Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Bertie Plays the Blues

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

Published by Polygon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

Copyright © Alexander McCall Smith, 2011
Illustrations copyright © Iain McIntosh, 2011

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The right of Alexander McCall Smith to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form, or
by any means electronic, mechanical or photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without the express written
permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-84697-188-4

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

1. The Question of Birth Order

Elspeth Harmony's triplets arrived in the order that was to dog them for the rest of their lives: first, second and third. They could not do otherwise, of course, but this was to determine so much for the three boys: emotional development, confidence, academic achievement, marriage, and ultimately – with that extraordinary synchronicity that nature can sometimes muster – the leaving of this world. Had the hospital not noted their order of appearance, and recorded it on the tiny bracelets fixed round the ankle of each by a nurse, then it would have been chance, rather than seniority, that governed how they fared in relation to one another. But these bracelets were put on, and the die, so to speak, was cast.

Matthew had some inkling about the significance of birth order within a family. As an only child, he had no sibling with whom to develop rivalries and other passions, but he knew so many who did. One friend, the youngest of five boys, had once opened up to him in a maudlin moment in the Cumberland Bar. "They've never taken me seriously," he said. "Never. And everything I had at home – everything – was fifth hand. Fifth hand clothes, shoes, handkerchiefs – the lot."

Matthew thought about this for a moment. "Fourth," he said.

His friend, absorbed in self-pity, had said, rather peevishly, "Fourth? Fourth what?"

"Hand," said Matthew. "It's been through four hands by the time it reaches the fifth child. Therefore – fourth hand."

Self-pity does not appreciate pedantry. "Fifth," said Matthew's friend. "Five owners – fifth hand."

Matthew had stuck to his guns. "No. It depends on the number of hands it has been through. And something that's second hand has been through two sets of hands: the original owner's and the new owner's."

"That means you have to count the fifth owner too," said the friend. "My clothes were fifth hand. Five owners, including me."

Matthew had lost the point. "You're probably right. But anyway . . ."

"Well, it was awful, I can tell you. And it's carried on all my life. Do you know my oldest brother? You've met him, haven't you? He still treats me as if I'm six. He expresses surprise if he phones and my wife says I'm in the pub. He thinks I'm not old enough. He still thinks that."

"It could be worse," said Matthew. "You could have no siblings – like me. Nobody to compete with. Nobody to think you're too young. Nobody to dilute parental attention."

He was determined, of course, that he and Elspeth should make as few mistakes as possible in bringing up their triplets. A whole library of books had been purchased – each claiming to be the definitive guide to the raising of infants and young children. They had gone to a special talk put on for the parents of twins – prospective multiples had been the term used – and had listened intently to the advice that one should seek to achieve a balance between economy of scale and recognition of individuality.

"Your twin is a person, and not just a twin," said the lecturer. "I call this the paradox of the shared self. We are all ourselves, but we are, at the same time, something other than an isolated self. We are a social self – a self defined by those with whom we live; a self that has imposed upon

it a number of roles – the role of sibling, the role of child, the role of lover, the role of employee and so on. The self has so many facets."

This required further thought. More immediate were the various questions raised by those attending, among them that of the effect on the child himself or herself of being a twin or, as the questioner somewhat untactfully put it, worse. This led to a discussion of the usual behavioural issues, and, significantly, to the issue of birth order.

"The experience of the multiple is different from other children," explained the lecturer. "The twin or triplet does not have to deal with existing rights – unless there are already older brothers and sisters. So there will not be a brother or sister who can do things better, who has an established position in the family: the playing field is level in that sense. Unless, of course, you tell the children who is oldest. And, frankly, I don't recommend that. Why create any sense of entitlement?"

"My father was a twin," whispered Elspeth. "He knew that he was younger than his brother. By a couple of minutes, apparently."

"Why did they tell him?" asked Matthew.

"They must have told them when they were very young. He said that he always knew."

"We won't tell," said Matthew. "We don't want to create any sense of entitlement, do we?"

"No."

They might not have wanted to, and yet they did. Five years later, in the face of persistent questioning, the parental position on birth order began to change and the official position that all three boys had been born at exactly the same time began to change. Yes, it was conceded, one had arrived first, but they claimed that they

had forgotten who it was. That satisfied curiosity for a year or two, but the questions returned, and with the same determination as Mr Tam Dalyell had shown in trying to winkle admissions out of Mrs Thatcher on the sinking of the *Belgrano*, the boys managed to find out who was the oldest and who was the youngest. And so the fateful work was done, and the lottery of birth began to make its effects felt.

