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Where there's Brass, there's Muck

VERY PUBLIC SCANDALS PART 1

PETER WALKER

Author's Note

Although these stories are written in the context of real-world events, the places and areas described in this narrative are entirely fictitious, as are the events that make up this story.

All characters in this book are completely fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This story contains strong and emotive language in certain places, as it reflects the kinds of language used by young people of at the end of the Twentieth Century.

I see no good reason to be prudish about this sort of thing, but if such language offends, I apologise.

This book is dedicated to that curious breed of Headmaster or Headmistress, without whom so many of the nation's schools would run so much better.

Peter Walker

WHERE THERE'S BRASS,
THERE'S MUCK

Chapter 1

J. L. Dunstan Stoate always enjoyed his short walk from his riverside apartment to the independent grammar school of which he was headmaster. It allowed him to reflect on the success he had made of his life, as well as take in the views of Tanswold, the town in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire which he had called home for the last twenty years or so. He always felt uplifted by the pleasant Georgian town with its main street surrounded by fine town houses on either side. He would peer down small side streets of pleasant cottages. It pleased him that the town had survived virtually intact from the architectural ravages of the nineteenth-sixties that had so desecrated its neighbours. He would often stroll through Packham Gardens, a delightful park named after, and donated to the town by, the previous owners of The Hermitage, the eighteenth-century country mansion which had been their family home for ten generations and was now the home of the Tanswold School.

During his morning constitutional, Stoate would often reflect on what was coming up that day. Sometimes he would consider long-term plans for the future of his school, which was growing by the year and prospering by the day. He was proud of its continued success, which had been entirely due to his forward thinking. It was also his family, as he had remained single all his life, unencumbered with domestic trivia such as the need to amuse small children, mend the Hoover, or fix a dripping tap. He could concentrate on the important things of life, and the current important thing in his life was the new dining room and kitchens that the school desperately needed. He had drawn up the plans; the estimates had been agreed and now all that had to be done was to get the money together and go ahead.

The Governors were meeting that evening, and he was feeling excited about the prospect. The new dining room should be up and running by the following spring if the builders got their skates on, and he looked forward to Speech Day next summer in which he was going to formally open it and name it 'Stoate Hall'.

The most important thing was that the new dining room could be paid for without recourse to expensive bank loans. Stoate was immensely proud of this. In previous projects, funding had been the school's Achilles' heel, but now the school was prosperous and seemed awash with money. There did seem to be a little doubt nagging in the corner of his mind. Somehow the Bursar seemed to be dragging his feet, and was not as enthusiastic as everybody else, or at least everybody else that mattered. Stoate could not see what the problem was. The Bursar was always a man for prudent financial rectitude. On the other hand, Stoate had an uneasy, albeit illogical, feeling that he could smell an unpleasant financial rat. He would yet again tackle the Bursar later, after he had interviewed two people for a staff vacancy in the Physics Department. Instead, Dunstan Stoate turned his mind with pride to his achievements.

Although Dunstan Stoate considered himself to be the Founding Headmaster, he was not. That Tanswold School existed at all was due to various political machinations in the county education department of the neighbouring county of Sowerland and a desperate rear-guard action fought by a small group of parents to retain a grammar school in Tanswold. When the closure of Tanswold Grammar School had been announced, there was mustered enough support to purchase the Tanswold Grammar School site (which they did for a song) and started a new independent grammar school for boys under the old headmaster, Mr Kent.

Although Mr Kent was a kindly man, well respected by pupils, parents and staff alike, he did not remain for long. In the first few months, the school was struggling and almost went bankrupt. A small but influential group of governors headed by a local landowner, Sir Kenneth Rounce, saved the situation, but began to make life rather difficult for Mr Kent. Eventually, he retired before he was pushed. Sir Kenneth appointed himself Chairman of Governors, along with Donald Blance, Lionel Hyland and Sir Ronald Wiseman. They had been at Oxford or Cambridge in the halcyon days before the War, clearly remembering the high life that they had led as undergraduates.

Although the governing body consisted of twenty people in all, including representatives of the parents, Sir Kenneth and his friends became the dominant force in meetings and one of their first acts when Sir Kenneth became Chairman was to abolish the staff representation. They appointed one J L D Stoate as Headmaster.

Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate was the younger son of a banker. As a boy, he had lacked nothing. He had been indulged with everything he had ever wanted, and this indulgence, as in Sir Kenneth, had developed a rather ruthless and selfish streak in the young Stoate. Stoate was not as unremittingly unpleasant as his employer-to-be. Unlike Sir Kenneth, who was at heart a coward, Stoate had a great sense of adventure and some of the capers he got up to as a boy are still legendary.

As a pupil at St Peter's School in Everingham, he had incurred the wrath of the Headmaster by placing a dustbin on the cupola of the school clock on the morning of Speech Day. Any St Peter's old boy would tell you that this was a feat of incredible daring and not a little danger. Mr Stoate (Senior) was not pleased at the bill, which demanded an astronomical sum to pay contractors to remove the bin.

Another caper got the young Stoate into trouble at St Peter's. He abseiled down the airshaft of a railway tunnel to see if there were bats. The foolhardy young explorer went so far down that he reached the bore itself and was narrowly missed by a passing goods train. The rescue was an exceedingly hazardous affair, leading to the injury of one of the rescuers as well as the closure for six hours of the main line. Neither the school nor the railway authorities were at all amused; Stoate was suspended for a month and fined.

As Stoate got older, his lust for adventure did not diminish. He read books that he considered "ripping good yarns" and enacted them with a few like-minded friends. Six more welts decorated his backside after one such prank in two old army Jeeps; the brakes were defective on the vehicle that Stoate and his friends had "borrowed". Their joyride went somewhat out of control, leading to the destruction of a greenhouse and a pair of garage doors, as well as deep tyre marks over the first eleven cricket square. The Headmaster of St Peter's maintained that he stopped going bald when Stoate left.

When Stoate went to university, he joined the Air Corps, becoming an aviator of some considerable skill. In the carefree days after the war young men tried out various stunts with, occasionally, fatal results. Stoate made his name with a stunt that he had invented, the Dunstan Roll. This was a fiendishly complex manoeuvre that required split second timing as well as expert airmanship. The dare devil pilot was grounded not long after, for not only did he buzz the Vice Chancellor's Garden Party, but also on the same flight he did a Dunstan Roll and strained the airframe of the plane so seriously that it was at once declared no

longer airworthy. The Civil Aviation Authority took a dim view of the matter and fined Stoaite £500, a not inconsiderable sum at that time.

When he left University, Stoaite joined the Royal Air Force, soon flying the fast jets. His sense of his own self-importance was undiminished. As his exploits became legendary in the Officers' Mess, Stoaite enjoyed his reputation as a fearless daredevil. When things went well, he was not shy in coming forward to claim the credit. On the other hand, when one of his capers went wrong, he somehow managed to get the blame shifted onto somebody else, the more junior the better. Several promising young men had their careers terminated prematurely as a result, and Stoaite was hated by his ground crew. They did the minimum for him that was necessary to prevent him from falling out of the sky, thereby wrecking a fine aeroplane. They need not have worried.

It was not due to their negligence when one day Stoaite did a Dunstan Roll involving another pilot. Their wings touched. Stoaite managed to get his damaged Vampire back to base, a feat of expert airmanship considering how severely damaged the aircraft was. The other pilot was not so lucky. The remains of his machine were removed from a smoking stinking crater ten metres across and three metres deep. This time Stoaite's instinct for self-preservation was not sufficient for the occasion and it was the end of the line for him.

At the enquiry, he tried unsuccessfully to put the blame onto his late colleague. The Board was not taken in. At the subsequent court-martial, Stoaite was dishonourably discharged, but almost immediately used the Old Boy Network and secured employment in an aeronautical engineering company.

Stoaite remained in that line for several years, but at the age of thirty had another crisis of career. A top-secret plane had crashed due to faulty avionics. No amount of attempting to shift the blame onto others on Stoaite's behalf could remove the spotlight placed on him by the subsequent enquiry. He left under a cloud.

It is said, *He who can does; he who cannot teaches*. Stoaite started teaching. By skilful wheeling and dealing, he made his way rapidly up the career ladder and was appointed Headmaster of Tanswold School.

On appointment, Dunstan Stoaite (He hated the name Joseph as it reminded him of old men with terrier dogs, and Leslie as it could be a woman's name; Dunstan was much more distinguished.) invested a substantial sum of money into the struggling school. He set about his duties with a dynamic enthusiasm, which ensured that the school prospered. He dismissed almost all the old guard

from Mr Kent's days, replacing them with younger men. He only appointed women in desperation. Stoate tended to use dismissal of staff as a first resort. This was encouraged by Sir Kenneth, and it was said that Stoate had dismissed as many staff as there had been years that he had been at the school.

Stoate loathed the teaching unions; in his view a man who had been dismissed should accept his lot and go without an unseemly fight. Stoate was a bully to his staff, and his management style was capricious. The most charitable thing that could be said about Stoate was that he was good with things, but hopeless with people. To people that mattered, like parents, he was charm personified, guiding the school through several periods of expansion. He also thought of himself as a very charismatic teacher; many of his pupils and colleagues (secretly) thought of him as an overgrown schoolboy.

Stoate was particularly pleased with himself that the school had secured The Hermitage, an eighteenth-century mansion opposite the old grammar school site. He was particularly proud of the stable conversions and the new classroom blocks, which he had designed himself. There was no doubt about it; Stoate had a genuine talent for architecture and was a superb draughtsman.

Soon after the move to The Hermitage, Stoate decided that the school needed toughening up. Warrant Officer Charlie Gallagher, a tough Scot and career soldier, was appointed to be School Major. Gallagher had seen action several times in his army career, including surviving being shot down in a helicopter. A Combined Cadet Force was set up. Attendance at this was voluntary; school parade on a Wednesday afternoon was not. The boys in their brown sweaters and black trousers were lined up in forms while the staff hung about in their black gowns, for not even Stoate dared to suggest that they should be on parade as well. Stoate and Gallagher would wander up and down the ranks of boys coming out with the occasional comment like, "Shoes need polishing, boy!"

The parade used to occur near the school gate so that the townspeople of Tanswold could see, the result of which was that the boys were dubbed "The Black and Tans". The school parade degenerated into chaos one afternoon when an ex-pupil with a debt of ingratitude towards Stoate brought some friends from the sixth form at Goyder's. It was not the fact that he was called "Biggles" that irked Stoate so much. It was the response to this defiant insolence; that the school had fallen about laughing. Stoate re-established his undermined authority by raising the dust from a couple of backsides with his cane. Subsequently the parade was moved behind The Hermitage.

Years went by and the school prospered more. Its results were excellent and matched some of the best independent schools in the land. Although this was due to the hard work and dedication of his staff, Stoate always attributed the school's success to his leadership style. Girls were taken in the sixth form. Sports and other wholesome activities for boys flourished. As in all schools, less wholesome things occurred from time to time, to be dealt with severely by Stoate. More recently, Stoate had been elected to the Headmasters' Conference and The Hermitage with its grounds had not looked better for generations.

