

FOUR STORIES

BY

ALAN BENNETT

P

PROFILE BOOKS

This edition published in 2014

First published in Great Britain in 2006 by

PROFILE BOOKS LTD

3A Exmouth House

Pine Street

London EC1R 0JH

www.profilebooks.com

in association with

LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS

28 Little Russell Street, London WC1A 2HN

www.lrb.co.uk

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

First published in 2001 in the London Review of Books

First published in book form in 2001 by Profile Books Ltd

THE CLOTHES THEY STOOD UP IN

First published in 1996 in the London Review of Books

First published in book form in 1998 by Profile Books Ltd

FATHER! FATHER! BURNING BRIGHT

First published in 2000 in the London Review of Books

First published in book form in 2000 by Profile Books Ltd

THE LADY IN THE VAN

First published in 1989 in the London Review of Books

First published in book form in 1999 by Profile Books Ltd

The Lady in the Van is also included in Alan Bennett's collection of prose,

Writing Home, published by Faber & Faber Ltd

Copyright © Forlake Ltd, 1989, 1994, 2003, 2006

Photos of Miss Shepherd and her vans © Alan Bennett, Tom Miller

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Quadraat

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 1 78125 379 3

CONTENTS

1	The Laying on of Hands	I
2	The Clothes They Stood Up In	79
3	Father! Father! Burning Bright	161
4	The Lady in the Van	225

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

SEATED OBSCURELY towards the back of the church and on a side aisle, Treacher was conscious nevertheless of being much looked at. Tall, thin and with a disagreeable expression, were this a film written forty years ago he would have been played by the actor Raymond Huntley who, not unvinegary in life, in art made a speciality of ill-tempered businessmen and officious civil servants. Treacher was neither but he, too, was nothing to look at. Yet several times he caught women (and it was women particularly) bending forward in their seats to get a better view of him across the aisle; a murmured remark passed between a couple in front, the woman then turning round, ostensibly to take in the architecture but actually to look at him, whereas others in the congregation dispensed with such polite circumspection and just stared.

Unwelcome enough in any circumstances, this scrutiny was not at all what Treacher had had in mind when he had come into the church fully half an hour before the service was due to start, a precaution against having his hand shaken at the door by the vicar. Such redundant clerical conviviality was always distasteful to Treacher but on this occasion he had a particular reason for avoiding it. Luckily the vicar was not to be seen but, early as he was, Treacher had still had to run the gauntlet of a woman in the porch, a reporter presumably, who was making a record of those attending the memorial service. She held out her book for him to sign.

‘Name and organisation?’

But Treacher had pushed past as if she were a lowlier form of autograph hunter. ‘Not important,’ he said, though whether he meant he was not important or that it was not important his name be recorded was not plain.

‘I’ll put you under “and many other friends”,’ she had called after him, though in fact he had never met the deceased and did not even know his name.

Somewhere out of the way was what he wanted, where he could see and not be seen and well back on the side aisle he thought he had found it, instead of which the fuller the church became the more he seemed the focus of attention. It was very vexing.

In fact no one was looking at Treacher at all, except when they pretended to look at him in order also to take in someone sitting in the row behind. A worldlier man than Treacher, if worldliness consists in watching television, would have

known why. Seated behind him was a thick-set shaven-headed young man in dark glasses, black suit and black T-shirt who, minus the shades and occasionally (and far too rarely, some viewers felt) minus the T-shirt, appeared nightly on the nation's screens in a television soap. The previous week he had stunned his audience when, with no excuse whatsoever, he had raped his mother, and though it later transpired she had been begging for it for some time and was actually no relation at all, nevertheless some vestiges of the nation's fascinated revulsion still clung to him. In life, though, as he was at pains to point out to any chat-show host who would listen, he was a pussy-cat and indeed, within minutes of the maternal rape, he could be found on another channel picking out the three items of antique furniture he would invest in were his budget limited to £500.

None of this Treacher knew, only becoming aware of the young man when an usher spotted him and insisted on shepherding the modest hunk to a more prominent seat off the centre aisle next to a chef who, though famously disgruntled in the workplace, now smilingly shifts along to accommodate the big-thighed newcomer. After his departure Treacher was relieved, though not unpuzzled, to find himself invisible once more and so able to look unobserved at the incoming congregation.

