

ABIDE WITH ME

Thank the Lord he's dead, thought Penny Gray, sitting at the back of St Saviour's Church. And then felt slightly ashamed. After all, she hadn't disliked Lionel Leacock. Not Lionel, the man. A harmless ex-teacher with the smell of dog about him. But Lionel Leacock, the novelist, whose editor she had been for twenty-five years, she loathed intensely. Not that she ever admitted it. How could she? It was Leacock's lamentable historical romances that kept the firm of Siskin & Mooney afloat.

Leacock's mid-sentence heart attack in his writing-shed had hit Penny's boss, Robin Pettigrew, very hard indeed.

'A shocking loss,' he said, as they approached the church porch. 'Such a prolific storyteller. Seventy-five thousand words each spring and autumn. Two books a year, as regular as clockwork. What *shall* we do without him?'

Penny smiled wanly.

The years of my life I've sacrificed, she thought. Correcting his grammar. Suppressing his clichés. Repairing the holes in his paper-thin plots. Propping up his cardboard characters ... Indeed, there had been times when black despair had so overwhelmed her that she found herself looking longingly at her father's ivory-handled cut-throat razor.

The organ swelled into sombre life. Penny stood up in her pew and opened the pale green hymnal.

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide ...

But now, she thought. Finally, I'm free.

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The organ subsided and Lionel's stick-thin widow, poised and tearless, stepped forward to stand in the aisle.

'Tireless. That was Lionel. One thousand words per day. Six days a week. Fifty weeks a year for twenty-five years. Lionel's only break was our annual holiday in

Broadstairs,' said the widow. 'A prodigious scribbler. That's how he described himself. That's what he was.'

Being engaged in a mental arithmetic exercise, Penny didn't hear the rest of the eulogy. Six thousand words a week. Fifty weeks. Three hundred thousand words a year? No, she thought. That can't possibly be right ...

The pews emptied. Penny lingered. But Robin and Lionel's widow were waiting by the hearse.

'This is Penny,' said Robin.

'Hello, Penny,' said the widow. 'Lionel always held you in such very high regard.'

Penny felt a twitch of guilt.

'You'll miss him terribly, I expect,' said the widow.

Penny tried to assume a sorrowful expression.

'But don't despair,' said the widow. 'I was telling Robin. While tidying up Lionel's writing-shed, I discovered a tea-chest full to the brim with unpublished manuscripts.'

'Imagine that, Penny,' said Robin, beaming. 'Isn't it marvellous? Any number of new novels to satisfy his readers for years to come!'

'Yes, marvellous,' Penny heard herself saying.

Every year, one hundred and fifty thousand further words to be cut and shaped and pasted. Each spring and autumn, two new novels from the 'prodigious scribbler'. For how long? A second calculation. Another twenty-five years. No, thought Penny. I've had enough. And she pictured herself lying at peace in cold, carmine bathwater, her father's ivory-handled razor resting by her side.