

# GILLFINS



a dramatic celebration of  
Cecilia Brindle & her Circle

Dominic Power

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## **Characters**

Brindle Pike

Penelope Jason

Lionel Tarling

Toby Kitson

Vivian Janson

Pericles

**GILLFINS** was first produced by Mind's Eye Theatre at the Old Red Lion Theatre, London on June 15<sup>th</sup> 1982, with the following cast:

Brindle Pike

Roland Oliver

Penelope Jason

Angela Wyndham Lewis

Lionel Tarling

Richard Bremmer

Toby Kitson

Michael Walker

Vivian Janson

Mike Elles

Pericles

Andrew Hilton

Director

Andrew Hilton

Stage Manager

Jay Robson

Photography

James Wilson

'Max' Cartoons

Paula Wilson

## ACT ONE

*A platform with four chairs in a semi-circle to the back and two lecterns to the front. To one side is a table; on it are various objects: books, some shells, a cup and saucer. Behind is a projection screen showing a profile portrait of Cecilia Brindle.*

*In one seat is **Lionel Tarling**. He wears an odd assortment of apparently homemade clothes: coarse woollen smock, baggy linen trousers, sandals.*

*In another seat is **Toby Kitson**. He is casually but modishly dressed.*

*In a third seat is **Vivian Janson**. He has cultivated an old fashioned style: well cut suit, bow-tie.*

*The fourth chair remains conspicuously empty.*

*Enter **Brindle Pike** and **Penelope Jason**. They are both carrying papers and are both clearly dressed for an occasion. Pike looks at the empty chair and quickly shakes his head for the benefit of Lioniel, Toby and Vivian. Then he smiles briefly at Penny. She starts to read ...*

**Penny** 'A child staring out at the sea. For a moment let us allow our fancy to take this small, solemn figure to be the essence of childhood, as yet happily innocent of adult injunctions concerning the buttoning up of waterproofs or the importance of dry shoes. Let us look into the child's eyes, for there we shall see a wisdom beyond that imparted by governess or tutor, wisdom learnt from the ebb and flow of the moondriven tides.'

**Pike** My name is Brindle Pike, and like all of you I've come here tonight to remember the writer of those words: the novelist, Cecilia Brindle, who was born on June 15, 1882. So tonight really is her centenary. I notice that this has been advertised as a 'tribute'. Fair enough. It just seems such a dry, colourless word. What we'd like tonight to be is a celebration, quite literally, in words, pictures and artifacts of the whole woman: her life, her personality and her friendships. Particularly her friendships. I can't imagine any portrait of Cecilia that didn't include that charmed circle of writers and artists that gathered around her as if by magnetic attraction, a circle we've come to know as the Gillfins Group. Words were important to Cecilia and her friends, so up here we'll be reading their words as well as modestly adding some of our own. But before that, one or two votes of thanks. To the landlord, for allowing us to use this building which has a particular significance for us – but I'll come back to that later if I may. To all of you, naturally, who share our love of Cecilia and have joined us here on this rather nasty night (or 'despite the wonderful weather outside' etc). Also we're very grateful for the photographs we'll be seeing. They were specially prepared for us by someone who (*glancing nervously backstage*) ... has unfortunately been delayed, but we hope will join us later to give a unique, very personal view of Gillfins. Anyway, we'll keep a chair and hope to see it filled before long. Of course, thanks to our readers: Penelope Jason, who I'm sure is well known to all of you from her many stage and television appearances ...

**Penny** Thank you Brin. Hullo everyone.

**Pike** We also have Lionel Tarling from the Gillfins Trust ...

*Tarling is fiddling with a pair of wooden dividers. He ignores Pike*

**Pike** Er ... the actor, Toby Kitson ...

**Kitson** Hi!

**Pike** And Vivian Janson ...

**Janson** (*Surprised and grateful*) Oh, good evening.

**Pike** (*Glancing at notes*) It's no accident that I chose to open with that passage about childhood from what I think is Cecilia's greatest novel, *Sea Anemones*. Childhood is naturally where all stories begin, and it's also the area of human experience that I for one feel is central to her achievement. On a personal note, Cecilia Brindle had a deep effect on my own childhood. I often tell my students at Leeds Polytechnic that she's responsible for what I am today. I was born at Gillfins. My mother worked there as housekeeper -

**Tarling** That explains it.

**Pike** What's that, Lionel?

**Tarling** Teeth marks along the wainscoting in the gallery at Gillfins. Obviously the work of some child.

**Pike** I think I can plead innocent there, Lionel. I was only eight months old when we moved back to Lancashire. No, my memories of Cecilia belong to Blackburn in the thirties. There were brown paper parcels of books she'd occasionally send us, marvellous books on anything from Minoan pottery to Home Economics. One of my most treasured possessions is the copy of Montaigne's *Essays* she sent me when I was recuperating from Salmonella. Even more exciting for a boy were the two or three visits she paid us. She was this intriguing figure from a different world, who would swoop down on us in a chauffeur-driven Daimler, clutching bags of candied quinces and homemade boiled carrot sweets. I can still taste those sweets. Penny, can I just say that your portrayal of Cecilia for the recent T.V. documentary really brought it all back?

**Penny** Thank you, Brin. I must say, that's lovely to hear from someone who actually saw her.

**Pike** She really means a lot to you, doesn't she?

**Penny** Oh yes. Of course I can't claim to have met her like you, but that isn't so important. You see, I do feel I know her and that she knows me.

**Pike** Penny and I haven't always agreed about the novels, but I've gained a great deal from our discussions.

**Penny** Ah yes, how does one describe those novels? Personally they are essential to my life. That might sound rather earnest. Let me add that they are also warm and

valued friends. It's a voice I feel I know, it seems to speak to me directly. It illuminates life with what I think is a peculiarly female intelligence.

**Pike** I believe you also came to Cecilia early.

**Penny** When I was just thirteen. As a birthday present my parents had taken me on a world cruise. Needless to say I wasn't consulted and the voyage rapidly became a nightmare of suffocating heat and uncomprehending adults. I'd escaped to the ship's library and there I came upon a tattered one and sixpenny edition of *Sea Anemones*. At last! Here was someone who understood. Most of all, it was the character of the daughter, the unhappy, sensitive Laetitia Carson, that mirrored my own impatience with the conventional pieties and affections that were expected of me. I can still remember the excitement of first reading that exquisite description of the Carson's dinner party, when Letty glimpses the sea in a bowl of clear soup.

**Pike** (*Breaking in excitedly*) Yes, absolutely, Penny – I'm glad you brought that up. I imagine anyone who knows Cecilia's work must get a feeling of just how important the sea was to her. It runs through her writing as it did her life, from her childhood walks along the Norfolk coast up until her own tragic, unnecessary death. Let's try to understand the artist and the woman by looking first at that childhood ...

*He moves the slide on. A smiling man in a chauffeur's uniform appears*  
Oh, that's not ...

*He presses the button again; the slide changes to one of a portrait of a lugubrious, bearded man*

Ah, that's better. Cecilia was the daughter of the influential Cambridge scientist and free-thinker, J.R. Apsley-Crohn. Her mother died in childbirth, and it can't have been easy for an only child whose sole companion was this brilliant and demanding man. He must have been a fascinating character. One gets the impression of restless energy coupled with rocklike integrity, a man whose opinions profoundly challenged late Victorian orthodoxies. In particular, his theory that mankind had evolved from the South Asian Bummalo Fish was bitterly opposed by both the scientific and ecclesiastical establishment. Cecilia learned early to share in the intellectual excitement of their house on Trumpington Road.

*He moves the slide on to one of the young Cecilia with her father*

Here she is with her father when she was about eight years old. The literary critic, Sir Henry Janson, was to become a close friend of Cecilia and in his memoir of her, he describes the effect of this upbringing. Vivian?

*Janson stands to read*

**Janson** 'Cecilia and I often talked of our respective childhoods, she more lucidly than I, for her novelist's eye for detail never forsook her, even in personal reminiscence. From our conversations I gained the distinct impression that her admirable strength of character was nurtured with great care by her father. If those early years had none of the kinder white lies that parents, on occasion, will tell their children, they were also

free from humbug. For her there were no terrors lurking under the bed, no fear of the dark on the landing. Surely in this environment were nurtured the seedlings of that intellectual honesty that was to flourish so luxuriantly in her adult writing.'

**Pike** Lucky for us Cecilia had a biographer who understood her so well. No less important an influence were the visits she and her father paid to their holiday cottage on the Norfolk coast ...

*He moves the slide on to one of Cecilia as a child, standing on a beach*

It was here that she was able to become a child, an extraordinary one, perhaps, in her sensitivity and her already remarkable powers of observation. Here also, during long walks on the beach, faithfully recorded in a journal that she started at the age of ten, she discovered her love of the sea. Here's one of the first entries in that journal, written in March 1893:

**Penny** 'Walked along the beach, looking for the seaweed that Papa had told me of. Saw the colour of Aunt Hilda's grey bombazine dress. While walking, found a dead fish. Once I would have been afraid but Papa has taught me not. Held it up to my face. It felt cold and I shivered. But when I put it down I saw that its skin had left little silver stars on my glove. Ran all the way home to tell Papa.'