There was quite a throng, with people still crowding through the door and a small queue now stretching over the worn and greasy gravestones that paved this London churchyard. The flanks of the queue were harried by autograph

hunters and the occasional photographer, outlying celebrities meekly signing as they shuffled on towards the door. One or two did refuse, on the justifiable grounds that this wasn't a first night (and more of a closing than an opening), but the autograph hunters were impatient of such scruples, considering themselves wilfully thwarted. 'Choosy cow,' one muttered as he turned away from some glacial TV newsreader, brightening only when he spotted an ageing disc jockey he had thought long since dead.

The huddled column pressed on up the steps.

As memorial services go these days it had been billed as 'a celebration', the marrying of the valedictory with the festive convenient on several grounds. For a start it made grief less obligatory, which was useful as the person to be celebrated had been dead some time and tears would have been something of an acting job. To call it a celebration also allowed the congregation to dress up not down, so that though the millinery might be more muted, one could have been forgiven, thought Treacher, for thinking this was a wedding not a wake.

Clive Dunlop, the dead man, was quite young – thirty-four according to the dates given on the front of the Order of Service, though there were some in the congregation who had thought him even younger. Still, it was a shocking age to die, there was no disagreement about that and what little conviviality there might have been was muffled accordingly.

Knowing the deceased, many of those filing into the church in surprisingly large numbers also knew each other, though in the circumstances prevailing at funerals and memorial services

this is not always easy to tell as recognition tends to be kept to a minimum – the eye downcast, the smile on hold, any display of pleasure at the encounter or even shared grief postponed until the business of the service is done – however sad the professionally buoyant clergyman will generally assure the congregation that that business is not going to be.

True, there were a number of extravagant one-word embraces, ‘Bless!’ for instance, and even ‘Why?’, a despairing invocation that seemed more appropriate for the actual interment which (though nobody seemed quite to know where) appeared to have taken place some six months previously. Extravagant expressions of sorrow seemed out of place here, if only because a memorial service, as the clergyman will generally insist, is a positive occasion, the negative side of the business (though they seldom come out baldly with this) over and done with at the disposal of the body. Because, however upbeat a priest manages to be (and indeed his creed requires him to be), it’s hard not to feel that cheerful though the memorial service can be, the actual interment does tend to be a bit of a downer.

Still, discreet funerals and extravagant memorial services are not unusual these days, the finality of death mitigated by staggering it over two stages. ‘Of course there’ll be a memorial service,’ people say, excusing their non-attendance at the emotionally more demanding (and socially less enjoyable) obsequies. And it is generally the case nowadays that anybody who is anybody is accorded a memorial service – and sometimes an anybody who isn’t.

Hard to say what Clive was, for instance, though taking note of the numerous celebrities who were still filing in, 'well-connected' would undoubtedly describe him.

Dubbing such a service a celebration was, thought Treacher, a mistake as it could be thought to license a degree of whoopee. The proceedings seemed to include a saxophone solo, which was ominous, and Treacher's misgivings were confirmed when a young man sat down heavily in the pew in front, laid his Order of Service on the ledge then put his cigarettes and lighter beside it.

She was in the next pew, but spotting the cigarettes the spirits of a recently ennobled novelist rose. 'You can smoke,' she whispered.

Her companion shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'I see no signs saying not. Is that one?'

Fumbling for her spectacles she peered at a plaque affixed to a pillar.

'I think,' said her friend, 'that's one of the Stations of the Cross.'

'Really? Well I'm sure I saw an ashtray as I was coming in.'

'That was holy water.'

In the light of these accessories, more often to be met with in Roman Catholic establishments, it was hardly surprising if some of the congregation were in doubt as to the church's denomination, which was actually Anglican, though a bit on the high side.

'I can smell incense,' said a feared TV interviewer to his actress friend. 'Are we in a Catholic church?'

She had once stabbed a priest to death in a film involving John Mills so knew about churches. 'Yes,' she said firmly.

At which point a plumpish man in a cassock crossed the chancel in order to collect a book from a pew, bowing to the altar en route.

'See that,' said the interviewer. 'The bowing? That's part of the drill. Though it looks a bit pick'n'mix to me. Mind you, that's the trend these days. Ecumenicalism. I talked to the Pope about it once. Sweet man.'

'I missed the funeral,' whispered one woman to her vaguely known neighbour. 'I didn't even know it had happened.'