Stoate was always pleased to recount the more successful parts of his life's story to visitors, carefully avoiding the nasty bits. He was due to meet the candidates for the physics vacancy this morning and was looking forward to regaling them with his tales. He put the unwelcome thoughts of smelly financial rodents to the back of his mind. Instead, he admired the grounds of The Hermitage. They were looking splendid in the spring sunshine, and Stoate revelled in being Lord of the Manor. He imagined what it must have been like to be one of the Packham family, especially in the heyday of the house, just before the First World War. He did not want to go too far back, as they did not have heating or bathrooms until the late nineteenth century. The idea of having to go to the little house at the bottom of the garden quite appalled him.

He wandered about the gardens in front of the house, before going in to start his day's work. He spent a short time briefing himself on the two candidates he was going to interview that morning, after which he turned his mind back to the problem with the Bursar. He was going to trap this rat once and for all.

Chapter 2

Robert Cooke knew nothing about any of the background to his potential new employer, of course, beyond what was published in the prospectus and in the job specification, nor would he have cared. Tanswold School had appeared to be the ideal school for him, emphasising as it did its Christian ethos and care for its students as individuals. Both of those worthy aims were at the head of his agenda and now he was on his way to the interview. This was nothing new to him; he joked that he spent a quarter of his life writing out application forms and attending interviews.

As a struggling but conscientious teacher, he felt that he had seen half the schools in the North of England, and he had wearily waited in many a foreign staffroom waiting for the summons to the Head's office. When the other person had had been summoned and offered the job, he would have many a debriefing with a Deputy-Head or Chairman of Governors which had a rather repetitive theme to it, "Well, Mr Cooke, we really liked your answer to... However, we found that..."

This time, things were going to be different. He had longed to leave the bedlam of the comprehensive school that he had worked at for the last eight years. In the comparative peace and good order of an independent school, the children would be rather better brought up and would, so he thought, obey his not unreasonable instructions without an unseemly slanging match. At long last the opportunity had come. He had applied at the last minute to what appeared to be his ideal school and was on his way to meet J L Dunstan Stoate, Headmaster.

Half an hour before his interview, Cooke found himself caught up in the Tanswold traffic jam. Cursing, he looked at the map for an alternative route but could not find one, as Tanswold Bridge was the only crossing of the River Sower for many miles. The climbing temperature gauge on the dashboard seemed to mirror his blood pressure, for Cooke was not a patient man under such circumstances.

Finally, he had worked his way along Tanswold High Street, missed the back entrance, and had to go in through the front, which was normally the way out. Compared with the run-down system-built nineteen-sixties edifice that was his current workplace, with litter blowing about in the corners, graffiti on the sports hall walls and boarded-up windows on the corridors, The Hermitage was a picture. The stucco on the old house was a warm off-white, gleaming in the spring sunshine in a way that was most pleasing. The tall cedars that surrounded the house offset the lush green of the beeches. It was break and boys played over the full extent of the landscaped grounds. What a contrast in their civilised games of football with the fights that were a regular feature of Cooke's present school! What a revelation! Only one master needed to be on duty rather than half the staff.

Cooke parked his car, and a smiling youth asked him in a courteous manner if he could help in any way.

"I've come to see Mr Stoate and Mr Brett," Cooke replied, pleasantly surprised at the boy's good manners. He had spent much of his working life in the unwilling company of the disaffected. He had at one time attempted to share his enthusiasm for physics. Now it was a case of drumming it into those who were by choice idle, insolent and irresponsible. While his teaching was doing nothing for his audience, it had jaundiced Cooke's view of youth. It was an interview, and Cooke made himself feel more inclined to see the favourable side.

The boy took Cooke to Reception. The Receptionist punched some numbers into her telephone keypad. A minute later a large homely looking woman with silver hair appeared, the Headmaster's secretary. People said that she was the one who ran the place and was the only person who could control Stoate. She took Cooke to a waiting area in the entrance hall and seated him on a comfortable sofa and offered him coffee.

The entrance hall was a grand room, as were most of the rooms in The Hermitage. A large portrait of one of the Packham family hung there, alongside another one of Sir Kenneth Rounce dressed up as High Marshall of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. A fine cantilevered stone staircase led up to a mezzanine level where there was a large window overlooking the back garden and the river. Around the hall were beautiful antiques that had been bequeathed to the school by a grateful grandparent. Along the corridor that led off from the hall there were large colour photographs of some of the boys' activities out of school. In one there was a boy in combat fatigues with a radio set, in another five boys were in

shorts and T-shirts carrying heavy rucksacks, clearly on a long-distance hike and in yet another there was a mud splattered youth on a mountain bike.

Presently, the Headmaster's secretary came in carrying coffee and a small plate of biscuits. Cooke received these gratefully.

"I need these after the traffic jam I was stuck in, just now," he said. "It took me twenty minutes to do the last mile. I should have got out and walked."

"I know," replied the secretary. "I come in the other way to you. On some mornings, the traffic is right up to the roundabout. If you are coming in from your side, the traffic is not quite so bad. Some of our staff live in Rockwood and they find it quicker to walk. Well, I must be off. The other candidate will be due shortly."

"Thanks for the coffee, I needed it."

"My pleasure. Good luck in your interview."

I'll need it, thought Cooke, knowing what normally happens. I hope I don't have to spend ages in the staffroom, making small talk with those I will never meet again.

Presently, the secretary arrived with the other candidate and introduced him. Cooke promptly forgot the name, although it reminded him of a racing driver. The other candidate was from the far side of the county, living in the Pennines. This man appeared to be in his late thirties, young looking for his age at one time, but now with a receding hairline and a distinct bald patch at the back. Although in his youth he had been something of an athlete, both as a fell runner and an oarsman, now he was out of training, slightly tubby. It was apparent that his suit had been bought when he was an athlete, for now the trousers were straining at the waist, as were the lower buttons on his shirt.

It reminded Cooke of an old song he had heard about that *bally bottom button*. The other candidate's neck would have been mightily relieved to escape from the collar. Cooke eyed him suspiciously and wondered when the other candidate would end up exposing himself in a hail of bursting buttons. The other candidate tried to strike up a conversation with Cooke about his wife and young son. He spoke in a manner that Cooke thought of as ponderously pompous.

Typical public-school type with his lah-di-dah accent and superior manner! Cooke thought gloomily. *They always seem to go for the chinless wonders.*

The secretary returned with a cup of coffee for the other candidate and a plate of biscuits, before disappearing to her office. The other candidate started on

about the school he was at and it sounded to Cooke every bit as frightful as his own.

“...School. When I applied in 1987, I did so because I knew it maintained standards. The 5th year that left that year had been really bad, even from the 1st year... They had based the budget on 180 coming back into the Lower Sixth, but that year was so bad that only 120 turned up... Now that schools are paid by bottoms on seats, that meant that there was a £100 000 deficit... County started to lean on the Headmaster who was a decent man but became less and less effective as he became ill. They started to expand the sixth form in competition with the local colleges. This meant that they had to lower standards... First of all, they got rid of the uniform for the sixth form.

“That is where the rot set in... Soon after, the old Headmaster retired, and they got another bloke from the Midlands. We had been promised that he was the best Headmaster for a long time... He was a lemon. He could not teach. The school really started to go down the pan... His head of department refused to timetable him because he was so bad... He really let discipline slip. All he was interested in was administration. Disciplinary issues did not interest him one little bit. In fact, he would put members of staff who complained too much on special measures... Now the sixth form is full of drugs, and he doesn't know where to start... He virtually has to ring County for permission to fart... I wish now that I had stayed at...”

Cooke wished he had as well. It reminded him of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in which there had been a sketch which was based on a similar diatribe about “sweaty, mindless oafs from Kettering and Boventry...” Only this time it was for real, and there was no on/off switch. He did not pick them, but he always seemed to get them. It was just his luck that he had to share the day with this long-winded and overweight bore, who had only paused his monotonous diatribe to stuff another biscuit in his mouth. When the other candidate had finished the biscuits from his own plate, he had started on those that remained on Cooke's plate. Good manners prevented Cooke from shoving the plate down the other candidate's mouth. He would probably have eaten it.

The Bore, or judging from his size and eating habits, The Boar, started again, “My colleague used to keep flouncing out when things got too much for him, and I had to take over. Several times I ended up teaching his lessons...”

I would have flounced out, if I had been working with you, thought Cooke. Fortunately, a secretary from the Bursar's office was just passing by and the coffee had reminded Cooke of a need he had to attend to.

"Excuse me, could you tell me where the loo is?" asked Cooke.

"Go up the stairs, turn right and it's on the left at the end of the corridor."

"Finish those off, if you like," said Cooke to the other candidate, passing him the plate. He went upstairs, leaving the other candidate to read a copy of the school magazine.

When he returned, the other candidate made the same trip, returning in a minute, this time without resuming his diatribe. Both men sat in silence with their noses in copies of the school magazine. In the distance a bell rang for the end of break, and both heard the distant conversations of staff making their way from the common room to their respective lessons. Above there was the clattering of feet and the noisy chatter of boys waiting to go into the classrooms that were on the first floor of The Hermitage. After the bumping of chairs on the carpets, the old house was quiet again.

Presently, a tall wiry man with a bald head, beard and glasses walked down the corridor into the hall and approached the two candidates. Before he introduced himself, it was clear to the candidates who he was; he was in every way the very caricature of a physics teacher.

"Good morning," he said shaking each by the hand, "I'm Peter Brett, Head of Physics."

Again, Cooke heard the other candidate's name. This time it registered as James, but the surname did not. Not that Cooke could have cared less. If he never met the man again, it would be too soon. To Cooke, he was still the Boar. Peter Brett handed each a sheet of photocopied A4.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. I was on duty this morning and couldn't arrange a swap. The programme for today is on this sheet. Firstly, you will both come with me to see the department..."

As Brett was finishing, a small tubby man appeared from the headmaster's study, snorted as he strode along the corridor and lunged through a door marked *BURSAR*, which closed loudly behind him. Brett smiled.

"He's obviously slashing our budget again," he observed. "Typical, we don't know if we will get the money to fit out the new lab this year."

The Bursar appeared again, this time carrying a large file, before striding purposefully to the headmaster's study. Brett took the two candidates to the

Science Department. It was housed in a very new and pleasing building next to the river. The Science Department shared its building with the Design and Technology Department, and the building was designed around a quadrangle. There was a large open plan workshop full of state-of-the-art machinery. The boys could do virtually anything they wanted to a piece of metal or wood. If they could not do it, a computer could.

“Unlike many schools, Science and DT get on very well and we share ideas and chat a lot over coffee,” Brett said to the candidates. “We often work together on big projects and many of our A level students do DT. Vehicle projects are the most popular.”

As if to confirm this, there was a loud revving of a car engine at the rear of the building followed by a series of sharp explosions. Blue smoke rose lazily above the roof into the spring air. The driveway in front of the building extended through an archway into the quadrangle, and when Brett and the two candidates had passed through, they came upon the source of the noise. A long-haired youth (Cooke recognised him as being the mud-splattered boy on the mountain bike) in grubby overalls was working on the strangest wheeled vehicle that Cooke had ever seen. It reminded him of one of the strange contraptions put together by *Wesley Pegdon* on *Last of the Summer Wine*, being a steel frame on six wheels, on top of which was a seat and a steering wheel at the left-hand front end. An engine was mounted on the right, and this was receiving earnest attention from the youth.