**Janson** (*Aside to Kitson*) How sweet.

*Pike moves the slide on to another portrait of Apsley-Crohn, this time standing on a beach holding up a shell*

**Pike** All through this extraordinary journal we get a sense of the deep attachment she felt to her father. Years later, he appeared in her first novel, *The Watermark*, as the dying scientist, Arthur Windscale:

**Penny** 'Nettie looked wonderingly at this strange creature seated opposite her, whose long untrimmed beard, she considered, gave him the look of an Old Testament prophet. Yet this was a prophet who, she knew instinctively, would scientifically question burning bushes, would need to know the exact constituents of manna and would weigh carefully the dietary value of milk and honey. He had been eating the meringue with grave concentration but now he looked directly at her. "D'ye think you have the stomach for science, Miss Nettleton?" he asked, slowly brushing the featherwhite crumbs from his beard. At that moment she felt an electric current of sympathy run between them. Not love, she was to reflect later, but something infinitely more enduring.'

**Pike** Unhappily for Cecilia, this all important relationship was to be cut short. In 1895 J.R. Apsley-Crohn died, as he had lived, in the service of science. He was drowned – perhaps not far from where he's standing in that picture – while searching for a rare species of algae that he believed would finally, conclusively disprove the existence of God. (*Pause*) There are some sorrows that even the most articulate can find no words for. For a while the journal stops.



**Penny** I think, Brin, that this experience must have been crucial to her development as an artist.

*Pike nods and moves the slide on to a picture of a house*

**Pike** This is Elderthorpe, Cecilia's Aunt Hilda's house in Derbyshire. Cecilia was to spend the next few years here and at a selection of boarding schools. The atmosphere of this new home – pious, non-conformist – must have proved very trying after the intellectually stimulating life with her father.

**Penny** Brin, I don't know if you remember, but she later wrote a marvellous account of this period called *Whalebones and Psalters* ...

**Pike** (*Joining in on 'psalters'*) ... Yes indeed, Penny. It's perhaps my favourite of her essays on childhood -

**Penny** Surely it's much more than an evocation of childhood. She draws a very moving parallel between her adolescence and the plight of German intellectuals in the thirties.

**Pike** That's very true. Could we just -

**Penny** (*To audience*) I do urge you to read it - it's as gripping as any novel.

**Pike** Thank you Penny.

*Pike moves slide on to one of Cecilia with bicycle outside Girton*

Her journal reopens triumphantly in 1899:

**Penny** 'Arrived Girton today. What bliss! Spent most of the afternoon exploring every little cranny and texture of my own dear little room. Outside in the corridor I overheard two girls discussing Goethe. Oh brave new world that has such creatures in it. Tomorrow I go to buy a bicycle as a symbol of my new liberty.'

**Pike** Girton really did mean liberation for her. She was away from the limiting atmosphere of Aunt Hilda's and on her eighteenth birthday she came into a tidy sum of money from her father's estate. Her zest for this new world is joyfully communicated in her journal:

**Penny** 'To tea with Moira and Laddy. Much talk of Laddy's scheme to found a literary magazine for working people. Conversation aided by delicious little scones, strawberry jam and plenty of fresh cream. Absolute heaven.'

**Pike** There was a more serious side to life at Girton. Cecilia's mind and her personality attracted the notice of Hesione Bracegirdle ...

*He moves the slide on to a portrait of a severe-looking, middle-aged woman*

Hesione Bracegirdle was one of the leading classical scholars of the time. This intense, high-minded woman fell under Cecilia's spell and a friendship developed that was both intellectual and passionate. At last Cecilia had found a relationship to fill the void left by the death of her father.

**Penny** Letter from Cecilia to Hesione Bracegirdle, summer vacation, 1900: 'My Dearest Hector, What an age it seems since we were last together. I am staying with Moira at her family house in Dorset. Our walk to Madingly and our tremendous talk are still fresh in my mind as I sit here with only Mr. Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* for company. This morning I took myself for a solitary ramble along the shore. I wish you could have been with me to admire the bright yellow clumps of gorse that breathed life into the stern grey rocks. Above all I wish that I could hear your dear voice, always serene and reasonable, marvellously combining the practical and the poetic.'



*Pike moves the slide on to one of Cecilia and Hesione dressed in Roman costume, kneeling theatrically on an open air stage*

**Penny** Brin, how did you get hold of these amazing pictures?

**Pike** Nice, isn't it? You know what it is, don't you?

**Penny** That must be the famous Girton production of *Coriolanus*. That's Cecilia as Valeria. Hesione of course as Volumnia.

**Kitson** (*Sotto*) Anyone know who played Coriolanus?

**Pike** But alas, for the second time in her life she was to lose someone she loved. While Cecilia was enjoying her second year at Girton, Hesione Bracegirdle suffered a cruel disappointment when the chair in classics was given to a lifelong rival. Her uncompromising temperament and admiration for the ancients made the tragic conclusion inevitable. Imitating the Antique Romans, she shut herself in her room and fell upon a centurion's broadsword she had borrowed from the Fitzwilliam. Once again a grief-stricken Cecilia abandoned her journal. [*Pause*] Carrying on must have taken great strength of character. I thought that quality really came across in your television performance, Penny.

**Penny** I hope so. I must say I felt sometimes that I was suffering with her. What always pulled her through I think was the absolute certainty that she must write.

**Pike** Yes, and of course that meant coming to live in London. She came down from Girton in 1903 and settled in rooms in Wimpole Street. Within a few months she was contributing essays and reviews to that essential magazine of the time, *Minstrelsy*.

*He moves the slide on to a reproduction of the cover of an issue of 'Minstrelsy': a still life. However it has been loaded upside down in the projector and in this form it takes on a bizarrely anatomical character*

**Kitson** God - that's obscene ...

**Pike** Er ... no, it's just been loaded upside down ... *(he twists his head to view it properly)* I wonder, could you all ... perhaps if you ...

*He tries to get the audience to follow his lead. He is unaware of the alternative interpretation*

**Kitson** Er, Brin, we can soon fix it ...

*Kitson leaves his chair and goes to the projector. He turns the slide the right way up and returns to his seat*

**Pike** Thank you, Toby ... It's a lovely design, isn't it? Lovely bold colours.

**Janson** Mark Sadler.

**Pike** Yes – himself a member of the Gillfins Group. *Minstrelsy* was founded by Cecilia's cousin, Roger Stern, and his then wife, Adela. And it was through her connection with *Minstrelsy* that Cecilia was to form three crucial friendships that I'd now like to look at. The first of these was Sir Henry Janson ...

*He moves the slide on to a portrait of Janson. It is a carefully posed photo of an elderly pompous man, seated at a desk in a book-lined room. He is wearing the same suit and tie as Vivian*

Here he is in the photo taken for the dust-jacket of his last book. He gives us this illuminating picture of Cecilia's apprentice years:

**Janson** *(Standing)* 'By my third year at Kings I was making regular trips up to the London offices of *Minstrelsy*, where I was one of a number of ardent young men who succumbed to Cecilia's spell. There was no element of flirtation in our allegiance, for we were very solemn young men, who found in her a compelling and challenging voice. Yet there were paradoxes in her nature that charmed us as if we were the most devout cavaliers: her waif like, bone china fragility contrasting with her enormous appetite for both food and life; a mind that was, in the non-theistic sense, spiritual (how she would have hated that word), yet one that ruthlessly discounted cant, sentimentality and intellectual weakness.'

**Pike** For anyone who cares about Cecilia's writing, Henry Janson's very personal biography is indispensable. Even now, nearly four decades after its first publication, it

remains one of the best accounts of the woman and her work. A marvellously warm, wise book, crammed with insights – the book I feel she would have chosen as a memorial. We're lucky to have Vivian Janson with us this evening. He is, of course, Henry Janson's nephew. In keeping with the Janson literary tradition, he's currently working in a bookshop in Hastings.

**Janson** Well, one does like to maintain a proximity to the written word.

**Pike** Vivian, when you were a child, I believe your uncle was very much part of your life. What was he like?

**Janson** Oh enormous fun. Completely at home with children. He was a great civilising influence, but never condescending or stuffy. He used to invent some splendidly ingenious games for us – games of instruction, dressing up games. My own favourite, I remember, was called *League of Nations*. Each child would be assigned his or her particular country ... wait, that's not quite right ... anyway the object was to achieve World Government.

**Pike** Like many people, I suppose, I have fond memories of those famous radio broadcasts he made during the fifties. *(To audience)* Anyone here remember them? ... Ah well, for my generation he was very much a lone ambassador for culture in that rather bleak period. *(To Vivian)* The unkind publicity he received just before his death must have caused him a great deal of pain.

**Janson** Oh indeed. And of course it was all so unnecessary. Henry was notoriously absent-minded and even the judge questioned the train guard's testimony. Besides, he couldn't possibly have known what was in the young lady's suitcase.