'Same with me,' the neighbour whispered back. 'I think it was private. What did he die of?'

The sight of a prominent actor in the Royal Shakespeare Company gliding humbly to an empty place in the front row curtailed further discussion, though it was the prototype of several similar conversations going on in various parts of the church. Other people were trying to recall why it was they had failed to attend a funeral which ought to have been high on their lists. Was it in the provinces they wondered, which would account for it, or one of the obscurer parts of South London ... Sydenham, say, or Catford, venues that would be a real test of anybody's friendship?

It had actually been in Peru, a fact known to very few people in the congregation though in the subdued hum of conversation that preceded the start of the service this news and the unease it generated began to spread. Perhaps out of tact the question, 'What did he die of?' was not much asked and when it was

sometimes prompted a quizzical look suggesting it was a question best left unput; that, or a sad smile implying Clive had succumbed not to any particular ailment but to the general tragedy that is life itself.

Spoken or unspoken, the uncertain circumstances of the death, its remote location and the shocking prematureness of it contributed to an atmosphere of gloom and, indeed, apprehension in the church. There was conversation but it was desultory and subdued; many people's thoughts seemed to be on themselves. Few of them attended a place of worship with any regularity, their only contact with churches occasions like this, which, as was ruefully remarked in several places in the congregation, 'seemed to be happening all too often these days'.

To Treacher, glancing at the details on the front of the Order of Service it was all fairly plain. He was a single man who had died young. Thirty-four. These days there was not much mystery about that.

'He told me thirty, the scamp,' said one of the many smart women who was craning round to see who was still coming in. 'But then he would.'

'I thought he was younger,' said someone else. 'But he looked after himself.'

'Not well enough,' said her husband, whose wife's grief had surprised him. 'I never understood where the money came from.'

Anyone looking at the congregation and its celebrity assortment could be forgiven for thinking that Clive had been a social

creature. This wasn't altogether true and this numinous gathering studded with household names was less a manifestation of his friendships than an advertisement for his discretion.

It was true that many of those present knew each other and virtually all of them knew Clive. But that the others knew Clive not all of them knew and only woke up to the fact when they had settled in their seats and started looking round. So while most memorial services take place in an atmosphere of suppressed recognition and reunion to this one was added an element of surprise, many of those present having come along on the assumption they would be among a select few.

Finding this was far from the case the surprise was not untinged with irritation. Or as a go-for-the-throat Australian wordsmith put it to her companion, 'Why, the two-faced asshole.'

Diffidence was much to the fore. A leading international architect, one of whose airports had recently sprung a leak, came down the centre aisle, waiting at the end of a pew until someone made room, his self-effacing behaviour and downcast eyes proclaiming him a person of some consequence humbled by the circumstances in which he currently found himself and which might have been allegorically represented on a ceiling, say (although not one of his), as Fame deferring to Mortality. 'Do not recognise me,' his look said. 'I am here only to grieve.'

Actually, compared with the soap-stars he hardly counted as famous at all. The world of celebrity in England, at any rate, is small. Whereas fame in America vaults over the barriers of

class and profession, lawyers rubbing shoulders with musicians, politicians and stars of stage and screen, in England, television apart, celebrity comes in compartments, *Who's Who* not always the best guide to who's who. Thus here Fame did not always recognise Reputation or Beauty Merit.

A high official in the Treasury, for instance, had got himself seated next to a woman who kept consulting her powder compact, her renown as bubbling game-show host as wasted on him as his skill in succinct summation was lost on her. Worlds collided but with no impact at all, so while what few lawyers there were knew the politicians and some of the civil servants none of them knew the genial wag who pounced on reluctant volunteers and teased out their less than shamefaced confessions on late-night TV. The small-screen gardeners knew the big-screen heart-throbs but none of them recognised 'someone high up in the Bank of England' ('and I don't mean the window-cleaner,' whispered a man who did).

Much noticed, though, was a pop singer who had been known to wear a frock but was today dressed in a suit of stunning sobriety, relieved only by a diamond clasp that had once belonged to Catherine the Great and which was accompanied by an obligatory security guard insisted on by the insurance company. This bovine young man lounged in the pew picking his fingers, happy already to have pinpointed Suspect No. 1, the Waynflete Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Oxford who, timid though he was, clearly had villain written all over him.

In front of the Professor was a member of the Government,