He called into the workshop to the DT master, “Sir, I’m going to have to take the head off again; the valves aren’t seating.”

The youth got back onto his machine. The starter barked ineffectively several times in its attempt to get the engine going again. Eventually the engine spluttered into life, with a cloud of smoke pouring out of the exhaust. He jabbed the accelerator with his right foot and the engine responded with a second fusillade of explosions, with yellow flames shooting out of the exhaust, before stuttering to a stop with a loud bang and a long flame shooting out of the carburettor. A window opened and an angry bearded face leaned out.

“FRANKLAND! TURN THAT DAMNED THING OFF! My class are doing a test and can’t concentrate.”

The bearded face belonged to, and was inseparable from, Ian Denham, the Head of Chemistry. It retreated, the window shutting with a bang. The last detonation from the exhaust had made a smoke ring that hung languidly above

the group that had gathered around Frankland's contraption. Frankland was fishing about in a metal toolbox, before looking up at Mr Brett and the two candidates.

"Gentlemen, this is Thomas Frankland. He is one of our physicists, and he will be showing you around later," said Mr Brett. "Can you tell us about this thing?"

"Well, sir, it's a six-wheel drive all-terrain vehicle I'm making as my main project," explained Frankland. "It's based on a Ford engine and gear box, but I am having trouble with the valves in the cylinder head. I think I'm going to have to do a top end rebuild."

Judging from some of the other knocks and bangs that had come from the engine, Cooke thought that Frankland ought to start off with a bottom-end rebuild instead. He said nothing but looked on in a manner that he hoped might have looked approving. It was the Boar who gave vent to Cooke's unspoken thought in one of his many ill-thought out and ill-timed comments.

"I would scrap the lot and start again," he said. "Or you could sell it as living sculpture and make a fortune; you would get paid more than us. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Frankland gave a long-suffering smile. His all-terrain vehicle had been the butt of a few similar jokes in the Sixth Form Common Room, and he did not like Denham shouting at him from the Chemistry lab. Above all he did not want this overweight and pompous buffoon whom he had never met before making wise cracks at his expense. He collected up his tools and put them in the box, before calling a couple of his friends over. They pushed the vehicle back into the workshop before Frankland got out his *Haynes* manual to see how to go about his engine rebuild.

Meanwhile, the Head of Science and the two candidates had left the quadrangle and gone into the rear entrance of the Science lobby. They followed Brett into a staff room and sat down on the easy chairs that were along two walls of the room. Brett offered them coffee, and both accepted it. A caffeine-high would be essential for them to get through this interview. Brett started to expand on the nature of the job on offer, giving the impression that he was somewhat fearful of the headmaster and parents. Cooke wondered what kind of support there would be if there were any trouble. It could not be any worse than what he had already; his Head of Department was an ambitious woman who was on the career ladder. She would move on after three years in a post leaving a mess for

her successor to clear up. Besides that, the department was in a splendid building and seemed very well equipped.

Soon they were wandering around the department, and Brett was presently showing the room at the end of the corridor, K124, which was to be the successful candidate's teaching room. It was the most pleasant school laboratory that Cooke had ever seen. Even the Boar seemed to be impressed, muttering something about its being "better than S16."

While meeting with other colleagues, The Boar was name-dropping about his "Membership of the Institute". Somehow this made Cooke feel a little more relaxed as it was becoming clearer that the Boar was starting to bore the others, and in doing so was spinning out enough rope to hang himself with.

Brett continued the tour of the Department. Moving out of the Physics area, they saw the new computer suite with its network of PCs. Brett did not tell them of its nickname "Disneyland" which was put about by the Head of English, a gruff Scot called Andrew McEwan, who explained it by pointing out, "This disnae work, that disnae work..." It looked very impressive, and the class were clearly enjoying what they were doing. Next door to that in the corner of the building was a large science and technology library with its own librarian. There were shelves of books on any topic a student could conceivably wish to look at. There were computers and even areas for the low-tech approach to communication, writing with a pen on paper.

The Boar was now coming out with another of his quips in poor taste, this time with the Librarian. He was hanging himself wonderfully.

They took a quick look at the Lecture Theatre before going out through the main entrance. On the grass outside, a group of boys stood at a distance from their teacher who was approaching a large balloon with a lighted taper on a broomstick. He had the trepidation of an apprentice lion-tamer. The balloon, full of hydrogen and oxygen, detonated like the crack of doom. Frightened birds circled around the trees above and curious faces appeared at several windows of The Hermitage, which had been rattled by the explosion.

Dunstan Storate was waiting in the hall to meet Brett and the candidates. Brett introduced them, and Storate shook hands with them warmly. He was a large man in every sense, tall, overweight, with a moon face. Like Brett, he was bald save for a little white hair behind his ears, neatly trimmed. He spoke in a loud voice, managing to convey the impression that he was highly honoured that the candidates had bothered to come at all.

“I’m so sorry that I was not here to meet you.” he started. “I had a meeting with the Bursar that went on rather longer than I had hoped. Anyway, welcome to Tanswold School. I trust you enjoyed your tour of the Science Department, splendid it is too, isn’t it, Peter? What was that bang just now? It made me jump out of my skin! Do come on through to my office. Would you like a coffee? Eileen, could you do three coffees? Eileen keeps me in order. I would be lost without her.”

Stoate ushered both through into his study, and they sat down in deep armchairs. Stoate eased himself into a large revolving chair behind a large antique knee-hole desk. Presently Eileen came through with the coffees, and Stoate started to talk about the school. Three things became noticeably clear from the outset. Firstly, it was his school, secondly, he was very proud of his achievement and thirdly, he was a very powerful man in all senses of the word. Cooke thought to himself that he would not like to cross Stoate in any way.

The Headmaster carried on about the centrality of the Christian Faith to the school. He enthused about the church service that was always held last lesson on a Friday. All the school would troop to the parish church in Tanswold, which was a wonderful way of ending the week. Neither candidate could disagree; both had experienced Year 10 bottom sets last thing on a Friday and had struggled to keep them in their seats, let alone get them to do some meaningful tasks.

“The important thing about today,” Stoate concluded, “is that we are on trial in your eyes as much as you are in ours. Please ask us anything and let us know what you feel. The main thing is that the parents feel they get value for money and you must convince us of that. You will, of course, understand that your first year will be a kind of trial year in which your teaching will come under close scrutiny not just from your colleagues and myself, but also from the boys and their parents. Confirmation of your appointment will naturally be subject to your satisfactory performance in this year. This applies to all my staff, and they are subject to review from time to time. Be in no doubt that the most important thing is the value for money that you provide. The parents pay a lot of money, and we must give them much more than they would get from the comprehensive, both in quality of teaching and in the discipline of the school. Parents are paying us for results. They will not be happy if their son only gets Cs at GCSE when they want As, and we get the blame. In our business you make your own way; it is up to you to get the results. You must understand that to achieve this you must give one hundred and ten percent commitment to the school. Anything less is not

acceptable. We cannot afford to have passengers on board. If staff are found to be lacking in any area, well, I'm sure you understand... Not of course that that should apply to you."

Cooke suppressed a desire to give Stoate what his grandmother would have called "a jolly good slosh". The secretary came back in to announce the arrival of the two Sixth Form boys who had been delegated to show the candidates around the rest of the school. Although they did not show it, both felt quite intimidated by Stoate's conclusion. He had left them in no doubt where he stood and whose side he was on; it was not theirs. There would be no professional support from him. Anyone would tell them that for free. If they had not disliked their present posts so much, each would have walked away, telling Stoate that he was a pompous and patronising buffoon. At any rate, most headmasters of independent schools would have said that wouldn't they? One thing was for sure; they were both glad to be out of Stoate's office.

One of the two guides they had met before, Thomas Frankland. Graham Edwards was a close friend of Frankland, and both were friendly, doing their best to make the candidates feel welcome. Frankland had got over his annoyance at the Boar's asinine comments on his all-terrain vehicle with the prospect of being able to tell Mr Brett and Mr Stoate what he thought of the candidates. Both had made up their minds quickly that they preferred Mr Cooke to the other candidate. The two boys showed the candidates around the Hermitage, their Third Form History project on the Packham Family being a remarkably useful resource for them to call on as they talked. They showed them the first floor with the library. The Geography Department occupied the rest of the first floor, with the Art Department on the second. There, not only could boys paint, but also do photography, make models and do pottery. They met Mrs Golland and Miss Holt, the two Art mistresses, who showed them the wonderful views it was possible to paint from The Hermitage. Certainly, the quality of work on display suggested a great wealth of talent. The Boar, who was trying to sound clever and concerned, responded with another asinine comment about the kiln.

Mrs Golland looked at him pityingly. Edwards and Frankland could tell that Mrs Golland was not best pleased; she had been working flat-out on the display of examination material for moderation. She was thoroughly tired and did not appreciate rather patronising comments from men that she did not know.

Leaving the Art Department, Edwards and Frankland showed their visitors the photographic dark room, the model railway room and the small room where

the CCF practised their radio signals. The two guides showed their guests across to the stable block where there was the Sixth Form Common Room. Like all modern day Sixth Form blocks, it was made obvious by the dull bass rhythmic thumping coming from the stereo. A more extraordinary sight greeted them. Two girls were revising their *Romeo and Juliet* by enacting the Balcony Scene, one girl out in the courtyard and the other at a first-floor window. It was a performance worthy of the *Royal Shakespeare Company* itself. It was at this point that the Boar used a little more of the rope to hang himself with.

“I hated Shakespeare at school,” he started. “We had to do *Julius Caesar*. A load of tripe if you ask me: *Hence home / your id-/le creat-/ures get / you home*.

“I can’t remember any of the rest.”

The significance of his attempt to say this line in iambic pentameters was missed by his audience, but they were thankful for his amnesia.

He continued, “I really couldn’t stand English Literature, and I got Grade 8 at O level. I really wanted to do languages, but I was put off by the literature element in them at A-level, so I opted for the Sciences, after dropping out of Latin, Greek and Ancient History. And they did me no good. Really, I should have been an engineer, after all I am an engineer at heart, but for some stupid reason, had a hare-brained idea to be a doctor, I did Biology instead... Absolute waste of time... My jobs in Biology weren’t me. I was a clinical cytogeneticist, which sounds interesting, but it wasn’t. In the end the job didn’t like me, and I didn’t like it. There were a couple of people I didn’t get on with.”

The Boar made some disparaging remarks about his ex-colleagues. He droned on, “Our immediate boss sidled up to me and said, ‘I cannot understand why you are doing the professional exams... You have no future in this job... You have not lived up to our expectations... You are very immature, yunno.’ Every Monday morning big boss man wanted to see me to tell him how my job applications were going. And that’s how I ended up as a teacher.”