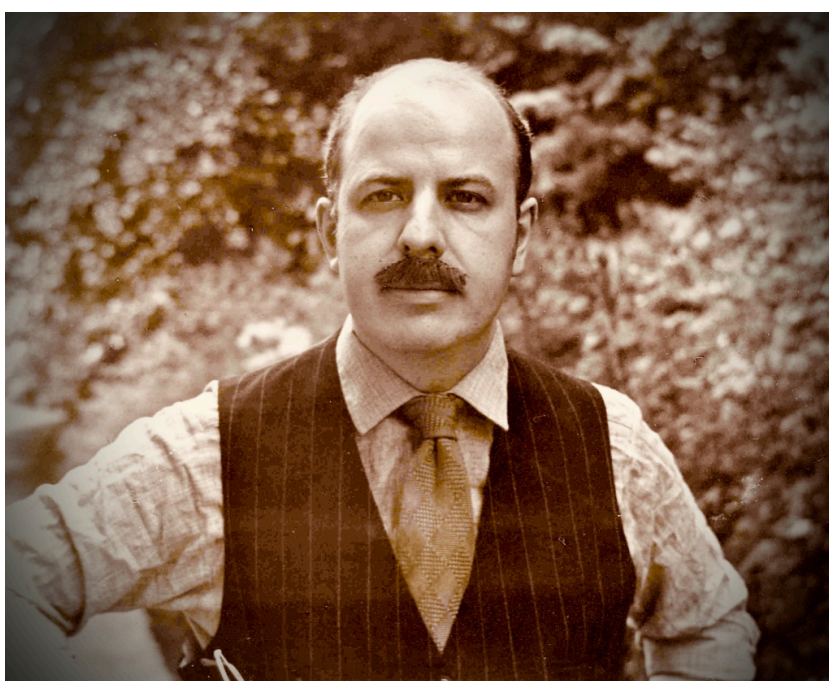
**Pike** No ... no, indeed. To go back to his friendship with Cecilia for a moment. Did he ever talk to you about her?

**Janson** Alas, no. When he did talk to us of grown-up matters, it was mostly on the subject of Khirlian Photography.

**Pike** Thank you, Vivian. Now we come to the second important relationship.

*He moves the slide on to an outdoor photograph of Laertes Brindle as a young man*

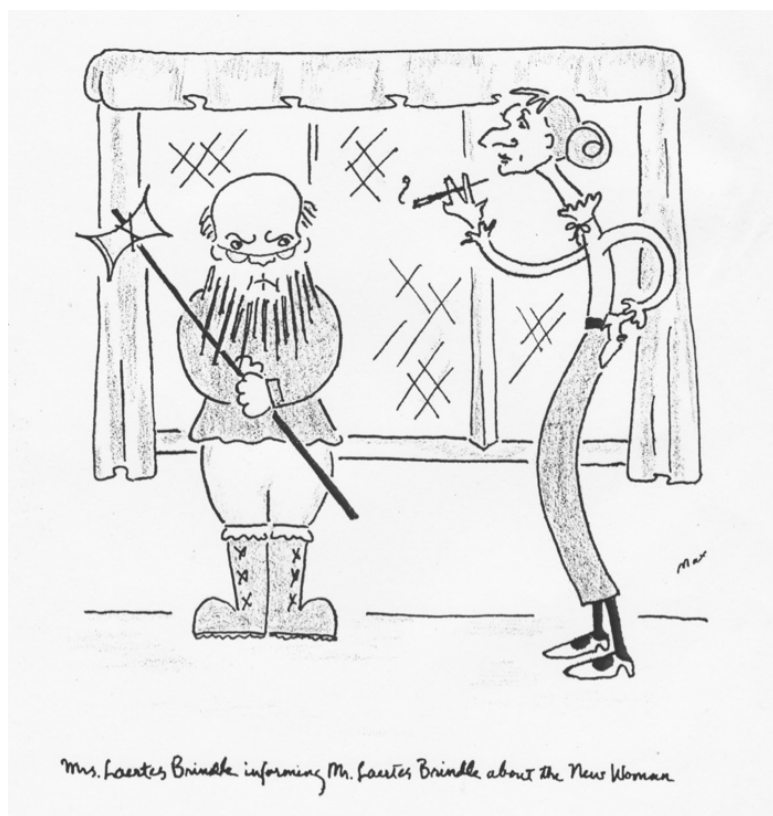
In June 1904, in response to an article she had written, Cecilia received a letter from the man who was to become her companion for the next thirty years.



*Tarling is staring intently at the screen. There is a short, awkward pause while Pike tries to attract his attention. Eventually Tarling stands, looks towards Penny and begins to read*

**Tarling** 'Dear Miss Apsley-Crohn, I write to congratulate you for your article on the responsibility of the New Woman, printed in the last edition of *Minstrelsy*. You write of important topics with a fineness of style and loftiness of spirit that has captivated me. Your cousin, Roger Stern, tells me that you are engaged upon the composition of a novel. Rest assured that although writing of such quality as you have already demonstrated will never find easy acceptance, it will ever be prized by those who prefer substance to excitement. Yours very sincerely, Laertes Brindle'.

**Pike** The wit and warmth of this relationship would come to be celebrated – famously, I think – in this delicious caricature by Max Beerbohm ...



*He moves the slides on to a  
Max Beerbohm cartoon*

The caption might not be too easy to read: 'Mrs Laertes Brindle informing Mr Laertes Brindle about the New Woman'. There is a clue there, perhaps, that although Laertes and Cecilia were alike in their idealism and respect for life, they were very different characters. Many of their contemporaries were surprised at their relationship.

**Penny** I must admit, it's an aspect of Cecilia's life that puzzles me. After all, she was a fiercely independent lady.

**Pike** I wonder, could it be that she needed someone like her

father? There were similarities between the two men.

**Penny** I'm sorry, Brin, but that really is rather a patronising assumption.

**Pike** Oh ... I didn't mean it to sound like that. Perhaps at this point we ought to say a little more about Laertes. Although nowadays his work isn't as well known as it should be, the volume of his achievements is staggering. I suppose today we'd call him a workaholic. I'm grateful to Lionel for providing me with this list ...

*While Pike reads from the list, Tarling listens with preternatural attention*



Let's see ... Co-founder of the Japonica Press with Roger Stern; printer of all its early editions; designer of a series of tapestries on the lives of the chartists -

**Tarling** Currently residing in the Bromsgrove Museum of Progress.

**Pike** That's something to look out for next time you're in the midlands ...  
Educationalist; founder of a children's orchestra – I see he made all the instruments himself; health dance pioneer; editor of the Mermaid edition of Alexander Tourniquet's *A Giddy Dame of Shoreditch*; writer, illustrator and printer of several books – including, of course, *Wisdom's Music*, an eloquent argument for his own style of muscular humanism.

**Tarling** Just a minute – you can't not mention *The Lay of Boadicea*.

**Pike** I'm sorry ...?

**Tarling** The verse drama he wrote for children in 1908.

'Her summons wings across the wat'ry meads:  
Leave rush strewn dwellings, run throughout the shires.  
Away: Away: It is a time for youth –'

**Pike** Thank you, Lionel. I think the essential point about Laertes is that, like William Morris before him, he was a craftsman who wanted to give a tangible form to his social and aesthetic ideas. When he wrote that first letter to Cecilia he'd just based himself at his family home, a beautiful seventeenth century farmhouse on the Suffolk coast, a house whose is now famous throughout the literary world, Gillfins.



*He moves the slide on; it is a blurred close-up  
of the earlier picture of the smiling man in  
chauffeur's uniform*

Oh, what on earth ... ?

*Pike's lectern suddenly tilts  
sideways, scattering his papers on the floor.*

I'm sorry, Lionel, I wonder how that could have happened ...

**Tarling** The Trust lent this furniture on the condition that it would not be tampered with.

*Tarling starts to repair the lectern. Pike is retrieving his papers*

**Pike** I can't understand it. I mean I didn't touch it.

**Tarling** You undertook the responsibility.

**Pike** I know, I know ... (*To audience*) I must apologise for all this ... (*Searching for place in notes*) ... Gillfins ... yes. Ah, good, here it is ...

*Of its own volition the projector has moved on to a picture of a country house*

Parts of the house and outbuildings Laertes had turned into workshops aimed at the production of ideal furniture. As he declared in an article for *Minstrelsy* ... (*searches for quotation*)

**Tarling** (*By heart, as he repairs the lectern*) 'That which is utilitarian can also be beautiful. Not the beauty some men will see in the insubstantial, but the beauty of Reason and Common Sense, of shared labour by men and women of vision for the Greater Good. We ask that poets become carpenters, essayists upholsterers and philosophers work the lathe.'

*Tarling returns to his chair and stands by it*

**Pike** Thank you. (*Patting the lectern*) That looks fine now.

**Tarling** Don't do that.

**Pike** Sorry.

*He gingerly replaces his notes on the lectern*

Lionel Tarling, you are Curator of the Gillfins Trust and, as we can all see, an enthusiastic disciple of Laertes Brindle. Once again, our thanks to you and the Trust for letting us use this truly remarkable furniture.

**Tarling** Before anyone asks any questions, I want to state categorically that not one item of furniture here today has had any relationship with a machine.

**Pike** Oh you can see that. I really do like these lecterns. They're certainly marvellous to look at. I find them fascinating in the context of Laertes' relationship with Cecilia. They could almost be described as a counterpoint to her writing, couldn't they?

**Tarling** L.B. would have scorned today's mass production techniques. To quote his own words: "The creation of furniture must be the offspring of the traditional relationship between craftsman and raw material." You couldn't shift him from that; even the clothes he wore were made from fabrics he wove himself.

**Pike** (*Lost*) That's interesting. You obviously feel a strong affinity with him.

**Tarling** I do. In fact the clothes I'm wearing now were woven by me, using L.B.'s original loom. You can see the advantages for yourself: (*preening*) pleasing appearance, comfort, maximum freedom of movement. The audience might be interested in one of the incidental benefits: I can personally testify that the proximity of coarse fibre to the skin helps regulate the bowels – through osmosis.

