

Extract from "Another Mouth has Passed" by Chris Sledge

The Jackson-Wrights were giving one of their drinks parties. As usual, they had succeeded in picking a fine day, so their guests were free to wander through the house, go outside and admire Edith's garden, sit by the pond, admire the view – and generally remind themselves, if they felt so inclined, that there was no shortage of money as well as generosity being displayed. Edward had long since given up charging around himself filling up his guests' glasses, and probably not just because of his lameness. Today the task was being carried out by three young waiters in immaculate white shirts and bow ties.

'Edward tells me there's going to be some ghastly social housing development at Church Field.' Charles Crawford had only heard this a couple of minutes previously.

'Oh, no, surely not!'

'Whose idea was that?' Charles's wife, and Mrs Henshaw, sounded even more affronted than he did.

'God only knows.'

'John Prescott, I expect,' Mrs Henshaw said. 'He sees it as his mission to cover the entire bloody country with mean little houses. For mean little people.'

'They can't force it on us, surely?'

Paul Preece was on hand to supply a few much needed facts.

'They'd have to get planning permission. So if we don't like what's proposed, we have our chance to say so.'

'A fat lot of comfort that'll be.' Mrs Henshaw had been preoccupied mainly with getting her wine glass refilled, but was now ready to join in the debate with vigour. All Mrs Henshaw's opinions were expressed with vigour, even when she didn't have a wine glass in her hand. 'The Council puts forward the idea, and the Council has the power to decide whether it should be approved. We don't really have a say at all. Sham democracy, that's what it is.'

'I think you'll find it isn't the Council,' Paul observed.

'What are you talking about?' Mrs Henshaw rounded on him. 'The Council's the planning authority.'

'Yes, I know that. What I meant is that it wouldn't be the Council which puts forward any plans. The Council doesn't provide social housing any more. It would have to appoint a Housing Association.'

'What's a Housing Association?' Mrs Henshaw was clearly prepared to damn it, whatever it was.

'It's a...successor body to a Council,' Paul replied, deciding to keep matters simple although he knew this wouldn't get many marks as an official definition. 'It gets Government money to help it build houses for people who need them and can't afford their own. Government doesn't want Councils to be direct providers any more.'

'Same thing, different name, is that what you're saying?'

'I don't think they'd see it that way.' Paul observed drily, beginning to wish he hadn't offered to help.

'And who will they decide to put here?'

'They don't decide. That's not their responsibility. They're just the landlord.'

This provoked Charles Crawford to rejoin the battle.

'You mean this outfit puts up the houses on Government money and hasn't got a clue who's going to live in them?'

'Let me explain,' Paul said, sensing that the bull was in danger of being grasped firmly by the tail and that there were plenty of volunteers ready to do the grasping. 'The District Council has the legal responsibility for maintaining the register of people in housing need. If it doesn't provide housing itself any longer, as ours doesn't, it appoints a Housing Association to build them and manage them. And the Council determines who's going to live in them.'

'So how do they know what type of houses to build?'

Give me patience.

'They talk to each other. They're allowed to do that, you know.'

Charles Crawford smiled, acknowledging the point.

'I'm glad you're up to speed with these things, Paul. We can do no end of damage to our blood pressure if we don't understand the system.'

'Well, whatever the system is, I don't like it,' Mrs Henshaw said, looking around in the hope of catching the waiter's eye. 'Horton Fence is fine as it is. That's why we all enjoy living here. I can see no merit in bringing any change to the village.'

'Let's see what Frank has to say,' Barbara Crawford suggested, seeing him walking in their direction and not wanting to lose the chance of involving him. Frank was a regular at everyone's parties as he seemed incurably genial and – being an electrician – most people in the village had reason to be grateful to him for rescuing them from actual or potential disasters of one sort and another. As he had lived in the village for all his working life – and done his stint on the Parish Council – he was held in respect by more or less everyone. A good man for drinks parties, even though no-one could ever remember him giving one himself, but not a candidate for dinner parties.

'We're trying to make sense of this social housing proposal,' Barbara said.

'Why're you bothering your heads about it?' Frank replied, smiling at them indulgently. 'It's miles away. If it ever happens.'

'But it might.'

'So where's the harm in that?'

'Well...'

Charles began, then realised it might be wiser to play for time.

'Look,' Frank said. 'My son went into the same trade as me. If he wanted to come back and live here, how could he afford to buy a house?'

'Is that what he's thinking of doing?'

'That's not the point,' Frank said. 'I'm sure you take my meaning.'

With which, Frank moved on. Mrs Henshaw did likewise, having failed to locate a wine waiter.