The first to be born was Rognvald, named after the Norse founder of the Earldom of Orkney, Matthew being Orcadian on his grandmother's side. The tiny baby, so small to be burdened with so great a name, was taken from his mother's arms, swaddled in a cloth, and given to his father, who wept with pride, with joy, as he looked down into the puckered little face. "Rognvald," he muttered. "Hello, my darling."

So moved was Matthew by this encounter that he quite forgot that Elspeth, still in the travails of labour, had two more babies to bring into the world. Matthew wanted to play with Rognvald, and had he brought with him to the hospital a Hornby Dublo train set – as some excessively keen fathers have been known to do – he would no doubt have set it up there and then and introduced his son to the pleasure of model railways. But all too soon, the nurse who had handed him Rognvald asked for him back. "You've got another one now," she said. "Look."

Matthew spent a moment placing the nurse's accent. It had a touch of the Hebrides to it – Stornoway, perhaps. He said, "Where are you from?"

She said, "Mull. Tobermory."

He was filled with gratitude. "We'll call the next one Tobermory," said Matthew. "As a thank you."

2. *The Naming of Boys*

Tobermory's tiny lungs, once filled with air, lost no time in expelling it in the form of a cry of protest. If birth – our first eviction – is a deeply unsettling trauma, and we are told by those who claim to remember it that it is, then this child was not going to let the experience go unremarked upon. Red with rage, he vented his anger as Matthew cradled him. "Hush, Tobermory," the new father crooned. "Hush, hush."

On her pillow of pain, already exhausted by the effort of giving birth to two boys, Elspeth half-turned her head. "Tobermory?"

"Just a working title," said Matthew, above the sound of Tobermory's screams. "It suits him, don't you think?"

Elspeth nodded wearily. They had agreed in advance upon the name Rognvald, and had more or less decided on Angus and Fergus for the others, but Elspeth, being wary of having children who rhymed, was less enthusiastic about these last two names. Tobermory sounded rather attractive to her; she had been there once, on a boat from Oban, and had loved the brightly painted line of houses that followed the curve of the bay. Why were Scottish buildings grey, when they could be pink, blue, ochre? Moray Place, where they lived, could be transformed if only they would paint it that pink that one finds in houses in Suffolk, or the warm sienna of one or two buildings in East Lothian.

"Tobermory," she muttered. "Yes, I rather like that."

She returned to the task at hand, and a few minutes later gave birth to Fergus, who was markedly more silent than Tobermory, at whom he appeared to look reproachfully, as if censuring him for creating such a fuss.

The family of five was now complete. Matthew stayed

in the hospital for a further hour, comforting Elspeth, who had become a bit weepy. Then, blowing a proud kiss to his three sons, he went back to the flat in Moray Place that the couple had moved into on the sale of their first matrimonial home in India Street. Once back, Matthew made his telephone calls – to his father, to Elspeth's mother in Comrie, and to a list of more distant relatives whom he had promised to keep informed.

Then there were friends to contact, including Big Lou, who had been touchingly concerned over Elspeth's condition during her pregnancy.

"You're going to have to be really strong, Matthew," she warned. "It's not an easy thing for a lass to have triplets. You have to be there for her."

You have to be there for her. Matthew had not expected that expression from Big Lou, whose turn of phrase reflected rural Angus rather than the psychobabble-speaking hills of California.

"I'll be there for her, Lou," he said, following her lead. "In whatever space she's in, I'll be there."

"Good," said Lou. "She'll be fair trachled with three bairns. You too. You'll be trachled, Matthew. It's a sair fecht."

"Aye," said Matthew, lapsing into Scots. "I ken. I'll hae my haunds fu."

But now there was no word of caution from Big Lou. "They're all right, are they, Matthew?" she said over the telephone.

He assured her that they were, and she let out a whoop of delight. This show of spontaneous shared joy moved Matthew deeply. That another person should feel joy for him, should be proud when he felt proud, should share his heady, intoxicating elation, struck him as remarkable. Most

people, he suspected, did not want others to be happy, not deep down. However we pretended otherwise, we resented the success of our friends; not that we did not want them to meet with success at all – it's just that we did not want them to be markedly more successful than we were. Matthew remembered reading somewhere that somebody had written – waspishly, but truly – *every time a friend succeeds, I die a little.* Gore Vidal: yes, he had said it. The problem, though, with witty people, thought Matthew, was working out whether they meant what they said.