**Pike** (*Nervously*) Thank you, Lionel ... We'll look at some more of Laertes' ideas later. Not long after meeting Laertes, an entry in her journal marks the beginning of the third important relationship formed during the *Minstrelsy* years:

**Penny** 'Seated at my right was a Mr. Edgely, a strange, ageless creature who diverted me hugely throughout an indifferent dinner. He is that rarest of all beings: a good listener as well as a good talker. The first impression is unappealing: a high, complaining voice, like that of a querulous maiden aunt. But his conversation is irresistible: witty, allusive and well-informed. He talks fluently on subjects as far apart as Grecian wrestling and Elizabethan boy actors, occasionally interrupting this flow of erudition to produce admirable satires on Addy's cooking. By the arrival of the fish (a poor thing garlanded with wreaths of dank parsley) we had sealed a firm compact of friendship.'

**Pike** Emmerson Edgely is a fascinating but elusive figure. Here he is, a little cheekily caricatured by the incomparable Max ...

*He moves the slides on to a cartoon of Edgely*

'Mr Emerson Edgely suffering for his art'. Indeed he did, and it's a shame that his unusual sensitivity prevented him from leaving us any completed work. Thanks to the energy and dedication of Professor Mason Anderson of Peoria University we get a glimpse of his genius through his collected letters. Toby Kitson, as an actor you've also made him accessible to a wider public. Your one man show, *An Evening with Emmerson Edgely*, was the surprise hit of last years Vancouver Arts Festival. Tell me, was it difficult devising a format for the letters?



**Kitson** No way at all. The amazing thing about them is that they're simply marvellous pieces of theatre. The actual adaptation turned out to be a doddle.

**Pike** I agree, they really do come across on stage. The language is tremendously vital.

**Kitson** Right! The way he uses words – magic! The letters to Cecilia are some of his best. A smashing mix of literary discussion, jokes, gossip ... Penny, I just wanted to say that I loved your performance as Cecilia on the box. I did have one reservation about the documentary as a whole -

**Penny** I know what you're going to say, Toby, but there simply wasn't time to include everybody she knew.

**Kitson** Yes, I realise that, Penny, but it is in the letters – she did have an enormous respect for Emmerson. Without him I felt the programme just didn't tell the whole story.

**Penny** I think you've rather missed the point.



**Tarling** (*Clearing his throat noisily*) Excuse me, could someone ask the young lady to mind her high heels at the base of the lectern. We've already had one accident this evening.

**Penny** (*Sharply*) Sorry.

**Pike** (*After an awkward pause*) Right from its beginning Emerson and Cecilia's correspondence gives us a marvellous sense of intimacy between equals.

*Kitson moves to the front of the stage. He reads the Emerson letters in a quavering, high-pitched voice*

**Kitson** 'Dear Lady, Dinner at the Sterns last night much enlivened by your surgical dissection of the prose, of Mr. Henry James, which compensated for the Spartan fare and the distinctly sombre atmosphere provided by Roger and Addy. This note is to invite you to take tea with me tomorrow at Monks Square. I was intrigued to learn that you have embarked on a novel. I myself had devoted the morning to the composition of a work of fiction, until a young friend of mine appeared, quite driving all thoughts of work from my fevered brain. Do come tomorrow for we must have a tremendous amount of talk.'

*Penny moves alongside Kitson*

**Penny** 'Dear Mr. Edgely, Many, many thanks for tea. How clever of you to bake those simply pagan Lardy Cakes. I confess, dear Mr. Edgely, that I am quite awed by your account of your novel, but then your conversation hints at so many extraordinary things it makes me almost shy of my own humble effort. At our next meeting I shall give you strange intelligence of Addy's new friend that will make 'thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres'.'

**Kitson** 'Naughty Creature! Your enchanting epistle has quite exhausted me, but oh what luxury simply to soak in good prose. To be truthful, Sissy, my work did not go well yesterday. I spent the morning devising, in my head, a quite scandalous conversation for Chapter three between the Archbishop and the Footman, when I was driven from the world of the imagination by a strikingly husky young brute hurrying past the window of my cell, bound for some dingy office, I fear. You must be very severe with me when next we meet. The Roger and Addy saga seems to be approaching a gory slimax, Roger striking all sorts of injured attitudes when I saw them last Tuesday, Addy enjoying her little secret immensely. How I wish I could gorge myself on those pages of manuscript that are doubtless piling up on your desk.'

**Penny** 'Dearest Emmie, I plod wearily on. Progress very slow. How I wish it were as easy to crystallize a moment between two people as it is with the crystallized fruit on the table in front of me. I wish I had a small portion of your courage and your insight to sustain me. Come and eat on Thursday and we shall be very sage and old. Much to tell of Addy.'

**Kitson** 'Gloriana, I shall console myself in a chaste and friendless old age with memories of dinner the night before last. You cook with your heart my dear. When I

die, I want you to marinate these old bones of mine in a Lombard wine, to be consumed by sinister, dark-eyed Sardinian fisherboys. Work on pamphlet interrupted by the arrive of B. Strident demands for money, scenes, tears. All quite hopeless. But greatly encouraged that Hornimans like *The Watermark*.'

**Penny** 'Dear Emmie, Written in great haste. Staying with Addy in Woodstock. Long walks, longer talks and huge meals. Am still scarcely able to believe that Hornimans are going to publish *The Watermark*. I must confess that I had thought the writing perhaps too finely wrought for popular appeal. Re: your suggestion last Wednesday, I do not think I have enough pull with Hornimans to be of much use to you, especially as none of the essays are yet completed. You must astonish us soon. Unable to lunch with you on Monday as am seeing Marchmont from Hornimans. '

**Kitson** 'Dear Sissy, I finally hold the published version of *The Watermark* in my hand. Splendid moment: 'Ornimans 'ave done you proud, Marm. Reading it through again I was tremendously impressed by your ability to make strong feelings credible and, indeed, vivid for us. I felt, though, that some of the conversations between Nettie and Windscale went on too long. The point could have been made more forcibly with some judicious cutting, I fancy. Still, a worthwhile achievement for a first novel.'

**Penny** 'Dear Emmerson, Thank you for your kind letter. I find your remarks about Nettie and Windscale puzzling, as you are normally quite perceptive. I wonder that you were not able to see that those conversations were designed to distil the essence of certain emotions that only a few can know. L. tells me that you have abandoned your monograph on Oscar Browning – the usual trouble, I suppose. Will not be able to see you on Sunday as Laertes and I are entertaining Katherine Mansfield and Middleton-Murray that day. I doubt if I will have much time during the next few months, as since the book I am being pursued by all sorts of tedious people. Sometimes I think it is really rather clever of you to stay out of print.'

*Penny returns to her lectern*

**Pike** It's a great pity, I feel, that just when they were beginning a revealing discussion of Cecilia's writing, there was a temporary break in their correspondence.

*Kitson sits down. His chair collapses as he does so. Tarling goes to him*

**Kitson** Bloody hell. I thought this was supposed to be ideal furniture.

**Tarling** (*Repairing chair*) These chairs were not meant to be lounged in. You've got to learn the right posture.

**Kitson** I'll do my best.

*Kitson sits gingerly on the repaired chair. Tarling returns to his seat*

**Tarling** (*Sotto*) Vandal.

**Penny** Brin, shall we carry on?

**Pike** Yes, of course. Er ... There was a good reason for this lapse in the correspondence between Emmerson and Cecilia. You see, she'd just entered a new phase of her life.

*He moves the slide on to a picture of Laertes and Cecilia together*

She and Laertes had recently married. The decision was arrived at with a quiet discretion that was typical of both of them.

**Tarling** 'My dear Cecilia, Your recent sojourn at Gillfins has occasioned in me a singular sense of well-being. Your conversation was, as always, admirable and your calming influence has enabled me to approach my daily labour with renewed vigour. Since your departure I have written a lecture on Edward Carpenter for the Fabian Society, a piece on Morris for *Minstrelsy*, as well as designing an escritoire suitable for a miner's cottage. I cannot help but feel that your presence here is conducive of so much good that I wish you would honour me by being my wife. I am asking you by letter, as then your decision will not be influenced by the confusing emotionalism that so often accompanies a spoken declaration. I beg you, Cecilia, to look favourably upon my request, for I know that together we can lead a happy and productive life.'

**Penny** 'My dear Laertes, Your letter arrived this morning and found me in a state of some confusion, as I am busy proofreading *The Watermark*. In addition, Addy has been staying here and shocking me with tales of Emmerson's strange behaviour. Still, I am very happy with the way that the book has turned out and flatter myself that I have written tellingly of the New Woman. The other matter you wrote of came as a complete surprise, though truly a delightful one. My first thought was to tease you for being so formal, but then I realised how sensible you were. I have always been happy at Gillfins and know that I always shall be – and so, my dear, the answer is – yes. Now that I have made up my mind I feel much happier, for I know that your firm, calm presence will make each day as valuable as the furniture you create. I must end now as I am about to supervise the evening meal; duck in a wine sauce. Emmerson is to be allowed to attend, on condition that he does not become tiresome. He is sure to have a tremendous amount of gossip, but I shall not be able to give him my full attention, for part of me will be wandering through the rooms of dear Gillfins.'