I would rather work with her than a braying donkey, Cooke thought miserably. He was getting heartily sick of the Boar. Cooke’s heart went out to the Boar’s erstwhile colleague. Unlike the Boar, she was good at her job. She deserved a medal for having to put up with him. Although Cooke had no idea of what a clinical sito-whatever-it-was did, it was clear that the Boar had been no damned good at his job. He and the two boys were of the unanimous opinion that the Boar was a clinical psycho. Immature, this one had certainly not improved

with age. As for engineer, he was living proof of the adage “A little bit of knowledge is a very dangerous thing”.

They passed through a pleasant modern suite of classrooms. Like the Science and Technology block they had been designed in the local style by Dunstan Stoate. They passed through Modern Languages, and the Boar had to show off his self-taught German until a Fourth Form Pupil pointed out that his syntax left something to be desired, whereupon he went bright red with embarrassment and shut up. Edwards and Frankland later agreed to ask Mr Brett to give the boy a House Credit for that.

They moved on through the music block. There were small practice rooms in which boys hammered away on pianos and scraped industriously at violins. Some blood-curdling wails and groans come out of one. A boy was trying to play the saxophone while a peripatetic music teacher was trying to help him to coax some musical sounds from it. They all agreed that the sounds, if recorded, could have been sold as a piece of modern classical music. Much to everybody’s surprise, the Boar said nothing. He had been suitably chastened over his sub-GCSE German as to refrain from comment, sparing them from his perceptions of himself as a man of some culture.

Their relief was short-lived. A Third Form “ensemble” started playing a piece by Mozart. Starting was something of a misnomer. Wolfgang, who at that age was an accomplished performer, would have enjoyed the sound for he had an impish sense of humour. He would have included it in his *Musical Joke*. Some of the boys had to be called back several times from a false start. Even when the majority did manage to start at about the same time, a number came in late and at very slightly different times and at slightly different pitches. Their tempo was uneven, and their performance became more and more violent and tuneless by the minute. Finally, it was apparent that it was a race to get to the end, the viola winning. The Boar went red and could not contain himself. Nor could a lower shirt button. The Boar burst out laughing while the button flew across the passageway.

By the time the Boar had managed to get a grip on himself, they were out of the music block and on their way to lunch. Frankland and Edwards had not found the Boar at all amusing, let alone up-lifting company, and were looking forward to telling Mr Brett and Mr Stoate so. They found them waiting outside the dining room.

“Gentlemen,” said Stoate, “I’m afraid I cannot have lunch with you today as I am entertaining some governors. Peter, will you look after our guests at lunch? Do you know where to go if you want to wash your hands or anything?”

While the two candidates went to the staff lavatory, Stoate and Brett asked the two boys what they felt about the two candidates. They gave their reply, “We really liked Mr Cooke, sir. He was very polite to us and asked us questions about what it was like to be in the school. The other bloke, Mr... Sorry, sir, I’ve forgotten his name. Well, he was rather boring and made lots of not very nice jokes about us and other boys. The funniest bit was when his shirt button came off...”

The two boys enlarged on this theme and got a lot of their feelings about the Boar well and truly off their chests, confirming Brett’s own view that the man was not only strongly self-opinionated, but also something of an oaf. They had only just finished when the two candidates arrived back. They normally enjoyed showing visitors about the place, but after the Boar, they were glad to have finished. Cooke did not share their relief; he had the Boar’s company for much of the rest of the afternoon. The only satisfaction he felt was that it was quite likely that the Boar had already made such a fool of himself in his attempts at being funny that they could not possibly give him the job. But there was always the warning about not counting one’s chickens; some schools liked the kind of buffoon represented by the Boar. Perhaps they might decide not to appoint at all. It had happened to Cooke before.

Brett took the candidates into the dining room. This was housed in one of the sprawl of wooden huts that skirted The Hermitage, and had once housed the staff canteen of Benyon Hydraulics, an engineering company that had occupied The Hermitage before the school. At one end there was a self-service buffet, serving hot dinners and a separate cold buffet. At the other end was a long refectory table on a raised dais. Unlike the tables for the boys which had plain benches either side and were not set, the staff table had substantial dining chairs around it and had been laid for lunch. Staff and school prefects could avoid the queues for the hot cafeteria by serving themselves from a trolley at the staff end of the room. Today the hot dish was fish, chips and mushy peas, the loathing of which was shared by all three men. The batch on the staff trolley looked especially nauseating. Instead, they waited in a queue for the cold buffet which had a range of tasty salads and was particularly popular with the staff and the Sixth Form.

When it was time to help themselves, the Boar, who had wanted to push to the front, but had managed to restrain himself, piled his plate up with rather more than what was decent in the circumstances. In doing so he finished up one of the more popular salads which would have served at least three more people. This confirmed Cooke's suspicion as to why his suit was straining so much at the waist. It was only because of the jacket that the bulges were hidden; without it the Boar would have resembled the *Michelin* man. Cooke, Brett and everyone else took a polite portion. As they sat down to table, Cooke thought it would be a polite gesture to ask Brett and the Boar about their respective families.

Brett talked a bit about his two daughters. One was doing A-levels at Goyder's and was doing remarkably well there. She had had the option of coming to Tanswold but had good friends at Goyder's. The other daughter was doing her second year at university and should get a good degree if she didn't get too distracted by a succession of boyfriends. The innocence of the conversation was short-lived.

"I have an eighteen-month son," interrupted the Boar, "and he is useless. It has been utter purgatory living with a baby this last year and a half. If there is one thing that must prove evolution to be wrong, it is the human baby. Can you think of anything more useless? This thing bawls and craps all the time, wearing its parents into the ground. It cannot walk; it has to be carried. Well, what about the time when humans were hunter-gatherers on the savannahs of Africa? A baby would have made a wonderful meaty snack for a passing jackal or lioness. So, we must be here by a different mechanism, otherwise the human race would now be extinct. I don't know why people bother. Ours costs us a fortune; he tears up all our books and destroys our ornaments. My wife is a wreck. What is it about the power of the selfish gene that seems to overcome all logic?"

Several staff sat there, their forks suspended in mid-air, their mouths open with shock and disgust, for it was an unfortunate thing that, when the Boar started off on one of his more controversial theories, his voice became noticeably louder. Brett was embarrassed at the tastelessness of his guest's comments, while Cooke was furious at their uncouth nature.

"What about ground-squirrels?" Cooke rounded on him. "Aren't they born totally blind and helpless? Their parents look after them, and we look after ours! My wife is expecting our second in a few months and we're really looking forward to it! Yes, I know that there will be sleepless nights and lots of dirty

nappies, but you should have thought of that before you went in for one. What does your wife say? I'm glad you're not my father!"

A ripple of unspoken agreement ran up the table. The Boar realised that he had dug himself into a hole, and that the best way to proceed was to stop digging. He proceeded to fill his face with luncheon, pausing only to get up and help himself to more. The Boar went on to help himself not only to an ample portion of dessert, but also to cheese and biscuits. As they got up from the table, Cooke overheard some comments about Brett's guest that were not very complimentary. He was bound to concur.

For Cooke, the rest of the afternoon was a blur. He was glad to be out of the Boar's company but instead had been joined by that dull headache that would often be his companion at interviews. The only thing he could really remember about it was Mr Brett's getting off to a false start in his interview.

"How long is it since you last taught Physics?"

"Yesterday afternoon, Year 10, middle set."

"But it says in your CV that you have spent the last five years concentrating on Chemistry and that you taught Physics only to Year 9. We need a candidate who can teach to A-level," Brett replied, with an increasing sense of alarm in his voice. Brett had selected two candidates, one of whom appeared, on paper at least, to be totally under-qualified for the position, and the other who had the social graces and etiquette of a Gloucester Old Spot. He did not relish the prospect of reporting this to the Headmaster who would have his guts for garters.

"I assure you that I teach Physics not only to GCSE, but to A-level as well. I was doing Kinetic Theory with the Lower Sixth yesterday morning."

At this point the penny dropped, and Brett went red with embarrassment and choked. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. It had been an unfortunate coincidence that there were two Messrs Cooke, who had applied for the post and Brett had picked up the wrong *curriculum vitae*. He had prepared all his questions from this document, and the subsequent half-hour was one of stuttering improvisation.

At the end of the day, the Headmaster's secretary came bustling up to Cooke as he was preparing to leave.

"Mr Cooke, the Headmaster would like to have a chat with you now in his office. Could you spare a moment?"

Locking his car again, Cooke followed her into The Hermitage and ushered him into Mr Stoate's office. The latter stood up as they entered and showed Cooke into an armchair.

"Robert, I would like to offer you the post of Physics Master at Tanswold School. Will you accept?"

"I would be delighted to," replied Cooke, resisting the urge to hug Stoate, which would not have enhanced his career prospects at the school.

"I will have the contract drawn up as quickly as I can. You understand that it is for a trial period of one year, which, subject to satisfactory performance, will be made permanent. That will be all for now, but I would be grateful for the return of the signed contract as soon as you can. Meanwhile, welcome aboard, and I look forward to you starting with us in September."

Stoate leaned over to his intercom and spoke into it, "Eileen, Mr Cooke and I have finished. Could you show him out, and ask the Bursar to come to my office?"

Cooke's headache had gone. He was already looking forward to telling his wife and the dreadful Ms Heathcote, the Headteacher at Druker Grove. He passed through the front door of The Hermitage, feeling as though he was floating on cushions of air. He did not care what anyone back at Druker Grove would say, for they were bound to disapprove. Now here he was, Physics Master at a public school. As he walked back to his rather dilapidated car, he mapped out in his mind what he was going to achieve...Head of Physics...Housemaster? In the meantime, Cooke saw the Boar getting into a red hatchback. The Boar was looking to be in a thoroughly bad temper, and his wife was giving vociferous complaint as to how long he had been and how terrible the child's behaviour had been at the estate agent's. Cooke was surprised at how thin she looked. *Perhaps he eats for the two of them*, he thought to himself, *which is why he looks so pregnant. No wonder she looks so thin and gaunt, living with him. I had had enough after ten minutes!*

He saw the Boar turn around at the bawling blond infant in the back and shout at him, "Shut up, Stephen..." before the door slammed shut and the car drove off.

The headmaster also watched the red hatchback depart at a speed considerably higher than the limit imposed by the school. He decided on the spot to do two things. The first would be to lay sleeping policemen, and the second to ring a fellow headmaster who was head of another nearby Headmasters'

Conference school. The first would have to wait until the summer holidays. The second could be done right now. Stoate picked up the telephone.

“I understand you’re now looking for a Physicist, Neville,” said Stoate when he had managed to get through. “I’ve just been speaking to a splendid fellow. I have appointed someone else, but I was very impressed by him, and I thought I would send him your way. He’s just the right chap for you. I’ll give you his name and phone number. His name is...”

Five minutes later, Stoate hung up and sat back well satisfied. He did not like his colleague from the HMC. (Both shared that feeling.) His school regularly trounced Tanswold on the rugby field. This headmaster and staff were going to spend a morning of sheer purgatory in the company of the Boar. Revenge is nasty.

As the Bursar was soon to find out.

