in a LADIES toilet.

She got some odd looks and met some eccentric folk. One old man tried to foist his own list - "fags, donuts, whisky"- upon her ("dear madam! A gift!") and turned surly when rebuffed.

There was another unpleasant incident when Marcia saw an unattended list (attractively patterned with printed pineapples) on a damp post office counter at Christmas time & slid it artfully into her bag. Unfortunately the flustered writer of the list then returned from Boots – drenched & in angry search of her memo.

"That funny woman's just taken it" said the brassy girl behind the counter and the protective plastic screens. For by now the Covid pandemic had begun in earnest and shopping increasingly perilous. And for Marcia, much more of a stimulating challenge. Now on indefinite furlough from the office she was able to devote unlimited time to the list project.

It pleased her to see far fewer people in the stores; and she appreciated the drama of donning her mask and (as she fancied) the total anonymity it gave her. The streets looked so unusual. Marcia even noticed grass growing on a few pavements though admittedly these were in mean back alleys. Ribbons, dream catchers and wingéd dolls appeared overnight, hung on tree branches in the Jubilee Park; painted runic pebbles were arranged on the pavements; and dogs' mess had never been so profuse. Marcia once saw a tied green plastic bag laid neatly on a café windowsill. She'd certainly done the right thing in giving up the dog-sitting lark.

Shopping lists became more extravagant as "life coaches" spoke on the wireless, begging the listeners to "give yourself treats". Consumption of cake and alcohol rose dramatically. Marcia now noted tinned smoked oysters and even lobsters ("2 for £10: Your Valentine Special") though these luxuries were incongruously written on fragments of old cereal packets. This was a golden opportunity to track down real collectors' items if one were bold enough. Marcia congratulated herself in the extra care she now took when out and about

And she knew all about fumigation. She steeped pencilled lists in vinegar and dried them between blotting paper. Lists written in ink were baked overnight in a slow oven or, in fine weather, pegged on the washing line. When dry, aired and ironed Marcia pasted her lists into a series of albums. As a schoolgirl she had once won a prize for an essay on St Margaret of Scotland, her gilded gem-studded Bible and its miraculous preservation from river water. Remembering this pious legend, Marcia stuck the covers of her albums with artificial flowers and plastic jewels from the hobby craft shop and even cut up several of her mother's old necklaces for their beads and brilliants. It was long and weary work with Marcia usually continuing by the dim illumination of tea lights late into the night. There could now be no question of wasting electricity, not in this energy crisis that they kept going on about. It was reassuring to know that this time and trouble taken was certainly worthwhile and most rewarding.

And the great bonus, thought Marcia, was that continually studying food effectively killed what was left of her appetite. She sat with her papers at the kitchen table that hadn't held any nourishment to speak of for many months past. The unopened tin of biscuits ("Family Assorted") was still there from two Christmases ago. Maybe she might eat just one digestive? She might lie on the sofa with it for a while.

Marcia wondered if she could find the energy to remove the lid. Maybe not. Pity to open it. And really, not worth it. And after all she *couldn't* lie on the sofa, for where had the lounge got to lately?