**Pike** Their marriage took place in August, 1911, shortly after the publication of *The Watermark*.

*Pike moves the slide on to one of Cecilia and Laertes at a cafe table*

The excitement following its appearance meant that they had to delay their honeymoon for almost a year. We get a glimpse of Cecilia's new found happiness, not just from this, I think, rather charming honeymoon snap, but also from a letter she wrote to Emerson at the time.

**Penny** 'Dearest Emmie, This is written in a delightful little cafe on the Via Cavour, where I've been simply gorging myself on sweet pastries. Laertes is back at the pensione with a *mal d'estomach*. We have been for some glorious walks in the Tuscan hills and L. has been marvelling at the tapestries in the Uffizi. Our only complaints



concern the vulgarity of the tourists and the servility and superstition of the Florentines. I am blissfully happy and L. is a wonderful companion. Last night we finally indulged in what you are pleased to call "connubial raptures". I think that we are both relieved that it is now over. Afterwards, a most stimulating talk about Darwin. Conversation is, I think, the best part of marriage. I feel that ours

will be exceptional, ruled by harmony and reason, and far above the silly, brutal passions that many take for love. Do be happy for me, Emmerson. Tonight we go to a restaurant in Fiesole where they perform little miracles with veal, garlic and soured cream. I do wish that L. could learn to appreciate the culinary arts. His vegetarianism is his only disagreeable point.'

**Pike** On their return to England they settled at Gillfins permanently, so that Cecilia could be near the sea ....

*He moves the slide on to another picture of Gillfins*

At the beginning of the evening, I had a special reason for asking you to consider Cecilia's empathy with the world of childhood, an empathy most vividly present in *Sea Anemones*. Indeed her insight into this world is so brilliant that many of her readers are amazed that she never actually had any children of her own. But now I'd like to look at a quite unique relationship in her life which I believe may have directly influenced this aspect of her work. It's a relationship that belongs utterly to her life at Gillfins.

*While Pike has been speaking the sound of a woman sobbing off becomes audible. He chooses to ignore it and it fades after a few seconds*

Most critics have failed to grasp how central it is to an understanding of Cecilia. With respect to your uncle, Vivian, I'm afraid he also rather missed this one. It begins with an entry in her journal for October, 1915:

**Penny** 'Domestic crisis this morning. I was taking my usual coffee and rolls in the study while going over the guest list for Friday's dinner, when Mrs. Pike burst in, cheeks quivering, wringing her hands. Please Marm, Tomkins 'as found a child stealing eggs from the henhouse and please would you come and talk to the lad. I would, but wearily, silently cursing the whole race of housekeepers and wondering why the good Mrs. P. sees fit to react to every trivial household incident as if she were the heroine in a Marie Corelli novel. The boy was in the back kitchen with Tomkins, obviously cowed, wearing wet rags and apparently close to starvation. I recognised him as the rather striking child that L. and I had seen on the sands yesterday. Questioned him but he seemed unable to give any coherent answer. Tomkins thinks that he has been

abandoned by gypsies; predictably Mrs. P. of the opinion, interlarded with numerous operative Lor' bless us alls, that he has been cast up by the sea. Finally, unable to stand the distraction any longer, I told her to fetch some dry clothes and to give him something to eat. We will decide on a course of action later. He certainly is a picturesque child, with eyes as dark as agates. I wonder if anything can be done for him.'

**Pike** That passage fascinates me, not just because of the rich, almost Dickensian picture of my mother – people forget that Cecilia was often a marvellously funny writer – but because it shows us the woman behind the books: impatient at triviality but nevertheless caring about others. Let's pick up the story with another journal entry a few days later. See how quickly Cecilia has incorporated the child into the fabric of her life ...

**Penny** 'Am still suffering the effects of today's truly dreadful nightmare. Like the Governess in *Turn of the Screw* encountering her phantom in a sunny garden, my own particular horror chose to visit me in broad daylight. I had taken the boy on my afternoon ramble along the beach and we had rested on a hummock while I repeated some of Papa's wonderful lessons on the serenity and order of marine life. I must have drifted into sleep and in my dream a terrible silence descended. Looked up and saw the sea on fire and suddenly the silence was overwhelmed by a shocking cacophony from beneath the burning waves, sounds of laughter mingled with the rhythmic churning of jaws. It was as if I had become the unwilling auditor to some orgiastic underwater dinner party. Awoke to the welcome sight of the boy skimming pebbles. Spent rest of the day wondering at the cause. Could it be the delayed effect of some baleful meditation on hell preached by one of Aunt Hilda's ecclesiastical friends? If dreams are to be heeded, as Mrs. Pike insists they are, then mine shall produce this resolution: to provide the child with an enlightened, rational education, with no gods and no devils, no superstition and no fear.'

**Pike** Notice how this entry echoes that passage from *Sea Anemones* we read earlier. Surely that's some indication of the importance of this child, not just to her life but to her art.

**Penny** Brin, I can't help feeling ...

**Pike** In a minute, Penny ... She and Laertes realised that he could be an expression of their most deeply felt ideas. This unclaimed and unformed child was a blank page on which they were to write beautifully.

*Pike has pressed the button to cue in a slide of the young child. Instead he has the chauffeur's smiling face, this time looking at us over the top of a glossy hollywood magazine. Pike frowns and presses the button again. Nothing happens. He presses again. Still nothing happens. He turns back to the audience*

I'm sorry. We seem to have a problem with the projector.

**Penny** Brin, we simply can't concentrate with all this ...

**Pike** No ... No ... (*Clicks the projector again. with no effect*) Blasted thing ...  
Toby, any suggestions?

**Kitson** (*Stands*) Yes. Actually I think we could all use a break. There's a bar downstairs.

**Pike** That's an idea. What shall we say - ten minutes?

**Kitson** Quarter of an hour.

**Pike** I'm sorry for this unscheduled interruption, Ladies and Gentlemen, but could we take a quarter of an hour break?

*Pike, Kitson, Janson and Penny exit. Tarling remains seated on stage.*

E N D O F A C T O N E

## ACT TWO

*Tarling is seated as at the end of Act One. The slide is also unchanged.*

*Enter Kitson, Penny, Janson and Pike.*

**Pike** I'm sorry, Ladies and Gentlemen, but we do seem to have some kind of gremlin at work in our projector.

**Penny** Brin, I'm sure the audience will understand if we just carry on without the slides.

**Pike** Yes. It's such a pity, though. The pictures are an integral part of the programme. I did want us all to share a visual impression of Gillfins.

**Janson** Perhaps we could extract the slides from the machine and pass them round the audience?

**Pike** No ... no, that really won't do ... I do apologise for this, Ladies and Gentlemen. Obviously it's a great disappointment for us all. Still, we have had one piece of good news. I've just heard our guest speaker will definitely be joining us soon. I hope you'll bear with us, anyway. *[To the Stage Manager]* Could we switch the machine off, please?



*Of its own accord the slide moves on to one of a young boy, smiling. There is the sound of a child's laughter, off*

That's most extraordinary. That's just the picture I wanted.

*He presses the button. It returns to the slide of Gillfins that had preceeded the intrusive chauffeur slide.*

*He presses again. Back to the young boy*

That's really very odd ... Still, the projector seems to be working again. We must be back in luck. We'll keep our fingers crossed, shall we? Now, if I can just pick up from where we were before ... before our break, this is the little boy I was telling you about. If Cecilia had believed in a divinity – which of course she didn't – she might have suspected its benign intervention in the happy arrival of

this child that was to prove a catalyst for so many of her ideas. She and Laertes undertook to educate him according to their principles. Laertes outlined their plan in a letter to his brother-in-law, the painter, Mark Sadler. Lionel?

**Tarling** 'Cecilia has quite taken to the boy. She has named him Pericles, after a curious fancy of Mrs. Pike's. Of course he is untutored in any form, but having decided to take him in hand, we greatly relish the challenge. Sissy has taken it upon herself to develop the aesthetic side, while I shall form the more practical skills such as

woodwork and upholstery, as well as instructing him in social issues. Together, I feel confident that we can mould a model citizen of the New World.'

**Pike** Cecilia approached the task with no less enthusiasm.

**Penny:** 'Classes with Pericles going splendidly. I have bought him a marvellous costume in the style of the Ballet Russe which makes him look like a young faun. After lunch we sat together in the arbour and went through some of the sheaves of material I had brought back from London and I made him describe each texture for me. Afterwards, I read him a chapter of 'Romola'. Next week I shall take him to town to see the collection of eighteenth century clown costumes at the Criterion Galleries.'

**Pike** It must have been a wonderful experience for any boy. As well as guidance from Cecilia and Laertes, there was also the intensely creative atmosphere they generated. Cecilia had consolidated her reputation with a second novel, *The Shallows*, and *Driftwood*, her first collection of essays. Soon Gillfins became an artistic Mecca for anyone interested in what was fresh and innovative in literature. You know, Penny, I never fail to be amazed at Laertes' energy, but I can't help feeling that perhaps his greatest achievement was to make a secure environment that Cecilia's genius could flourish in.

**Penny** Yes. It must have been rather splendid to have had someone who actually relished the mundane details of life.

**Tarling** I don't write novels, and I dare say there's many here like me.

**Pike** I'm sorry, Lionel?

**Tarling:** I don't see why Mrs. Brindle is getting all the attention. Look at the furniture in this room. That's the real achievement of Gillfins. Why don't you say something about L.B.?

**Kitson** (*Sotto*) Seems to have been a bit of a Wally.

**Tarling** What was that?

**Kitson** Nothing.

**Pike** I think you've rather missed the point, Lionel. We're celebrating Cecilia because of her special relevance to today's readers.