Chapter 3

The Bursar also watched the Boar disappear rapidly up the drive. Although he had not seen much of the candidates at all, he knew that there had been an interview. From what he had heard—Tanswold School being small, these things got about quickly—one of the candidates was universally judged to have been an uncouth lout. There were plenty of those about, and not just among the boys. He watched Cooke get into his car, noting the look of absolute delight on the man's face, although he could not understand what it was for. He watched him drive off in his elderly Mazda.

He gazed over the driveway at the front of The Hermitage towards his Volvo. He looked at the state of the drive and knew that a large sum of money was needed to put it right, money the school did not have. He was now going to have to explain to Stoate and the Governors yet again that there was not the money even to buy a yard broom, let alone resurface the drive and the hundred-and-one other projects that seemed to emerge from the Headmaster's fertile imagination. He could not get them to understand that all of them required vast financial resources, which the school did not have. He had spent much of the morning in Stoate's office going through the accounts to explain for the umpteenth time why Mr Brett could not have the new laboratory equipped except out of the Science Department's day-to-day budget. Funding the new dining room project was utterly out of the question.

Now Stoate had kept on asking awkward questions about funding his schemes, while the Bursar had always stalled. At least the Headmaster had not brought up the Draycott Foundation and showed every sign that he had forgotten all about it. Thanks to some little dealings the Bursar had had on the stock market involving the Draycott Foundation, the school's capital reserve fund was somewhat meagre. At least nobody other than the Bursar knew, well nobody that mattered. And he made sure that that remained the case, for if Stoate and the Governors found out, well it did not bear thinking about...

When the Bursar had arrived at the school ten years before, he had inherited from his predecessor what he described as a financial “pig’s breakfast”. The previous incumbent, Colonel Jack Holiday, was appointed at the same time and from the same regiment as the School Major, Charlie Gallagher, and was a *bon viveur par excellence*, a man after Stoate’s heart.

Holiday was, frankly, a rank amateur at the mundane art of bookkeeping and had shown a flagrant disregard for the most elementary rules of accountancy. Records, if they were kept at all, were in chaotic disorder in ring binders, which frequently burst open spilling their contents on the floor. These ring binders were nominally marked with the year to which they applied, but since the contents were so prone to falling out, bills from one year were frequently to be found in the file for another year. This could even lead to bills being paid twice, not that the traders objected. More often than not, bills were left unpaid until red reminders or even solicitors’ letters were sent. Several tradesmen, who sent their sons to the school, withheld payment of fees until their own accounts were settled.

The files were stored untidily in a wardrobe and frequently fell out when the door was opened. Therefore, accurate study of the records was an almost impossible task.

Fee collection was not quite as chaotic, which was just as well, or Tanswold School would have tried the already stretched patience of the manager of the Midland & Great Northern Bank beyond breaking point. Holiday would store cheques, or even cash, in a pottery Toby jug that stood on the mantelpiece. One night a local villain broke into The Hermitage and stole a large sum of money, only to be caught when a sharp young car salesman became suspicious and quietly called the police. Even Holiday was alarmed, and the practice was stopped. After this he became much more security conscious and stored the cheques in the cashbox. Every Friday at midday on the dot he would stroll into Tanswold and deposit the monies into the bank.

Staff regarded the Bursar’s office as a kind of financial honeypot from which they helped themselves when they needed anything for their department. Nobody ever thought of budgets. Stoate, Holiday and the Governors entertained themselves and benefactors of the school in a lavish manner with no thought of the need for financial care. If the bank started to get restless, they would order the Bursar to put the fees up and the parents, by and large, paid up with no fuss. Trouble from the parents arose only when Holiday billed them twice. On several

occasions angry parents would come in with receipts or bank statements. Holiday usually pacified them with plenty of “Quite so, this is most regrettable. Please rest assured I shall make a most rigorous investigation and take stern action...” and a good quality sherry. Only a couple of times were the parents belligerent enough to involve the Headmaster, and even these were pacified after a more intensive course of therapy from the Headmaster’s drinks cabinet.

Colonel Holiday’s tenure came to an abrupt and rather unpleasant end when Tanswold School applied for membership of the Headmasters’ Conference. The vetting process demanded a rigorous inspection of the school and included the rather petty (in Holiday’s view) insistence that the Bursar’s Department should provide audited accounts. An accountancy firm was hired, but resigned the contract after one week, complaining that the work needed to provide anything that could be remotely described as an honest and truthful representation of the accounts was impossible. It would have taken a specialist months to understand the records, and frankly it was not worth their while for the money they would make. The work was blacklisted by other local firms. The uproar that ensued showed Stoate in his worst light. Although Stoate had known about the mess the accounts were in, it never worried him until now; indeed, he almost encouraged it. Dunstan Stoate now realised that the situation was critical and extricated himself from the mess he found himself in by abandoning his friend in a manner that could only be described as repulsive. There ensued several stormy governors’ meetings, in which the management of the school tried to clear up the whole sorry mess. As their attempts seemed to muddy the waters further, the meetings dissolved into bitter and unseemly recriminations. Apart from the obvious issue of his competence, the final meeting descended into a low and scurrilous personal attack by Sir Kenneth Rounce on Holiday, who was a thoroughly decent and honourable man. It included quite untrue allegations about cowardice and homosexuality in his army career, and it was even cited that he had been seen to be carrying a newspaper in Tanswold. Holiday was dismissed and, at vast expense, a specialist firm sent experts from London.

The Tanswold School Trust, which as an employer had a cavalier disregard for the rights of its employees, relied on the Forfeiture Act of 1897 whereby all monies owing to a dismissed employee could be made forfeit. The law had been introduced to prevent dishonest employees from benefitting from their ill-gotten gains. Unscrupulous employers often used the Act to their advantage. In the case of teaching staff, this was said to cover the expense of recruitment of a new

person. The school would often take the ex-employee to court and substantial judgements were made against the unfortunate individual. This travesty of justice was facilitated by Sir Kenneth's influence in judicial circles. The policy had only failed once, when a member of staff took his case to a court in Scotland. Tanswold School was taken to the cleaners, including the attendant bad publicity.

So, when Holiday took them to court, naturally the governors counter-sued Holiday for the expense of clearing up the matter. Sir Kenneth's influence reaped a handsome dividend; Holiday did not recover his unpaid salary and a judgement of £350000 plus VAT and expenses was made against him. He lost his home and was subsequently blackballed from election to the Byland Foresters. As a final attempt to clear his name, Holiday's case was made into a feature article in a national newspaper. Sir Kenneth and Dunstan Stoate got wind of it and successfully applied for an injunction forbidding its publication.

The school had satisfied the inspectors from the HMC, but with scathing criticisms of the Bursar's Department. After dispensing with Holiday's services, Stoate decided to make a clean sweep of it and sacked all Holiday's assistants, before drawing a line under the whole sorry affair. The issue of unfair clauses added to employment contracts after signature was raised in some detail. The Headmaster and Governors promised to investigate the matter, but this good intent was soon forgotten.

A redundant chief clerk of a sub-branch of a bank, Graham Smith, was brought in as Bursar. A fussy, overweight man who had gone bald many years before, he looked the ideal part. Used to the ways of accountancy and banking systems, his best qualification was that he was used to taking orders from above and obeying them without question. Smith took his role of Bursar seriously. He introduced a computer system to keep the records, although this was not such an advance as it seemed. Both the machines and their software were pitifully unreliable. On one occasion all the income receipt records were wiped out when the system crashed. The young man sent to sort it all out was quite *blasé* about it. "Just a characteristic of the program, be careful not to..."

Stoate heard about it and was less sanguine. Graham Smith always shuddered as he recalled the extraordinarily unpleasant post-mortem on the affair that Stoate had conducted with him. After that, all the computer records were duplicated manually, thereby doubling the work in the office.

Smith went on to horrify the heads of departments by introducing the previously unheard-of system at Tanswold School by which each department had

a budget for the year's spending. Some heads of department had been used to budgets when in other schools but had forgotten the annual haggle for more money. Others refused to countenance such an idea and still marched into Smith's office to demand money for this, that and the other. They always left fuming and empty-handed; Smith would give a lecture on the need for financial propriety and threaten to manage the departmental budget himself. Any appeal to the Headmaster fell on deaf ears; he had little interest in the petty ways of accountants and bank managers.

Except for when it was suggested by Smith that there should be limits to the budget for the Headmaster's and Governors' entertainment. Stoate became extremely interested in the petty ways of accountants and bank managers. He stormed into the Bursar's office, only to find Smith out, and went back to his study muttering and cursing. He immediately rang Sir Kenneth, whose reaction was even more extreme, "Do you mean to tell me that that damned little bank clerk is going to cut back on our entertainment? What do you mean that he says everything has to be accounted for? Good God, Dunstan, you've got to do something about it. He must be told where to get off. I'm coming over straight away."

Sir Kenneth was as good as his word. He immediately drove to the school in a state verging on apoplexy and was prepared to tell the Bursar precisely where to put his proposal (although the wording would have to be amended for the minutes). When Sir Kenneth arrived at The Hermitage, he hurled himself out of the Bentley and lunged into Stoate's office. Even Stoate who was quite used to Sir Kenneth's ranting, was somewhat taken aback, and decided that Sir Kenneth ought to be pacified before the Bursar was hauled in front of him. The last thing that even Stoate wanted was a murder on his hands with all the unpleasant attention that that would bring from the Middle Riding of Yorkshire CID and the subsequent bad publicity brought by the court case.

After two stiff gins and tonic, Stoate had pacified Sir Kenneth sufficiently so that serious slander was the most likely outcome with a slight risk of assault causing actual bodily harm. He noticed Smith's Volvo draw up outside. In a manner that Smith later described as most uncouth, Stoate pulled up the sash window, leaned out and bellowed, "Smith! My office! Now!"

It was unfortunate that a second-year boy called Smith was passing by and immediately reported to the Headmaster's study, wondering what he was going

to get a telling-off for now. The Bursar thought just the same and went to his office.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Storate when the boy knocked on the door.

“You called me to your office, sir. I don’t know what I have done, sir.”

“You haven’t done anything, although I’m sure you have been up to something. I’m sorry; I think there has been a little misunderstanding. That will be all, thank you.”

Storate resolved that he really ought to try to be a little more civil with errant staff, although he found it so hard to suffer fools at all, let alone gladly. He tried again, this time by picking up the telephone and dialling the Bursar’s number. This time he succeeded in getting the Bursar.

“Bursar! My office now, please,” he snapped, trying not to shout. The Bursar knew at once there was trouble ahead and went down to the Headmaster’s office armed with files and computer printouts to reinforce his case. Spending, after all, had to be kept under control to ensure good value for the parents’ money.

Smith need not have bothered about the files. From the moment he entered Storate’s office, he knew at once that this meeting was going to be every bit as unpleasant as the one in which he had had to explain to the Headmaster why the new computer system had crashed. He was wrong; it was far more unpleasant. Sir Kenneth did the speaking, and he was dark with fury.

“Smith,” he started in a voice trembling with rage, “I have come here at great inconvenience to myself to find out for myself about your proposals to limit the Headmaster’s budget. I am looking for a damned good explanation from you now as to (a) why you see the need for this idea, (b) how you propose to implement it. And your explanation had better be damned good. Well, where is it?”

