

## A Sign of the Times

by Richard Lewis

Daniel had a passion for collecting litter and was working his way along main street when something caught his eye. Hoisted high in the old oak tree, something was fluttering away as if fighting to free itself. At first he thought it was a blackbird caught in the branches but as he worked his way closer, identifying the object he thought, 'oh yes it's a sign of the times.'

The fluttering form was a face mask, caught the way he'd often seen plastic bags, balloons and other floating objects, flapping like Tibetan prayer flags placed in high places to bless the surrounding countryside. The mask was way out of his reach and he imagined it still being pinned there in years to come, as a ghostly reminder of the pandemic.

Having retired a few years earlier, Daniel had developed the habit of litter picking to give himself something to do. He was a slight wiry man in his mid-sixties with a goatee beard who always wore a peaked cap. You'd see him dancing through the village with his long handled grabber, single handily keeping the village tidy, his services being greatly appreciated by the villagers. Nothing missed his attention, swiftly cleaning gutters and pavements as if mother nature herself had swept them with a mighty wind. The bus shelter and service station were favourite places for the offending articles to congregate. Cellophane sweet wrappers, bright red Coke cans, news-papers and crumpled receipts; the list was endless.

When his wife Lisa travelled to Nepal, a place with poorly organised refuse collection, where rubbish was dumped on an industrial scale, she'd thought, 'if only Dan could have come, he'd be in his element.'

Sadly, being a Lupus sufferer with a seriously compromised immune system, Lisa had been one of the first to succumb to the virus, leaving Daniel devastated and alone.

Having even more time to himself he'd become further committed to his litter collecting duties, yet since lockdown there were fewer and fewer people about and therefore less litter. One morning crossing the foot bridge across the usually busy

A270, the road was completely empty in both directions, a previously unknown sight. No planes passed overhead; it had become like another world, silent except for the sound of birdsong which was on the increase.

While he hated the way people had so little respect for the environment, tossing sandwich wrappers and cigarette butts from car windows and worse, paradoxically he'd be disappointed if he were to show up for duty armed ready for action with little to collect.

That morning, coming across the face mask it hit him, realising he'd not seen his neighbour Gloria for weeks, being dragged along the pavement by her unruly collie, he thought, 'what's happened to everyone?' Daniel had been so busy keeping his head down hunting for litter, he'd not noticed. People seemed to be taking it all too far, sticking to the rules is one thing but not even the government expected this level of compliance.

People had become so fearful they'd shut themselves in their homes like bears hibernating in caves. What with working from home, ordering food and other supplies online there was no need to go out. Many felt they could even exercise indoors or in their garden, at least those who had one. Meeting up was replaced by Zoom sessions, much money was saved and many shops and offices closed down for good, communal areas becoming like ghost towns.

There may have been the benefits of lower pollution levels but Daniel was effectively being made redundant and as there became nothing for him to do, he also retreated indoors. He felt trapped, his heart beating uneasily as if trying to escape like that fluttering mask.

He longed for the state of emergency to come to an end and for the contaminating people to return to litter the village, so his services would once again be required.