**Tarling** There you go again. If the people here are representative of Mrs. Brindle's readership, let me tell you that I estimate that at least seventy-five per cent of them are wearing potentially harmful synthetic fibres. The place is a riot of nylon, terylene and polyester. This period you're talking about happens to be the one when L.B. was doing his greatest work. He was away from London and the ugly manifestations of so-called 'progress' –

**Penny** Oh, for Heaven's sake! This is supposed to be Cecilia's centenary.

**Tarling** Right. We all know where we stand. Could some of the audience help me with the table and chairs? The Trust isn't going to be a party to this.



*He takes hold of his own chair. It breaks*

**Pike** Lionel, I'm sure no-one here underestimates Laertes' importance. I know I was fascinated by some of the things you told me about him. Just to remind the audience: at this time, as well as all his other activities, he was founding the famous Artisans Institutes, colleges that specialised in such hitherto neglected subjects as Anglo-Saxon cookery, and nettle-weaving ...

*Tarling has been studying the broken chair thoughtfully*

**Tarling** It's all the fault of the juggernauts.

**Pike** Juggernauts?

**Tarling** The heavy traffic from the main road. This furniture wasn't designed to withstand those sorts of vibrations. You people ought to get up a petition.

**Kitson** Like it.

**Pike** Well, certainly it wasn't built by professional craftsmen, but by people whose primary interests were intellectual and artistic. Perhaps I should mention that Laertes insisted that every visitor to Gillfins had to spend at least three hours each day in the carpentry room working on furniture such as this.

*Janson rises nervously. Pike glances at him. Janson sits down again*

But be that as it may. We're here tonight to look at the Gillfins Group in the context of literature, not furniture.



*He moves the slide on to one of a picture of the Gillfins group. During his ensuing speech, Tarling appears to be listening intently for something, eventually kneeling with his ear to the floor*

And yes, here they are, the famous portrait of the

original Gillfins Group. There's Cecilia, of course ... Laertes ... I think he's wearing something he made himself. That's Henry Janson. Looking rather dashing there, Vivian.

He was just beginning to make a name for himself as a literary critic ... Laertes' sister, Ophelia. She'd just divorced the painter, Mark Sadler, and married Roger Stern ...

**Janson** I don't think she was Mrs. Stern when this was taken. I think Roger Stern was still thinking about Addie.

**Pike** Ah, yes, you must be right. Though Addie, of course – that's her, there – she'd just broken off her relationship with the poet A.E. Armitage. Isn't that right, Vivian?

**Janson** Yes, I believe so.

**Kitson** Bit of a tangled web.

**Pike** Yes ... That's Addie's husband, the philosopher Ernest Mackie. I don't think the recent press stories about Moles and MI5 cover-ups should distract us from the enormous contribution he made to the theory of ethics ...

**Janson** Indeed not.

**Pike** And finally, of course, the unmistakeable figure of Emmerson Edgely.

*Pike puts down the pointer and returns to his lectern*

Cecilia was now at the height of her powers.

*He sees Tarling. Becoming aware of the silence, Tarling returns to his chair*

Here's Henry Janson describing her at work:

**Janson** 'Cecilia greatly relished the life at Gillfins, happy in a realm where all her subjects were loyal. Of course there were flashes of melodrama in the midst of this serenity: our housekeeper, Mrs. Pike's inconvenient pregnancy, the fire young Pericles inadvertently caused during one of Cecilia's famous dinner parties, or Emmerson Edgely's mishap while planing wood for a chiffonier which cost him a finger. Yet she seemed to rise above these and other unconventional incidents. I believe we all realised that she needed tranquillity in order to create, and contrived to keep such episodes to a minimum. Each morning, on my visits to Gillfins, I would creep silently past her study window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her at work. I would be rewarded invariably by the sight of her seated at her desk, green fountain pen in hand, nibbling biscuits and drinking tea from her favourite cup, a frail vessel of the palest blue that she would always insist aided composition, a superstitious conceit that none of us would have dreamt of contradicting.'

**Pike** That cup is now in the care of the Gillfins Trust. Thanks to Lionel, we actually have it here with us today.

**Janson** Marvellous.

*Pike crosses to the table. Pike picks up the cup. Takes the cup around to show the audience*

**Pike** I don't know if you can all see ... it has a delicacy and richness of colouring that must have ... well, one can see how it would appeal to Cecilia.

*He gently replaces the cup on the table. The table collapses. He just manages to catch the cup*

For pity's sake ... Lionel, could you ... please do something about the furniture!

*Tarling goes to table and starts to mend it*

**Pike** (*Watching Tarling*) At least I saved the cup. I must say, I feel safer reading their books than using their furniture.

**Tarling** No wonder there's been all this disturbance.

**Pike** What?

**Tarling** You've got a plague of rats on your hands. I distinctly heard them gnawing at the foundations. A colony with enough determination could destroy the entire fabric of the building.

*Tarling returns to his chair*

**Pike** I hardly think that's likely ... Anyway, where were we? ... Yes, I'd like to get back to Pericles for a moment.

*He moves the slide on to one of Cecilia and Laertes supervising Pericles' studies*

Here he is, at his books. I believe his story gives us an insight into the more private side of Cecilia and Laertes.

*Janson's chair collapses*

**Janson** Oh dear, I'm most terribly sorry.

**Pike** Look it doesn't matter ... No, Lionel, leave it ... You'll just have to stand, Vivian. We want no more interruptions.

**Janson** No, no, of course.

**Kitson** Have mine if you like.

**Janson** No, really.

**Pike** (*Interrupting*) No matter how fulfilling their lives were at Gillfins, they never forgot their responsibility to this abandoned child who came to them in such unusual circumstances. Laertes' educational theories were unconventional for the time. He wanted there to be no division between learning and play. The lessons were modelled on those moral and mathematical games described in More's *Utopia*. Together, he and Cecilia guided their charge through the storms of adolescence with unfailing tolerance and good humour. His presence seemed to bring them even closer together. Lionel, would you read that passage?

**Tarling** (*Reluctantly*) 'My dear Sissy, I would be most grateful if you would return from town as soon as is convenient. Ophelia and Roger are most anxious to see you

and the boy misses your company. He has been in a strange mood since your departure and, in my opinion, would derive great benefit from some of your excellent counsel. We were unable to have our usual class today as Mrs. Pike informed me that he had been violently sick. She surmises that he has been eating raw fish again ... '

**Kitson** Raw fish?

**Tarling** Raw fish ... 'If true, this is disturbing news indeed. We must find some way of discouraging his nocturnal visits to the beach. I affected to know nothing of all this when I visited his room this afternoon to read to him. He had fallen into an unhealthy lethargy and even some stirring passages from Ebenezer Elliott's *Corn Law Rhymes* failed to revive his spirits. Do you think it possible that he learns this curious behaviour from boys in the village?'

**Penny** 'My dear Addy, Laertes and I very much look forward to seeing you and Ernest at Gillfins next week. About your query: there is absolutely no need to worry about Perry as he is being perfectly sweet. I cannot imagine what Emmerson has been telling you, he seems to have become quite morbid since the accident with his ear. The tantrums he speaks of are quite normal in a sensitive child. Yes, E.M. Forster was here, though Emmie is very naughty to spread gossip. Pericles may have bitten Morgan in fun, but certainly not in the place you were told about.'

**Pike** I like to think that the tact and perceptiveness Cecilia showed to Pericles was a reflection in human terms of what she was as an artist. Here's another absolutely characteristic portrait of Cecilia ...

*He moves slide on to a studio portrait of Cecilia*

**Penny** Ah, yes, this is how we all like to remember her.

**Pike** Yes, for me this picture and the one of the Gillfins Group sum up all the vigour, excitement and, yes, the glamour of Cecilia and the life at Gillfins during those happy, creative years. I know logically that the seasons must have changed, but somehow I imagine it always to have been summer. Now we come to the year 1930 and what was surely her most poetic, most deeply felt work, *Sea Anemones*. I may be prejudiced, but surely no-one who has read it can deny its place among the great achievements. For me, her study of the Carson's adopted son, Jonah, painfully learning to comprehend beauty is one of the great triumphs of art. And I feel sure that her observation of Pericles as he grew into manhood provided some of the ideas for this subtle and moving exploration of the parallel worlds of adult and child.



**Penny** 'A lonely child facing the sea. He looks intently at the grey surface, as if hoping to find some key to the universe in the sullen breakers. He turns, a small angry speck in what wise men have called eternity. The woman watches him from the grass at the edge of the sands. Sea-wise, she understands that his anger is an echo of the water's turmoil and that like it he will, in time, be calm. For a moment woman and child are still and then, as one, they start towards the house, where dinner is waiting.'

*The cup falls from the lectern and smashes. There is the simultaneous sound of a child's laughter off*

**Pike** No, leave it. Forget it. It's a cup. An artefact. It doesn't matter. Fortunately Cecilia left us more important and enduring things than that. She once wrote: "Only in art is the exquisite immutable, in life it is always cruelly transitory.'

*As he speaks, the sound of the woman sobbing is heard off*

When *Sea Anemones* was written Pericles was a child no longer. Cecilia's role in his development seems to have given her a unique perception of the unformed mind, a vision of childhood that was universal.