The Bursar hated being referred to as ‘Smith’ and felt himself starting to get hot under the collar. He managed to control himself and started on the need for financial rectitude and the need for an example to be set for the staff of the school.

“What do you mean by financial rectitude?” Sir Kenneth barked. “What is the purpose of this school?”

“To provide a good value education for the parents who send their boys here,” Smith replied. “It is my duty to manage the financial affairs of the school in the best way possible for the advantage of all the boys in the school.”

“Absolute poppycock!” roared Sir Kenneth, who was revving up again to do murder. “Although education is a part of the school, you must be aware that the Headmaster and the Governors and I have invested a not inconsiderable sum of money into this school and we want to see it working for us. We are NOT going to be told by some damned little bank clerk how we are going to enjoy ourselves. I don’t give a tuppenny damn what the staff think. If you don’t like that, you can...”

The Bursar winced at the infantile crudity that followed, expecting better from the Chairman of Governors at a public school. After all, he had always been under the illusion that the role of public schools was to produce well-turned out gentlemen and ladies. With Sir Kenneth, the system had clearly failed.

“Sir Kenneth,” the Bursar replied trying hard to maintain his dignity, “I would like to show you the figures that prompt me to suggest that the Headmaster’s Budget needs to be controlled.”

Sir Kenneth now looked if he needed to be controlled. “To hell with your figures,” he yelled, “I have never come across such balderdash in my life. Be assured, Smith, that if you worked on my estate, you would be out, and I would personally see to it that you never worked again. If you dare to present this proposal to the next governors’ meeting, I assure you right now that it will be totally rejected, and you will be as well. You come in here, you spend ten thousand pounds on those Banana Raincoat computers and tell us we must cut back, well Good Lord, man! Who the bloody hell do you think you are? You need horsewhipping!”

“Apple Mac computers,” sighed the Bursar whose campaign for stringent financial rectitude had suffered a major defeat. It was now time for the Headmaster to chip in.

“Well, there we have it, Bursar. You are quite clear as to the consequences of this proposal,” the Headmaster’s voice became low and threatening. “If you are not, and decide to persist, you only need to think back to your predecessor. Let me remind you, you may cut back on teaching budgets as much as you like, but nobody, but nobody will tell me or the governors how we are to spend our money. Your job is as a bank clerk, not a policy maker. If you consider resignation, you will get no reference off me, and I doubt you will ever get a meaningful job in this area. I assume you are clear about your status and position? This meeting is now terminated. Thank you, that will be all, Bursar.”

That had been nine years ago, and Smith knew what he needed to do for survival. The issue of departmental budgets clearly rankled amongst staff, especially when they saw the Headmaster and Governors entertaining themselves with unabated lavishness. Smith was fed up with being piggy in the middle. Soon, relief appeared to come with the Draycott Foundation.

Arthur Draycott had built up a substantial engineering company and personal fortune. A substantial sum of money had been placed in trust for his grandsons who started at Tanswold not long after the school had moved into The Hermitage. The Arthur Draycott family had only consisted of one son, who in turn had fathered twin boys, Ian and Jonathan. The twins and their parents perished in tragic circumstances, shortly after the end of one summer term. Their light plane, piloted by their father, failed to climb after taking off, stalled and struck an electricity pylon. The resulting electrical explosion and inferno destroyed the plane and blacked out much of Mid Yorkshire. Arthur Draycott, an elderly widower, was utterly heart-broken and his health went into rapid decline. Shortly before he died, he visited Tanswold School and was lavishly entertained. He gave instructions that his entire legacy should pass to The Draycott Foundation, which in turn should be used to the benefit of Tanswold School, with the Bursar, Headmaster and Chairman of Governors as Trustees.

Smith held several meetings of the Trustees of the Draycott Foundation, but these became rather pointless. In addition, it was tedious for Sir Kenneth and the Headmaster to have to sign every transaction that occurred, so they gave authority and instructions that transactions signed by Smith alone as Bursar were valid. Sir Kenneth and Stoate had more important business to get on with, and the Draycott Foundation was in safe and reliable hands, so they thought.

The income from the Draycott Foundation had enabled budgets to improve for a while. For all that, the Bursar took a course of action that was to prove to be his Achilles heel. He decided that the money was “not working hard enough” merely on deposit in the bank and used it to play the stock market game. Graham Smith had always wanted to be a stockbroker and the Draycott Foundation proved to be an ideal opportunity. Working with Mr Hackett, a young financial whizz kid from Staunton, Hardy, & Co of Manchester, he placed a large proportion of it as high-risk venture capital, yielding a high rate of interest. Most of the rest he used to buy stocks and shares and to speculate in the London property market.

At first, everything went better than expected. There was an economic boom, accompanied by soaring values of the share portfolios and property prices. While the interest came in, Draycott money financed a variety of projects including the part of the building programme that was necessary as the school expanded. Smith creamed a little of the money off for himself as a “commission”. The halcyon days did not last long; there came the stock market crashes, in which thousands of millions were wiped off the value of shares in one day. It was unfortunate that much of the Draycott Foundation money was in a portfolio of shares that suffered particularly badly. Many of the shares became worthless. Additionally, most of the money, used as venture capital, was wiped out by a series of spectacular company failures.

Smith realised the error of his ways and reinvested the money in safer places. Much of what remained of the Draycott Foundation was used to pay the stockbrokers’ commission and to patch up the mess. In three years, the Bursar had reduced the value of the Draycott Foundation from five million pounds to one hundred thousand. Draycott money dried up. Smith could easily fob off departmental heads with the excuse of the money being in long term bonds and that conditions were not favourable. He was right; it would take several hundred years for the money to grow back to its original value. Smith’s work on the Draycott Foundation was entirely unknown to anyone in the school because of which he managed to cover the whole sorry matter up. Soon people had forgotten about it, including Stoaite, who was not interested in matters financial, as long as he had an ever-full pot for his entertainment expenses. In the meantime, Smith managed to maintain his reputation for stringent financial rectitude.

Until now. The Headmaster was starting to get on Smith’s nerves. He was coming up with some building plans that involved the expenditure of an exceptionally large sum of money. Smith had spent several hours with Stoaite going through the accounts, and still Stoaite was twittering on about the new dining room, lavatories and locker rooms. Even this morning the Bursar had been asking what was wrong with the old dining room. Stoaite had been quite sharp with him and told him that it was going ahead, it was to be put forward at the next governors’ meeting, and he was to consider ways by which the project was to be funded and report them to the meeting. Well, at least he had not mentioned the Draycott Foundation.

Unbeknown to Smith, Stoaite had started to take an uncharacteristic interest in the petty ways of finance, accountancy and banking. He had spent a long time

considering the plans for the new building work, which to him and everyone else were essential. The dining room was one of those appalling huts that had sprouted around The Hermitage while Benyons had the place. They were an eyesore and becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Charlie Gallagher, the School Major and Administrator, complained that the huts were the bane of his life, while Alan Hodges, the Maintenance Manager, was always calling in contractors to do this job and that job on the huts. Also, there was a chronic shortage of decent secure lockers for the boys to use and in some years, theft reached pandemic proportions. The boys' lavatories were disgusting and universally condemned as a disgrace to the school.

Clearly these facilities had to be improved as a matter of urgency and would cost the school a considerable sum of money. Stoate had found the Bursar's lack of enthusiasm for spending money rather annoying. At first, he had put it down to the petty ways of finance, accountancy and banking. To test this out, he decided he would investigate how such a project could be funded. To have another appeal to Old Tanswoldians so soon after the previous success was pushing goodwill a little too far.

It was while Stoate was thinking about Old Tanswoldians that a little bell started to ring in his head, the Draycott Foundation. These monies had not been tapped for a while; the Bursar in his drive for financial rectitude and prudence (it reminded him of the sow his grandmother kept) had always given the impression that the legacy was being used to build up a much-needed reserve. Even at five percent, there must have been a build-up of accrued interest that would surely amount to almost a million pounds. And that would make a substantial contribution to the cost of the new building, if not pay for it completely. He thought it strange that the Bursar had not mentioned anything about the Draycott Foundation and wondered why. A few days before he even voiced the unworthy thought while dining one evening with Sir Kenneth and Lady Monica, "I wonder if he's been living it up on the proceeds or frittered it away on a horse."

"That's very cynical of you, Dunstan," replied Sir Kenneth, "although I did know of someone who borrowed £1500 from his company and lost it at the greyhounds."

As Dunstan relaxed after dinner with an exceptionally fine port, he mulled over the issue further and resolved to tackle the Bursar about it. But first, he would discuss the matter with Staunton, Whoever-they-are in Manchester.

When he rang up Staunton Hardy & Company just before he conducted the Physics interviews, he found them decidedly unhelpful concerning the Draycott Foundation. He did find out that Mr Hackett had left the company some time ago and no, they could not possibly tell him why or give him his new address, nor could they discuss the Dry Cod Found Station over the telephone and Mr Staunton and Mr Hardy were both in meetings. The conversation made Stoaate's blood pressure rise. He slammed down the telephone cursing the young male idiots called Gary that they always seem to employ to answer the phone in offices. He certainly did not like being referred to as an old geezer—Gary had not covered the mouthpiece very well. A few years ago, he would have raised the dust off Gary's backside for being so unhelpful. Stoaate poured himself a large brandy and mulled over his strategy.

He was still working out his strategy while interviewing the Boar. The latter's answers were ponderous and Stoaate paid little attention to them. Anyway, if the big oaf could not see that he was not paying attention, the chances were that his class control was not up to much in the first place. He was by now very suspicious about the state of the Draycott Foundation; after all, if everything in the garden were rosy, surely the Bursar would have immediately suggested it. Stoaate decided on a subtle strategy, rather than an outright confrontation, which would send the Bursar away to compose his resignation letter. With it would disappear any insight into the matter. It was better for the Bursar to be made to sing like a canary so that the whole saga was resolved. At least they would know which horse he had put it on, and it would be an object lesson to all to make a better study of form.

The first thing to do would be to get the Bursar to rise and take the bait. The second was to give him enough rope to hang himself. Stoaate took pleasure in metaphors. Thirdly, he would invite Mr Staunton and Mr Hardy to dinner and ask them to do a presentation about the performance of the Draycott Foundation. He would write to them, thereby bypassing the moronic Gary. The fourth prong in his attack would be to get two reliable sixth formers to hack into the Bursar's computer network and find out what they could. Not that this was a habit to be encouraged; they would be sworn to secrecy and would do it from the terminal on his desk. At last, his computer would come in useful, because now it was a mere decoration that took up a large amount of space. Stoaate knew nothing about this new-fangled technology, nor did he want to at his age.

As soon as he had offered the Physics job to Robert Cooke, Dunstan Stoate put the first part of his plan into action. Eileen had called the Bursar down to his office. Presently there was a knock at the door and the Bursar came in. Stoate was at his most affable and charming.

“Ah, Graham, do come in. Have a seat. Sherry? I always have your favourite. I’m so sorry to have bothered you again, but there is one other idea that I need to go through with you. No, it’s not the dining room, but do take a look at the drive. You would agree we need to do something about it? What do you reckon Graham?”