And it was the same with money. If somebody knew you had money – and Matthew had, when all was said and done, slightly more than four million pounds, transferred to him by his father – if a friend knew that sort of thing, then his face would cloud over, just for a moment, as the emotion of envy registered itself. We do not want our friends to be poor, but by and large we prefer them to be slightly poorer than we are – just a fraction.

Big Lou meant what she said. She was delighted that Elspeth and the triplets were well; she was thrilled that Matthew was so happy; she was, moreover, very pleased that the population of Scotland had gone up by three at a time when demographic trends pointed the other way.

"I'm going to celebrate," she said to Matthew.

"That's great, Lou. How?"

"I'll work something out," she said.

Matthew realised that his enquiry had been tactless. Big Lou lived on her own, and the thought of her celebrating by herself, opening a bottle of wine, perhaps, in her flat in Canonmills and then drinking a toast that would be echoed by nobody else, saddened him. Life could be a lonely affair, and there was no justice in allocation of company. There were many selfish and unmeritorious people who were

surrounded by more friends than they could manage; there were many good and generous people who were alone, who would love to have somebody to go home to, but who did not.

Big Lou was one of those. Matthew had met some of her male friends, and had taken a thorough dislike to them. There was that cook who had gone off to Mobile, Alabama, and who had shown excessive interest in young waitresses – Matthew had not liked him at all. Then there had been the Jacobite plasterer, who had gone on about the Stuarts and their restoration and who had, in Matthew's view, been certifiably insane. No, Big Lou had not had the luck she deserved, but could anything be done about it? Should she wait until some man wandered into her life – if that was ever going to happen – or should her friends perhaps speak to her about a dating agency? Why not? Dating agencies worked – sometimes – and Matthew had read of one that allowed you to get as many men as you liked – seriatim, of course – for three hundred and fifty pounds. Matthew had three hundred and fifty pounds; perhaps he would speak to Big Lou – tactfully of course. Big Lou came from Arbroath, and people who came from Arbroath were fine people in so many ways, but could be unexpectedly touchy-touchy, not touchy-feely.

3. Sons of Auchtermuchty

Domenica Macdonald heard of the birth of Rognvald, Tobermory and Fergus from her fiancé, Angus Lordie, who had in turn heard it from Big Lou. Matthew had tried to reach Angus by telephone to give him the news, but Angus

had not been in and his answering machine was full. That answering machine, in fact, had been full for three and a half years – ever since Angus had bought the phone – not having been listened to because Angus did not know that it existed. Some human messages never reach their destination, but remain in electronic limbo, waiting for some future archivist, centuries hence, some archaeologist of quotidian things, to unearth them and reconstruct a distant social past. *Meet me at three – usual place* could have the same fascination as some Pictish or Linear-B inscription over which scholars of our own time have scratched their heads.

"They've arrived," said Angus, himself arriving at Domenica's flat in Scotland Street. "Three boys. Rognvald, Tobermory and Fergus. Royal Infirmary."

Domenica shook her head. "Poor woman," she said. "I suppose they have everything ready, though. Three babies. And then imagine having three toddlers about the place. Three sets of temper tantrums. Three everything."

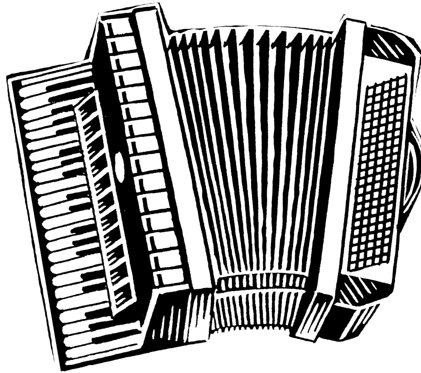
"She'll cope, I expect," said Angus. "She seems a very placid type. I always thought her name rather suited her. Elspeth Harmony – the Harmony bit is very reassuring."

Domenica was interested in the names chosen for the triplets. "We can be grateful that they've chosen real names," she said. "You can't go wrong if you name a child after a prominent geographical feature. Tobermory is very nice."

"I read about somebody called Glasgow the other day," said Angus.