**Penny** Brin ...

**Kitson** (*Rising*) What is that noise?

**Pike** Could we just ignore it, whatever it is ... And in the passage quoted she creates an image of childhood that will endure, confers on childhood, if you will, a kind of immortality – the only immortality she truly believed in.

*The sobbing dies away*

The publication of *Sea Anemones* marked the high point of their life at Gillfins. The next few years were to be in contrast a bitter trial of Cecilia's strength.



*He moves the slide on to one of Laertes, dressed in Saxon costume*

It became apparent that Laertes' almost obsessive dedication to his work had seriously affected the balance of his mind. She was becoming alarmed by his increasingly erratic behaviour. At times, he believed he was being persecuted by nameless enemies, at others that he was Aelfroth, the dispossessed king of Mercia and would wander the grounds dressed in a Saxon costume of his own

design. Entries in her journal for this period record her grief and her courage:



**Penny** 'Sixteenth of July. L's affliction is very distressing just now. He spends much of his time in the workroom which, I confess with sadness, is perhaps a blessing. I note with sorrow that he has abandoned his work on the suite of conversation chairs in favour of a series of fish-like wooden figures. Judged as works of art they are undeniably interesting but as signposts to my husband's state of mind they are deeply upsetting. This morning I suggested to him that he see the alienist that Ernest recommended. To my horror he flew into a passion, the first time such a thing has happened in twenty years of marriage. Thank heavens for dear Pericles who stays with him constantly and like Lear's fool 'labours to outjest his heartstruck injuries'.'

'Eighth of August. Am still distraught after last night's disastrous dinner. I had invited Cyril Acland as I particularly wished to discuss my introduction to the Hornimans *Young Poets* series. Bella, Addy and Ernest were present, as well as Emmerson and his new catamite, who made a quite unnecessary fuss over E.'s bandages. Acland proved charming and we spent most of the evening discussing Mr. Auden's poetry. I had just turned the conversation to the Series when L. rushed into the room, looking, as Bella later remarked, like Doré's illustration of the Ancient Mariner. Before we could recover he began to address Acland on the danger of Jewish secret societies taking over the government. Addy and E's little friend sniggered behind their napkins, while Acland blushed like a schoolgirl. Sometimes I wish I could become a little boat gliding gently over the water away from Gillfins, silently, without feeling, and at peace, at peace.'

*There is a small fall of plaster from the ceiling. Pike is momentarily transfixed, but continues*

**Pike** There was more sorrow to come.

*He moves slide on to one of Emmerson Edgely, heavily bandaged*

Soon her closest friend Emmerson Edgley was to be afflicted by a different kind of mental instability. Yet another accident in the workroom had left him seriously depressed. Apparently he convinced himself that it was some form of judgement and turned to a characteristically individual form of High Anglicanism. Ironically for someone who had always been sharply critical of the Victorians, his new faith was reminiscent of some of the more exotic spiritual *volte faces* of the eighteen nineties. No wonder Cecilia, a confirmed sceptic herself, greeted this change with dismay. Of course, she was perceptive enough to sense in it the symptoms of a deeper malaise, but for a while their relations became strained. Letters from this period are a hollow echo of their former buoyant correspondence:

**Kitson** 'My dearest Sissy, Ernest Mackie passed on your kind enquiry about my work when he visited Monk's Square yesterday. I have indeed cast aside my projected study of Victorian public schools and am instead preparing a life of Saint Urbanus, the fourth century missionary. I would be most grateful if you would offer me sanctuary at Gillfins for a short period at the end of November, as I fear my theme will expose me to the envy and malice of certain Modern Churchmen who have sought to bemire his reputation. Secure at Gillfins I shall flutter their apostatical dovecotes further with a full

account of how, disguised in female attire to avoid the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian, my saint entered the service of a Roman Senator, whom he converted to Christianity during the course of one momentous night. My visit will not incommode you as these days my needs are few: solitude, silence, the barest means of sustenance and a room to house myself and a few simple icons. You will find me sadly changed. My days are spent struggling with the horrors of winter, shrouded in shawls like an old Breton fisherwoman. Domestics and visitors alike regard me with a kind of awe, lowering their voices to a sacerdotal murmur in my presence. Oh Sissy, what a weary pilgrimage we make.'

**Penny** 'Mrs. Laertes Brindle, authoress of this parish, confirms that Mr. Emmerson Edgely may stay at Gillfins, on condition that all conversation is confined to matters literary or scandalous and none mystical or spiritual. For heaven's sake, Emmie – your heaven not mine – let us have no more martyrs, virgins or fallen angels. At the moment my poor head cannot stand it.'

**Pike** Emmerson's last visit to Gillfins was to be another trial for Cecilia, yet as Henry Janson points out, it was at this time that she wrote one of her most optimistic and best loved works ...

*Janson has momentarily lost his place, but then he reads:*

**Janson** 'The Well of Reason is, in my opinion, an essential book and a striking testimony to her indomitable spirit. This collection of elegant and delightful essays, speaking passionately for what is best in our culture, has been taken by most readers to be her response to the ominous events in Europe. Yet my memories of this period lead me to dissent from the prevailing view. Many of these essays were written when illness had effected a frightening change in Laertes and the book was completed during Emmerson Edgely's last melancholy appearance in our circle. For Cecilia, who was fond of quoting Lord Chesterfield's maxim that 'Religion is by no means a proper subject of conversation in mixed company', Edgely's presence was a source of constant nervous strain. He arrived unannounced one evening in the latter part of November, bringing with him a flamboyantly dressed young companion whom he introduced as his chaplain. Together they commandeered one of the guest rooms, insisting that it must be consecrated as a chapel, and for the next few days they seemed to move through Gillfins in a cloud of incense. Cecilia was normally the most gracious and tolerant of hostesses but eventually, much to the relief of us all, the young man was politely requested to leave. There followed a series of quarrels when poor Edgely, who was unhappier than any of us knew, developed an *idée fixe* that Laertes' condition was prompted by demonic influence, arguing vehemently for exorcism as a cure. Rereading *The Well of Reason* now, I can still recall her anguish as she struggled against the darkness that threatened Gillfins more profoundly than men with bombs or guns, and I remain convinced that the plea for rational, humanist values contained in these essays was more personal than any of her readers could have guessed.'

**Pike** Emmerson Edgely disappeared mysteriously, while staying at Gillfins, just before Christmas of that year. Pericles was the last one to see him, walking alone along

the top of the cliffs. There can be no doubt that he took his own life. His last note was to Cecilia:

**Kitson** 'Dearest Sissy, Has my behaviour been so very shocking? I fear it has for you continue to scold me, Laertes still lowers at me and even Janson purses his lips and passes me without a word. What is my crime? To state that Gillfins has fallen under a malign influence? To name that influence? You ascribe my suspicions to petty and vain motives which is both cruel and unlike you. I am alone here; my one ally below stairs has been driven away. Yes, driven, for beneath that starched, respectful exterior Mrs. Pike always knew that this is no place for a child. My nerves are in pieces. On returning to my room I found my statuette of St. Dagobert broken and I have been weeping like a child for the last hour. I cannot face you so this letter is to say goodbye. Give my Bible to Mark, the rest of my books are yours to do with as you please. I shall go for a walk to calm myself and then I must leave you, all of you. If I stay this house will swallow me up.'

**Pike** It's especially sad, I think, that his last hours were twisted by cruel illusory doubts about the person who had so freely given him her care and support. With Emmerson's death it was as if the sense of loss that had haunted Cecilia's early years had come back to find her at Gillfins. But now she was a writer who strove to come to terms with her sorrow in the pages of her journal.

**Penny:** 'My friend is dead. I must accept that. The police called earlier today. They feel that Emmerson must have been washed out to sea. Stayed in my room for most of the day, prostrate with grief, endlessly reliving my last sad memories of him: the quarrel with L., his unaccountable fear of poor Pericles and our last wretched conversation, when he begged me to destroy a joking letter he had written to me years ago – some reference to a fisherboys' feast of which I had no recollection. I suppose some part of me hopes that this process will help me to understand but it merely punishes me. One consolation is that Laertes has been very sweet. He urged me to come down to supper with an instinctive tact that was quite like his old manner. I decided to wear the simple grey dress with the pearl brooch that Emmie so admired. It is cook's day off and I was touched to find that L. and Perry had prepared the meal themselves. A cassoulet of dark meat, simmered in a Lombard wine and well seasoned with herbs. Meat unfamiliar to me but nonetheless excellent. Unbeliever though I am, I felt the meal to be almost a secular sacrament. Celebrating a friend in good food is, in its way, an act of love. Unfortunately, L. became overexcited as we ate and the child of Tyre had to calm him down. Perhaps he is not yet used to a meat diet. In the quiet that followed the memories came flooding back. Poor Emmie, I wish he could have been with us.'

*During Penny's reading, Kitson has become increasingly uneasy*

**Pike** Toby, I think you should have the last word on Emmerson Edgely. What do you think really happened to him at the end?

**Kitson** What really happened?

**Pike** What made him commit suicide?



**Kitson** Suicide ... Well, I suppose he must have been very depressed. What more can you say?

**Pike** Perhaps we should leave Emerson Edgely on a lighter note. After all, he was a great eccentric. Penny, wasn't there some marvellous story about a trick Cecilia played on him at one of her famous Gillfins dinner parties?