The Bursar looked up from his sherry. “Well Headmaster it will cost a considerable amount, especially on top of all the other things that we want to do. Charlie and Alan could get some quotes. I will need to see what further finance would be required but like everything else, we are going to have to be careful. As you are aware, it will lead to some serious pruning of budgets.”

“I’m not so sure,” replied Stoate, “that we have to be as drastic as that. We’ve been through this before, but I think I have the solution.”

“How so Headmaster?”

“Now I don’t want to be intruding onto your patch Graham. As you well know, I’m pretty well an infant on two fronts. Firstly, this damned thing on my desk,” Stoate pointed to the computer, “haven’t a clue what it does. Secondly, the convoluted ways of finance, bankers and accountancy. But I do understand that with your emphasis on financial rectitude we have been building up quite a fighting fund for these kinds of project. I would think that this is why you have been sitting on the Draycott Foundation for all these years. It should have built up quite a tidy sum, what?”

The Bursar spluttered into his sherry.

The Headmaster continued with another of his beloved metaphors from his flying days, “You see, when I was in the RAF, sometimes aircraft would have to go on long journeys. Of course, we would have to take extra fuel to get us there and we used drop-tanks, which could be jettisoned when we had finished with them. Well, I know of one Johnny whose flight engineer pulled the wrong lever and jettisoned the tanks too early. They didn’t have enough fuel to go back or to reach where they were going. Wouldn’t like to have been in that cockpit, would you? You understand that we are on such a flight. We’ve got the fuel, haven’t we? I’m sure you haven’t pulled the wrong lever, Graham?”

The Bursar had turned ashen. Stoate knew at once that all was not right with the Draycott Foundation, and he had the Bursar precisely where he wanted him; a cruder man than he would have said by the short and curlies. His flying metaphor had on this occasion been effective. Unlike the occasion when he used it with a member of the teaching staff who reminded him of the Board of Inquiry into some aerial horseplay involving two *de Havilland Vampires*, one of which crashed with fatal results as the result of reckless flying by one Flight Lieutenant J L D Stoate.

“So, Graham, I wonder if I could put on to you. You know that the Governors are discussing this whole business in their meeting next Thursday. It will be on your agenda. Could you provide us with details on the performance of the Draycott Foundation? It will give us a clearer picture of precisely what is going on. The governors would be most interested in what you have to say, and I think that it will cover everything, and we needn’t seek finance elsewhere. They will be delighted. It will save us a fortune. All down to you, of course.”

The Bursar didn’t think they would be delighted at all if they found out the truth. As he walked back to his office he thought of a long and nasty future in three stages. The first would be the combined wrath of Ken, Len, Ron, Don, Stoate, the rest of the Governors, the staff, the caretaker’s cat and Uncle Tom Cobley. The second would be The Trial at a Crown Court, yet to be decided. The third would be clearing out pig sheds on the prison farm at Waston, in the company of people about whom he didn’t want to know. All in all, a hosepipe up the exhaust of the Volvo seemed more attractive.

Procrastination seemed the best way out, although how he would raise the four million, nine hundred thousand pounds in a month was beyond him. He would tell the meeting next Thursday that he did not have a complete picture as Staunton, Hardy & Co had not yet responded to his enquiry. The Governors would not exactly be delighted, but at least he would have another couple of week’s breathing space, and they would look for some other avenue. He looked out of his office window as the boys were flocking out of class and heading up the drive to their buses at the end of a hard day.

In his office, Stoate had called Eileen through. She came through with his tea and biscuits, which he received, as always, most gratefully. Stoate started his second stage of his attack.

“Eileen,” he started, “could you kindly send out invitations to Mr Edward Staunton and Mr John Hardy of Staunton, Hardy, & Co of Manchester. I haven’t

got the address here, but it's in the phone book. I would like them to do a presentation at the Governors' meeting next Thursday on the performance of the Draycott Foundation. Naturally, we will entertain them to dinner and remunerate them more than adequately. I'm sorry to put onto you so late in the day, but we need to sort this one quickly. I've tried to speak to them on the phone but all I got was an idiot called Gary who came up with gibberish about dry cod."

The third phase could not be implemented immediately as the two sixth form computer experts had just gone up the drive in their battered Fiesta. Besides hastening a little more slowly would be more likely to ensure success. Stoate turned to his sermon that he was going to preach in Church on Friday.

The next day, Stoate sent for his two sixth form computer sleuths, Simon Collinson and Ian Ball. He explained their brief and the need for secrecy, excused them from lessons and set them to work on his computer. With astonishing ease, they got through to the Bursar's administration network while Stoate looked on admiringly. The main difficulty they had was that the Bursar's network still consisted of the by now ancient and obsolete *Apple Macs* which used a different operating system to the rest of the school network which was based on IBM compatible PCs. The two networks were coupled together with an interface box, which acted as an interpreter.

The two boys spent three hours mastering the configuration of the Bursar's system before they could sleuth through his files. Eventually they managed to find the material that applied to the Draycott Foundation and loaded it onto the Headmaster's PC. Since the operating systems were so different, the contents of the screen appeared to the layman as complete gibberish. There was no interpretation program available, so it had to be done manually, dissecting the words and figures out one by one. The boys were at it until eight o'clock that evening. Stoate contacted their parents, rewarded them with House Credits and paid for a slap-up meal for them at the Pizza Parlour in Tanswold High Street. The contents of the document made alarming reading, although Stoate felt sure that the situation was not quite as bad as it seemed. Surely the boys must have knocked off some figures while they were dissecting away all the "spaghetti" from the document?

While the boys were working, Mr Hardy of Staunton, Hardy, & Co rang Stoate to say that both he and Mr Staunton would be delighted to make a presentation on the Draycott Foundation and they would confirm it in writing. When their letter arrived the next day, it seemed to confirm the rather horrific

answer that Ball and Collinson had come up with the previous evening. Stoaate would have been even more alarmed had he known that Messrs Hardy and Staunton had used the Draycott Foundation (anonymously of course) as a dire warning of what can happen to clients' money with careless DIY stock-broking.

The Bursar knew nothing of what Stoaate was up to. He noticed two boys working on the PC in the Headmaster's office and thought they were trying to teach the old fool some elementary computing. He had also noticed that his computer was acting strangely, not looking up files when asked to, being busy when it had no business to be busy, and when it finally did bring up files, they filled the screen with utter garbage. Smith was almost minded to call out the computer people, but they would only send some baby-faced longhaired youth who would tell him that all this stuff was way out of date and should go into the skip. By the late afternoon, the computer was behaving itself and doing just what it was told.

The following Thursday the Governors convened at seven o'clock for drinks. Stoaate had given his apologies and would be present at seven thirty with his guests. The Bursar circulated nervously making the usual inane small talk about the state of the weather, the country and so on. He saw Stoaate with two men who were ushered to the parents' drawing room, but since his dealings had been with Mr Hackett, did not recognise them as the senior partners of Staunton, Hardy & Co.

Sir Kenneth called the meeting to order. The Governors filed through to the Old Library, which still contained Mr Packham's books, a most generous and much appreciated bequest from the Packham family. The Governors seated themselves around the large oak table and Sir Kenneth started the meeting. An overhead projector and screen had been set up and Stoaate used it to make a presentation showing the Governors of the scarcely disputable facts that concerned the need for a new dining room, locker rooms and replacements for the boys' lavatories. He went on to show his preliminary drawings, and the governors shared a common delight at his exquisite draughtsmanship.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen," Stoaate concluded, "I have spoken with the architects, Hillman & Co. They have quoted us a fee of twenty thousand pounds for the detailed design work, and I have been given a quote of one million, two hundred and five thousand, four hundred and thirty-seven pounds and forty-six pence for the building by Carlton Quinn Construction. That includes demolition of the existing huts, site clearance, the building including all groundwork, all

electrical and plumbing work and connection of all services, decoration and equipping of the kitchens and dining room, and supply of six hundred and fifty lockers. Once that has been done, we should have a facility second to none and, believe me, you, the parents, the boys and my staff thoroughly deserve better than what we have. Additionally, we will have a facility that will be in wide demand for conferences. We have tried to satisfy the conference business, but until now, we have been turned down by organisers simply because our dining facilities are not what they would want. They are bowled over by everything else, especially The Hermitage, but when they see that dilapidated hut, well...

“You may well be ready with pertinent questions on how we are going to pay for it. As many of you are aware, we were left a substantial bequest by a Mr Arthur Draycott in memory of his grandsons who were at the school when they and their parents died in a tragic aeroplane accident. Mr Smith, whom you all know well as been managing this for us, and I am confident that the interest alone that has accrued from the investment of the Draycott Foundation should be more than sufficient to cover the cost. I would now like to invite Mr Graham Smith to share with the meeting the performance of the Draycott Foundation over the last few years. Over to you, Graham...”

Smith was sweating profusely when he stood up. He did not notice Eileen, who kept the minutes, sidle out of the room. “Ladies and gentlemen...um...good evening,” he stuttered. “In reference to the Draycott Foundation, I have yet to receive the full figures from Staunton, Hardy & Co of Manchester. As you know...um...I have kept the Draycott Foundation in...um...long term bonds. Since I have not got the complete record to hand...um... I cannot enlighten you further.”

Stoate got up again. “Thank you, Mr Smith. I think I can help you out. Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to introduce you to Mr Edward Staunton and Mr John Hardy who will be able to give us more enlightenment on the Draycott Foundation.”

Mr Staunton and Mr Hardy strode purposefully to the overhead projector, while Eileen distributed copies of documents from Staunton, Hardy, & Co, and the document produced and cleaned up by Ball and Collinson. The next forty-five minutes were taken up by a long exposition in non-technical language on the dangers of DIY stock-broking, the need for care in running trusts, combined with the regrettable affair of Mr Hackett who had left their company to set up on his own, and how Mr Hackett had had the difficulty of distinguishing his own

money from that of his clients. Currently, Mr Hackett could be contacted in Her Majesty's Prison, Manchester, where he was doing a five-year stretch for fraud and money laundering. A tasteless joke about working in the prison laundry fell flat.

More specifically, they demonstrated to the Governors the catastrophic fall in the value of the Draycott Legacy to two percent of its original value. At best, the hundred thousand pounds left would be bringing in an interest of four to five thousand pounds a year. Gasps of horror were accompanying these appalling revelations; what shocked their audience most was the matter-of-fact way that Staunton and Hardy delivered their dismal peroration. They appeared to be positively enjoying themselves, with no reverence at all for the late four million, nine hundred thousand pounds. Although they could account in detail for the bulk of the losses, there was a problem in tracing about one hundred and twenty thousand, which was put down to leakage, or, in laymen's terms, fingers in the till. A subsequent fraud inquiry had traced about forty thousand of this to Mr Hackett. Who else had had his fingers in the till? Eileen ushered the two men out, who were taken to dinner by the Second Master.