"Not bad," said Domenica. "It has a certain friendliness to it. One could be . . . well, I suppose, a pop singer with a name like that. You know, one of these people who seem to think that the only way one can sing is in an American accent, even if one is markedly not American. Very peculiar. Give me The Proclaimers any day. There's no doubt they

come from Auchtermuchty, rather than the middle of the Atlantic somewhere. Along with Jimmy Shand – what a great man he was! These are honest people."



"Names," Angus reminded her. "We were talking about names."

"So we were," said Domenica. "Glasgow as a name. Yes, I rather like it. Glasgow Maclean. Glasgow Wilson. Glasgow seems to go with any surname, doesn't it?"

Angus agreed. "Tobermory is a comfortable name. It's redolent, I think, of Toby, which is very easy-going. He's destined for a happy life, that boy."

They were in Domenica's kitchen when Angus made that remark, he sitting at the table, she standing in front of the newly acquired espresso machine, waiting for the coffee to start dripping into the tiny jug. Angus had given her the machine shortly after they had returned from Italy as a newly engaged couple. Now Domenica looked up as Angus referred to happiness; she looked up at her ceiling and thought of the words he had used. Were there really people who were destined for a happy life right from the beginning, or did we embark on that course – or its opposite – only a little bit later? Were there still people, she wondered, who

embraced predestination in the stern, old-fashioned sense; who believed that some of us were damned whatever we did? Burns had pilloried that so beautifully in "Holy Willie's Prayer" which went . . .

"'Holy Willie's Prayer', Angus? How does it go again? The bit about predestination?"

Angus had been watching the espresso machine huff and puff itself into action, and had been wondering whether a new aphorism was required to accommodate contemporary coffee culture – people today not watching kettles perhaps as much as they used to. A watched espresso machine never . . . never what? Never expresses. That was it.

"'Holy Willie's Prayer'? Now then: let me think."

"Remember to put on your Burns face." Domenica had discovered that Angus, and indeed many others, assumed a particular facial expression when reciting Burns. It was a very curious expression: one of reverence mixed with a look of satisfaction that comes from finding that one can remember the lines. Perhaps it had its equivalent elsewhere, she thought; perhaps there was a universal face that people put on when they quoted their national poets – if they had them. Some nations had no national poet, of course; they had an airline, perhaps, but not a poet.

Angus looked out of the window, subconsciously, perhaps, turning to Ayrshire as some may turn to Mecca. "O Thou that in the heavens does dwell / Wha as it pleases best Thysel / Sends ane to Heaven and ten to Hell / A for Thy glory / And no for any guid or ill / They've done before Thee."

Domenica smiled. "That says it perfectly. Just perfectly."

"Yes," said Angus. "It does, doesn't it? And he's still with us, you know."

"Holy Willie?"

Angus nodded. "In a different guise. Not perhaps in predestination terms, but in terms of disapproval of others. There are any number of people who take real pleasure in lecturing and hectoring us."

Domenica frowned. "Is it the same thing? Is that what Holy Willie is about?"

"Yes, I think it is. But of course Burns is having a go at hypocrisy too."

Domenica said that she found hypocrisy rather complicated. "Is it just a question of saying one thing and doing another? Or saying something that you don't mean?"

"That's insincerity," said Angus.

"But a hypocrite is insincere too, isn't he?"

"No," said Angus. "He may really believe what he goes on about. It's just that his actions don't match his words." He paused. "You know the best example of sincerity? The absolute gold standard?"

"Who?"

Angus pointed to the door, outside which Cyril was waiting patiently. "A dog. Have you ever met an insincere dog – a dog who hides his true feelings?"

Domenica looked thoughtful. "And cats?"

"Dreadfully insincere," said Angus. "Psychopaths – every one of them. Show me a cat, Domenica, and I'll show you a psychopath. Textbook examples."

4. *Where, Then, Shall We Live?*

The conversation between Angus and Domenica about triplets, hypocrisy, and national poets – all of them subjects of undoubtedly great interest – now became concerned with

that topic of even greater profundity in the minds of any newly engaged couple: where to live. While this topic tends to be fraught for the young, who will generally have to scrimp and save to find a place of their own, for those at a later stage of life the problem can be quite otherwise – that of surplus. Both Domenica and Angus were owners of the flats in which they lived: Domenica's flat being in 44 Scotland Street, directly above the Pollock family, and Angus's being several hundred yards away in Drummond Place. On the face of it, Drummond Place seemed more desirable than Scotland Street, at least in financial terms. But neither party to this engagement was hard up, and so there was no need for either of them to sell his or her flat. So the decision about where to live became one based entirely on domestic preference. Where would they be more comfortable and therefore happier: in the more intimate setting of Scotland Street accommodation, or in the distinctly larger premises in Drummond Place?