**Kitson** Jesus ...

**Pike** What was it now?

**Penny** Brin, shouldn't we let Cecilia's words be the last on Emerson. 'Celebrating a friend in good food is, in its way, an act of love'. I don't think anyone could have a better memorial than that.

**Kitson** (*Standing*) Look, I could really do with another break ...

**Pike** Oh, surely not. Our guest speaker will be here at any minute. I think we really ought to press on.



*Kitson sits down. Pike moves the slide on to a picture of the Pike family: mother, father, infant Brindle, next to them stands Cecilia and behind her Pericles, now grown up. It is the face of the earlier slides. An Errol Flynn moustache and a cigarette dangling from his lips, he is wearing the familiar chauffeur's uniform with the cap at a rakish angle over one eye*

**Pike** Now this slide takes us right back to my little personal reminiscence at the beginning of the evening. This is outside our home in Blackburn. I know it seems an unlikely setting for Cecilia, but she was a person who believed in hard work as an antidote to sorrow. Since Laertes wasn't getting any better, she took on some of his work as well, occasionally going north to visit some of the Artisans' Institutes he'd built there. And Cecilia didn't want to lose touch with my mother after we'd left Gillfins, so she would sometimes drop in on us when she visited the Blackburn College ... There's my mother, my father ... me ... And that, of course, is Pericles.

**Kitson** What, that guy in the chauffeur's cap? That face – that's Pericles?

**Pike** Yes. By then he'd become the family chauffeur. Very informal there – Cecilia was never one to stand on ceremony ... My goodness, this brings back some memories.

**Penny** Brin, she looks terrible.

**Pike** Really? I like to think she rather enjoyed her little trips to see us. But, yes, this was a very anxious time for her. She was having to face the fact that her marriage was no longer the ideal partnership it has been. I think this next slide tells its own story.

By this time, the mid-thirties, Laertes' feelings of persecution became more pronounced as he moved further from reality. He even began to believe that the secret societies he now dreaded had penetrated Gillfins. To Cecilia's relief, Pericles kept constant watch over his former teacher. The two of them were a familiar sight in the neighbouring town of Morton St. Leacock, where Laertes made an unsuccessful attempt to organise a group called the Loyal Sons of Wotan ...

*Tarling stands*

... Lionel, I don't think we need to hear that letter you were going to read. It seems a pity to dwell on the details ...

**Kitson** Letter – what letter?

**Tarling** I discovered it myself. Folded away in a copy of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* in the Gillfins library. It is dated November 13th, 1936: 'My dear Cecilia, It is time for me to leave both you and Gillfins. I regret this parting, but my orders come from One that I dare not disobey. There is a superior force among us, a Master who has guided me to the Final Enlightenment. From childhood I have had a vision of our land as it should be, home of purity and strength, of warrior and maid striding across Albion's fields, nostrils arched to the aroma of burning flax. Alas, all has been defiled by the sebaceous clutches of usury and effeminacy. We must purify with blood. That which is not pure must be consumed utterly. You yourself have unwittingly helped me in this task. The Master is strong and I fear I have had to be cruel, Cecilia. I did not want to and I weep at the memory. So it is better I leave. I have been secretly informed of the whereabouts of the famed Lance of Jurastus, a power so terrible that my enemies shall be driven back into the hungry seas. Forgive me, Sissy. Your husband, Laertes Brindle.'

*Tarling sits down*

**Pike** Thank you, Lionel. Laertes did in fact slip away to Germany in the winter of 1936 and was killed in a street brawl in Munich in April, 1937.

**Kitson** Poor bloody Emmerson.

**Pike** What do you mean by that?

**Kitson** Secular sacrament. We've been up here wanking over Cecilia, trying to ignore what happened.

**Penny** Toby, stop it.

**Pike** Its nice to see that the Gillfins Group still stirs up controversy, ladies and gentlemen.

**Kitson** Pike, you haven't got the first fucking idea ...

**Tarling** Do these lights contain tungsten filaments?

**Penny** I don't believe it.

**Tarling** For your information, they've been cited in a recent report as one of the major causes of bone cancer.

**Pike** Look, take it up with the landlord.

**Tarling** It doesn't matter. By now the rays will have affected everyone in the room.

*Janson begins to exit furtively*

**Pike** Right. That's it. Toby, Lionel, I'm showing you the yellow card. We've got a guest speaker waiting, and we're going to finish what we started. Vivian, where are you going?

**Janson** I rather think the last Hastings train leaves soon.

**Pike** There's plenty of time. Besides, you've got one more extract to read. Look, we've all become a bit emotional. It's understandable, really, feeling as we do about Cecilia, but we've got to see this through. We owe it to her.



*He moves the slide on to one of Cecilia looking ill. The others stare transfixed. Pike is referring to his notes*

After Laertes' death, Cecilia discouraged visitors. When old friends did come to Gillfins they found her sadly changed. Vivian, we're ready for that last passage from your uncle's book.

*Janson hesitates, then begins to read with a dreadful fascination:*

**Janson** 'For a short while during lunch she seemed to recover her spirits, talking animatedly of new books and questioning me eagerly about a good translation of

Racine's *Phèdre* which, I was moved to learn, she intended to read to Pericles. Too soon, alas, her vivacity faded and our silences became longer, broken only by the discordant shriek of a lone herring gull that hovered over the house. For the first time it occurred to me that Gillfins, now bereft of our small community, was in truth terribly isolated. The waves breaking on the beach sounded closer, as if they were lapping against the outside wall and for a moment I fancied that the house had been cast adrift to float like a ruined ship upon the icy waters. The impression was so disturbing that I felt a certain relief when the hired car came to collect me. She came to see me off and as I settled into the car the gulls gathered above us, their noise like the cries of grieving

women. Perhaps the same thought occurred to her, for as the car started, she pressed her hand against the window as if to detain me. I called to my driver to stop but my voice was lost in the roar of the motor. My last memory of Cecilia is of that frail, courageous figure watching our progress down the drive, with Pericles beside her, waiting to take her back to the house.'

**Pike** Her troubles didn't stop her writing. The last novel, *Ice Floes*, is uncharacteristically pessimistic. I must be honest ... *Ice Floes* is a disappointing book. Its plot of an imaginary king and queen of a nameless northern land, who lose their kingdom to a mysterious youth, is frankly unconvincing and it very much looks as if she did not know how to end it. Still she was incapable of writing a really bad book and certain passages do have an odd kind of power ...

**Penny** 'Together they wandered through the vast ballroom now shrouded in ice, until they reached the great throne at the northern end. Then Orella turned to face Zorander's mad, unseeing eyes and at that moment she knew that the ice had entered her heart and that she could feel no pity. What they had thought to be their enchantment could never withstand that terrible knowledge. She heard Zorander cry out, saw him run to the throne and sit down heavily. There was a rending of wood as it broke into fragments beneath him. The icy fingers, quivering from the crystal chandeliers, seemed to point jeeringly and, from a room far off in the palace, came the sound of laughter.'

**Pike** She never left Gillfins now, shunning old friends and spending most of her time during those last days with Pericles. The end came suddenly, on October the fourth, 1939. She had been for a walk along the beach with Pericles and at some point she sent him back to fetch her cape. When he returned she had disappeared. Her body was washed ashore several days later. The verdict: suicide. The last fragments of her journal reflect her torment. Written in a strange dreamlike language they make disturbing reading:

**Penny** 'Sitting alone in the darkened kitchen. The clock has just struck three. I can feel him ... it ... whatever he is ... all over the house. Not just in my bed where I left him, but in the cupboards and under the floorboards. I ache all over and my body smells of fish. Have just finished a whole loaf of bread and dripping with a jug of milk and had to be sick behind the stove. Oh God ... I hear him on the stairs.'

**Pike** Penny, I know you have some very definite opinions about the symbolism of those last journal entries ...

*Penny starts to sob helplessly*

... perhaps we could hear them later.

*He moves the slide on to one of Cecilia smiling at her desk, and turns back to the audience*

It would be pointless to dwell on the sadness of the end, for Cecilia's story is primarily one of courage and a love of life. She has left us so many wonderful books to remember her by. Writing that was serious but never solemn, that could be both playful and, in

Henry Janson's telling phrase, 'as resonant as the throb of cellos'. As long as we can be moved by the music of language she will not be forgotten ... And now I'd like to introduce my guest speaker ...

**Penny**        No, Brin ... don't ... don't.

**Kitson**       Jesus Christ.

**Pike**        I don't know what's got into you all. Well, we're not going to stop now, I've put too much into this. We are going to finish. (*To audience*) You see, when I started to put this programme together I had a real stroke of luck. I was contacted by one of the few people living who can claim that they really knew Cecilia. Since those days he's gone on to make a name for himself in the world. I'm sure he's known to some of you, at least by reputation. But I think that this evening, here in this building, that started life as one of the original Artisans' Institutes built by Laertes Brindle, it seems appropriate to introduce him by the name Cecilia gave him, one summer, long ago, at Gillfins ... Pericles.

*An elderly man enters. He is dressed smartly as a chauffeur, except that his clothes and hair are soaking wet. As he moves towards the platform, there is the sound of rumbling, like the beginning of an earthquake. It stops when he gets to the platform. He looks at the five, who are all frozen except for Tarling. Then the man turns and looks at the audience, slowly brushing some water from his moustache and smiling. Suddenly he throws out his arms and sucks in his breath with a sharp whistling sound that turns into a shriek. the lights go out and there is the sound of the building collapsing.*

T H E E N D