

THE VICAR OF NINETY

The Vicar of ninety
Rides a bicycle,
Panting up hillsides,
Dashing down.

The Vicar of ninety's
Eyes are like bullets.
Head like a cannonball,
Fingers crack.

The Vicar of ninety,
Brave and athletic,
Vaults the school wall
To flatten a bully.

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The Vicar is also
Scholastic, dramatic.
He's teaching me Greek
Though we both prefer stories

Of silhouette families
Framed on his wallpaper,
Schooldays at Marlborough,
Cambridge, the river —

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The Vicar of ninety,
Remembering rivers,
Has asked me and my mother
To travel first-class.

He wears a white jacket,
White shoes and white waistcoat,
Yellowing flannels,
A Panama hat,

And he bows as he hands us
Into the swaying
Boat on the water.
He rows like a demon

But puffs and goes scarlet.
My mother takes over.
We eat in a field.
— The Vicar rows home

Slowly, on sparkling
Wavelets, a flower
In his buttonhole nodding.
He snores in the train.

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The Vicar of ninety
Taught me no Greek
But made me tell fortunes
At the church fête

And he lent me his precious
Classical Dictionary
(Ancient mythology)
(Dusty and heavy).

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At Christmas the children
Sat round his pulpit,
At Easter — a prophet,
Arms lifted — he bellowed

'Good news! Christ is risen!'
We all cheered inside us.
He's dead, and I've given
Away his great book.

Ruth Silcock