In the early days of the engagement, nothing had been said about a move. Angus had assumed that he would move into Scotland Street, as it seemed to him that Domenica was the senior party in the arrangement; he was being admitted to her life rather than she to his. For her part, Domenica had made a similar assumption; indeed, one of the main issues for her had been the question of what to do about Cyril. Marrying Angus meant acquiring Cyril, and that was not something that could be lightly undertaken. However, she had found that her feelings had mollified, and now the prospect of having Angus's dog actually living in the flat was not as appalling as it had seemed before. In fact, although she would not have admitted this to Angus, Domenica had begun to relish the prospect of having Cyril in the flat and being able to take him for walks in the

Drummond Place Gardens or, at weekends, along the road that led from Flotterstone into the Pentland Hills. She looked forward to the conversation that dog owners have amongst themselves on such walks, the dogs breaking the ice for their owners.

Of the two flats, Angus's was by far the bigger. He was on the south side of the square, in a flat that occupied the top two floors of a converted Georgian terraced house. The house had been undivided until the nineteen-fifties, when an Edinburgh architect had sliced it into three flats: one in the basement, one occupying the ground and drawing room floors, and one incorporating the top and attic storeys.

Although they were not as high as those on the drawing room floor, where they were a good fourteen feet, Angus's ceilings were nonetheless twelve feet on his main floor and ten in the attic. The other dimensions of the rooms were appropriately generous, with the result that Angus had a studio with the necessary feeling of space. Here he kept his easels, his drawers of paints and thinners, his spattered ground sheets. Here he kept the chair he used for portrait sittings, an antiquated Edwardian library chair covered in green velvet through which the horsehair stuffing protruded at points.

The rest of the flat consisted of four bedrooms; a study filled with papers, well-thumbed art magazines and books; an echoing, cold bathroom with an ancient tub; and a kitchen dominated by a massive scrubbed pine table used for the preparation of food and the entertainment of guests. It was a comfortable flat in the sense that it had a lived-in feel and contained nothing that was aesthetically offensive, but it was irretrievably masculine and no woman could reasonably be expected to live in it, no matter how much she was in love with its owner.

Angus imagined that once he and Domenica married, he would keep the Drummond Place flat as his studio. That would mean that the only impedimenta he would have to move down to Scotland Street would be his clothes, his shaving bag, and a selection of paintings that he thought Domenica would like too: a pencil sketch by James Cowie of a child with prominent front teeth, a Philipson nude (with cathedral background), an Alberto Morrocco study of a melon, and a snowy Scottish landscape by Anne Redpath. There would be Cyril's modest possessions too: the basket in which he slept, his bowl, and the collection of bright bandannas which Angus tied to the dog's collar when he took him for walks along Queen Street or Heriot Row.

"I've been thinking about flats," said Domenica. "We'll need to do something about that."

Angus continued to look out of the window. "Do we?"

"Yes. You see, there's not much point in having two flats – especially two that are so close together."

"I don't know," he said casually. "My flat is not just a flat – it's my studio."

"Of course," said Domenica. "But I thought that perhaps the spare bedroom here would do for that. It's quite large, after all. And the light's quite good."

Angus was silent. He could not imagine painting in a spare bedroom. "I'm not sure," he began. "I'm very fond of . . ."

Domenica held up a hand. "I don't want to put you under any pressure, Angus, but I really think we should consider something."

He turned away from the window and looked directly at her. "Consider what?"

"I've had a letter from Antonia," said Domenica. "And what she says has a bearing on what we might do."

Angus's curiosity was aroused. "How is she? Has she fully recovered?"

Antonia Collie, who owned the flat next to Domenica's, had accompanied them on their trip to Italy. Unfortunately, she had succumbed to Stendhal Syndrome, a rare condition that affects a small proportion of visitors to the great art cities of Italy. She had been referred to a psychiatric hospital in Florence and from there had been transferred to the care of a group of nuns in the Tuscan countryside.

"She's doing very well," said Domenica. "And she's asked me to do something for her that affects us very significantly, Angus."

"Tell all," he said.