

Billy Boy
By David Silver

As I walk slowly and with some painful difficulty through the park, perhaps for the last time ever as my health and mobility is now in terminal decline, my thoughts inevitably turn back to times past. Don't get me wrong, I've had a good run and can look back on an interesting and in some ways unusual life. I also feel especially privileged to have been one of the few who actually saw the elusive Dog Lady.

I pick my way carefully through the debris that scatters the pathway after last night's gale. Branches, leaves, overturned bins; it feels like the aftermath of a battle. A few other bemused walkers are wandering through the park too. Gusts of wind still come and go as if feebly attempting to make amends by sweeping up some of the debris, but they are only making it worse. Besides which, I'm sure I can hear a faint, distant voice in those flurries as they swirl through the denuded trees in the strange green-yellow tinged light. 'Billy Boy' it seems to sing, "Billlllyyy...".

Is the wind really helping my mind go back or is my subconscious attributing real words to a natural phenomenon? Either way, I'm cast back in time as I remember ...

The country was in the grip of a great pandemic. Most social activities involving people getting together in groups had been prohibited and would continue to be for the best part of two years. Sporting events, music, dance, they all suffered, none more so than those who participated in those sorts of activities to make a living or just for fun. 'Just for fun' is a slightly misleading phrase. To some people their hobbies are a fundamental part of their *raison d'être*. Anyway, all that stopped dead.

In the first March of the pandemic, reports started to come in about strange sightings in the very park I'm walking through now. A graceful, slender lady dressed in purple would appear as if from nowhere, dancing and whirling. That alone wouldn't have been particularly remarkable. We've all seen, I'm sure, people who behave wildly and erratically in public and we've all learned that the trick is to not establish eye contact, then walk on by as quickly as possible. But this was different. She was clearly a skilled dancer; those weren't random steps she was taking and the patterns were quite complex. Furthermore, she was singing a song as she danced and she was dancing to the rhythm of the song. Always the same song – Billy Boy. The most remarkable thing was that she danced with a partner who just happened to be ... a Springer Spaniel. The dog would place its front paws in her hands and twirl round with her for a couple of verses then it would scamper off, run around trees chasing squirrels and birds then return to its partner for more dance frolics. Occasionally it would become too preoccupied snuffling in a tree root after some unspeakably attractive-to-dogs object until it heard the call 'Bilbo!'. It would race back, tail wagging furiously and jump up onto its hind legs so as to dance again with its owner. Is 'owner' the right word? It seemed more of a companion. Surely it was just a coincidence that that folk song Billy Boy was made famous by Alan Price, a musician

with the 1960's pop band The Animals. To add another layer of strangeness, in between verses the lady could be heard vocalising some sort of instruction to herself. It actually sounded as if she was choreographing her dance.

Now many individual witnesses reported that at some stage whilst observing this display, they'd blink and the couple would have vanished, as if they'd never existed. There were never any videos or photographs. Was it a mass hallucination? Perhaps either the observation or the performance was a side effect of the pandemic virus. It was said that when the Dog Lady (as she came to be known) appeared, a fascination - an enchantment - would descend and all thoughts other than observing would evaporate from observers' minds. It was a form of hypnotism. The Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order certainly hypnotised themselves but it was unheard of for onlookers to become entranced too.

Her appearances were unpredictable. There were unfounded rumours of her origin – an escapee from a psychiatric hospital or perhaps a rogue Morris or Circle dancer. The emergency services were consulted but neither the police nor medical experts considered that any offence was being committed. The police suggested the RSPCA be contacted lest there was animal cruelty involved, but the accounts of eye-witnesses didn't bear that up. There were a number of residential care homes for the elderly in close proximity to the park. Maybe these were the last few flings of a fading, demented persona.

That was more than twenty years ago. Things change. Things cease. People cease. Now, on days when I have the strength to leave my own care home and walk the park by myself, slowly and unsteadily on gusty days, I do seem to see and hear her in the trees – “Oh, where have you been Billy Boy, Billy Boy? Oh, where have you been Charming Billy Boy?”.

Today, as the wind sweeps me off my feet for the last time, upwards, ever upwards into a glowing purple cloud, I experience again all those good times of the past - the music, the dancing, the joie de vivre.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E66A9MsG0wc>

September 2021

Inspired by FH, the real-life Dog Lady of Cassiobury Park.