

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Meeting Old Friends Again

*The Reverend Canon Marshall (Mark) Shier*

The last chords of the organist's postlude faded away. I was now officially retired. A million things pulled at my attention, like my dogs eagerly pawing my legs when I returned home (me first, me first, me first!). But two stuck out above the rest. One was to revisit the literature I had read (and, to be honest, misread) in my youth. The second was to get serious about a regular exercise regimen — I had ignored my family's history of heart trouble and diabetes far too long.

I knew two of the books with which I would begin the first: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and the John Galsworthy classic *The Forsyte Saga*. With leisure to savor the artistry, I could reread the literature I treasured with the advantage of fifty years of adult knowledge and thirty-two years of parish ministry. My, what a difference!

When I was a high school senior, our English teacher assigned us all book reports of well-known novels. I was assigned *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1932). It was a somewhat rough beginning of a lifelong passion for English and American literature. I say somewhat rough because I was indignant when I discovered that, while everyone else had one novel to read, I had three, since the work is a trilogy. I was not a happy camper. I read the books grudgingly and hurriedly and altogether missed what the author was saying. I was simply too young and inexperienced to appreciate the human drama that Galsworthy was so masterful in laying out.

Nonetheless, *The Forsyte Saga* has stayed with me through five decades. I didn't much care for the television adaptation; I missed the literary skill of Galsworthy's descriptions. Until last year I did not read it again in its entirety, though I would occasionally dip into a few pages.

And so the rereading of this marvelous literature was coming along easily and naturally for me in retirement. What was not coming along so well was my other retirement initiative for exercise; I've always been a couch potato.

In my younger years I had jogged some until my back rebelled and couch potatohood reclaimed me. During most of my adult life I attempted to develop a walking regimen but always gave up after more or less time (less as time went on). There always seemed more important parish work to do and little time to accomplish it (sound familiar?). But now I had all the time in the world (well, almost) and no excuses sufficed. I realized that one reason for my earlier failure to walk consistently had been sheer boredom. While I enjoy the weather and greenery of our Southern California Mediterranean climate, I can be entertained for only so long by palm trees, bird-of-paradise bushes, and magnolia blossoms.

Salvation finally arrived in the form of an iPod and some audio books. Voila! Now I am no longer bored; the hour I walk daily seems to fly by, and I am gaining a whole new appreciation of our cultural heritage. Hearing literature, by the way, is quite a bit different from reading it — sometimes better, sometimes not, but always engrossing.

I began with *Moby Dick*, my favorite novel of all time. It's really much easier listening than reading, in my humble opinion. But I took a break about halfway through; reading that book is like gorging on a magnificently rich dessert; after a while, you just have to stop and come back later. I cleansed my palate with Jerome K. Jerome's comic travel guide *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*.

Then on to *The Forsyte Saga*. It was all that I had grown to expect. My favorite part has come to be what Galsworthy calls an interlude, *Indian Summer of a Forsyte*. In it, we follow the last weeks of Old Jolyon Forsyte, one of the more sympathetic characters in the saga. Old Jolyon has the strong middle-class Victorian characteristics of love of property and love of propriety that figure so prominently in this work, but he also has another streak, an appreciation for beauty that is alien to the rest of his family and that opens him up to life in ways that his family find confusing (except for his son, Young Jolyon, who inherits his father's love of beauty and becomes an artist). In my seventh decade now, I appreciate Galsworthy's skill in limning the experience of eighty-five-year-old Jolyon: the physical deterioration, the love of children and dogs, enjoyment of the moment and of little things, an inchoate sensing of the mystery of existence, awareness of an ever closer end, impatience with the solicitude of family, and more. This little fragment, this interlude, has become my favorite old friend.

Perhaps you might be interested in some of this, too. You can download to your computer or iPad for free the texts of the classics published before 1923. Pre-1923 literature is in the public domain; you can access it at [www.projectgutenberg.org](http://www.projectgutenberg.org).

If you wish to listen to these works, allow me to point you to [www.librivox.org](http://www.librivox.org) where you can download free audio books (the same pre-1923 literature). These books are recorded by volunteers, not professional actors, so the quality of the reading varies, but I've always found the readers acceptable and some really captivating. (Full disclosure: I am one of the volunteer readers and have recorded John Galsworthy's *Five Tales*, which contains *Indian Summer of a Forsyte*.)

Who knows, perhaps you will encounter some old friends again.



Canon Shier was the rector for thirty-two years of Saint Andrew's Parish, Fullerton, CA. He now takes Sunday services at St. Michael and All Angels Parish, Studio City, while the parish searches for a new rector.