As the two men left, a pregnant silence fell on the room. Sir Kenneth's face was dark with fury, and twenty pairs of eyes were fixed on the Bursar. Surprisingly, it was not Sir Kenneth, or Donald Blance that spoke first, but Mrs Sanderson, whose son was in the fourth year. "My son Martyn, if he lost five pounds, would be devastated and everyone would know. Could the Bursar explain how he managed to lose five million and not turn a hair or tell anyone about it? How could he tell so many people so many lies and how is he going to make it up?"

This question was like the first bolt of lightning in a violent thunderstorm and unleashed a torrent of angry inquisition. For twenty minutes the Bursar was lashed with question after question, to which he replied with little more than a gulp and an "um". Sir Kenneth had worked himself to a summit of fury and made a tirade full of obscenities against this damned little bank clerk. Smith got up to walk out, muttering, "I'm not listening to this."

"Sit down, Smith!" roared Sir Kenneth. At the same time Donald Blance grabbed Smith, pinned him to the wall, before frog-marching him back to his seat. Stoate had whispered something to Eileen, and she had sidled out again, returning fifteen minutes later with Detective Inspectors John Franks and Lisa Mallinson who were urged to act with the utmost discretion. Graham Charles

Smith was called out of the meeting, arrested and cautioned on suspicion of fraud. He was driven away from The Hermitage in an unmarked police car.

With the target for their rage out of the way, the Governors' meeting degenerated into an unseemly and undignified slanging match of mutual recrimination. Sir Kenneth was in a state of apoplectic fury and was not in a state fit to conduct the meeting in a manner that could be minuted. A unanimous vote of no confidence in the Bursar was passed. Sir Kenneth and Stoate came in for particularly furious criticism for their negligence as trustees and dereliction of their duty to supervise the actions of the Bursar. Dr Waterhouse made some particularly critical observations and even Stoate was hard put to it to shift the blame.

Stoate yelled back, "I'm a bloody schoolmaster, not a bloody banker. How was I to know that that bloody little bank clerk was...well nobody told me!"

Stoate's defence sounded pitiful, but at least it was a more constructive reply than anyone could get out of the Chairman, whose reply to any point raised in regard of his duty of Trustee of the Draycott Foundation was foul, threatening and abusive. He spent the rest of the evening muttering obscenities and getting progressively more and more drunk. He was sent home in a taxi to face the wrath of Lady Monica. Eventually Sir Ronald Wiseman took control of the meeting. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "this meeting has had to contend with revelations that are, frankly, too shocking for us to deal with. We need to all calm down, go away and mull matters over, especially as there are some severe consequences for the school.

"Tonight, we came to consider an exciting project to take Tanswold School into the new millennium. Instead, be in no doubt that we are going to have to deal with a major scandal that will make it into the national media. The recriminations I have witnessed this evening have done us no credit in the eyes of the parents or the staff. And believe me, any decent schoolmaster or parent would no doubt deplore the obscene language we have heard tonight. The boys have a right to expect more dignity from their so-called elders and betters. I therefore propose the meeting be adjourned until next Thursday."

The proposal was unanimously accepted. The meeting closed at ten minutes past eleven and was summed up in the minutes, *There was much discussion and concern expressed about the Draycott Foundation. A vote was passed expressing no confidence in the Bursar because of allegations of serious incompetence and maladministration of the Draycott Foundation.*

Not one of the Governors had the appetite to tackle the sumptuous buffet laid out for them in the Old Dining Room. It was put away and put out for the boys and staff next day at lunch.

Chapter 4

The next morning Dunstan Stoate woke up as usual to the *Today* programme. He listened more carefully than usual to the seven o'clock news bulletin, which contained its usual litany of human barbarity and self-important politicians. There was no hint of anything to do with the lamentable saga of the Draycott Foundation. He thought of a pop song that was around when he was in the aerospace industry:

*Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away,
Now they seem to have come back to stay...*

He washed, dressed and ate his breakfast as usual reading the *Daily Telegraph*, tut-tutting at page 3 (the bit with the dirty court cases), but saw nothing about the Draycott Foundation.

Stoate walked down early to The Hermitage, and unusually for him, he stopped off at the newsagent and bought a copy of the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Northern Echo*. Not a hint of the breaking scandal in those papers. Eileen was there early, and he called her through to his office. He asked her to arrange a staff meeting for break so that he could brief his colleagues on the lamentable happenings that had occurred and not a thing must be discussed with boys and parents, let alone the Press.

He looked out of his office window over The Hermitage gardens, which were looking lovely in the late spring sunshine. Bees droned lazily amongst the lavender, and he wished he could snatch a few private moments there to collect what few thoughts he could muster. The Governors were right; he had failed badly in his duty as a Trustee of the Draycott Foundation, and there were certain elements that would want to take him to the cleaners. And there was no way he could shift the blame and nobody he could shift it onto.

True, he had not caused the scandal; he had not had his fingers in the till, but he had done pitifully little to stop it. It was almost certain that he and Sir Kenneth would be called as witnesses in the trial. Sir Kenneth would have to have an almost miraculous amount of influence to make it otherwise. For the first time ever as Headmaster of Tanswold School, Dunstan Stoate felt that he ought to consider retirement. He had accrued quite a decent pension and had substantial private means. Therefore, he was very well off.

Even so, he still had a strong sense of dire foreboding. The last time he felt like this was when he was about to explain to superior RAF officers his role in the destruction of one *de Havilland Vampire*, the serious damage to another, and the death of a fellow pilot. He saw boys arriving for school, some down the drive from their buses, while others were being dropped off by parents who had bought four-wheel drive vehicles for the purpose of being seen and of negotiating the drive at The Hermitage.

“Not one of our more constructive or edifying evenings,” he started gloomily to his secretary, “and if the boys and parents hear about the way the Governors conducted themselves, there will be hell to pay. It was quite disgraceful, and frankly I felt ashamed. To think that yesterday, I thought that I could be contacting Hillmans and Carlton Quinn to get on with the project. Now we have a major scandal on our hands and damage limitation is the order of the day. Eileen, could you write to Hillmans and Carlton Quinn to put things on hold?”

At that moment, there was a knock on the office door and Charlie Gallagher came through. He reported yet more problems with the boys’ lavatory next to the dining room, and the power had gone off in the kitchen. The plumber and electrician were on their way. Stoate sighed gloomily. It had not been his intention, but the School Major had certainly managed to rub his face in it.

Dunstan Stoate was about to call his senior management team, Miles Stanton, the Second Master, and David Woodhall, the Director of Studies, when he saw a familiar Range Rover with Lady Monica at the wheel and noticed that Sir Kenneth’s Bentley was still parked by the rose garden. Sir Kenneth got out and walked ponderously over to the front door, his gait suggesting that everything was ten percent heavier than normal. He came to join Stoate and Eileen in the office. He appeared unusually crestfallen and clearly had a bad hangover.

“Good heavens, I haven’t felt so bad since...” he mumbled hazily through his hangover. “I can’t think what got over me last night. Monica was furious when I arrived home in the taxi. She told me that she had not heard such

language; it was like something in a brothel. Was I as bad as that? Dunstan tell me whether all of this is true. Is it not just a nightmare?"

Dunstan and Eileen assured him that it was all true. He had used a considerable amount of foul, threatening and abusive language. It was also true that five million pounds, of which they were two out of the three Trustees, had gone AWOL, and that the third Trustee was in Tanswold Police Station, being investigated for serious allegations of fraud. They also told him in detail of the shameful shambles into which the meeting had degenerated. Sir Kenneth was almost humble in his apologies, "Eileen, Dunstan, I'm sorry, I should have conducted myself in a manner appropriate to the Chairmanship of the Governing Body of Tanswold School...Oh God!"

Presently Eileen came through with two large mugs of black coffee, before going back to type the correspondence with Hillmans, the architects, and Carlton Quinn Construction. Dunstan and Kenneth went into discussion about their role as Trustees of the Draycott Foundation. It was one of the rare occasions that Sir Kenneth had admitted his fault in anything. Both men realised that they were both responsible for a gross dereliction of duty as Trustees. If there had been a Draycott Foundation left to speak of, both would have resigned at once. Instead, they decided against it for they felt a strong obligation to lead the damage limitation exercise that the scandal was going to require.

The extent of the damage limitation that would be needed was being paraded in front of The Hermitage as the two men were talking. Two police cars, two other cars, a police minibus and a large box van had pulled up and many uniformed officers and officers in plain clothes had got out waiting for instructions. A tall man in a grey suit walked into the outer office and was talking to Eileen. The lack of discretion was obvious, and groups of boys looked on with interest. This sort of thing only happened on the telly and not for real in, of all places, their rather expensive school with its emphasis on tradition, discipline, responsibility and Anglicanism. Parents had stopped their cars and were gaping aghast for precisely the same reason. A strange looking van marked BBC down its sides had manoeuvred around the blockage of cars, and an aerial was rising from the roof. Several men got out and set up a large range of very technical looking equipment. Some boys were positively looking forward to being on the television but were thwarted by being hurried away to registration by the duty master. The tall man knocked on Stoaate's door and walked in without invitation.

He showed every sign that this meeting was going to be done in a business-like manner and to the book.

“Are you Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoaate?” he said showing his warrant card, “I am Detective Commander Richard Smithells of the Fraud Squad. I am investigating affairs concerning the Draycott Foundation, and allegations of fraud against the Bursar of this school, Graham Charles Smith. You, sir, are Headmaster here and one of the Trustees? And this gentleman is Sir Kenneth Richard Baines Rounce, the remaining Trustee? Well, gentlemen, I must tell you now that the alleged fraud is serious, and Mr Smith is cooperating fully with our enquiries. I also must tell you that he will be facing charges in relation to these allegations and that I will need to interview you in detail as to your role as Trustees. I must warn you both that my inquiries may lead to charges against you of being an accessory to theft and fraud. Meanwhile I need to search these premises, especially the offices of your Bursar, to help us to resolve this matter. It would be to your advantage to cooperate, which will avoid our having to obtain a warrant from a magistrate.”

Despite his hangover, Sir Kenneth was changing colour in an ominous way. “Good God, Smithells, I am on the bench here! Don’t you realise that I am High Marshall of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire? And let me tell you that amongst my friends are some the most senior judges in the district. I have considerable influence with the judiciary, and I shall speak to the Chief Constable and have you on the beat tomorrow!”

“Who you know concerns me not one little bit, sir,” replied Smithells who had heard this kind of bluster many a time in his work in the Fraud Squad. He carried on coldly, “I have little sympathy with old boys’ networks. I suggest once again you do cooperate with us, otherwise I will radio the Assistant Chief Constable, and he will have the warrant served on you in the hour.”

“You could have made this more discreet,” complained Stoaate. “This will do us no good at all.”

“Theft and fraud don’t do anyone any good, sir. And we are talking big money here. A Bursar with his fingers in the till will do your reputation no good at all. I need not tell you what the Draycott Foundation could have achieved had it not been played with. I cannot begin to imagine what the relatives of the late Arthur Draycott must think, and he must be turning in his grave. Although I agree that this is not in any way a violent crime, I am sure that you understand that we

are talking of the equivalent of a major bank robbery. I must also tell you that the last person I put away for this kind of thing got seven years.”

Stoate and Sir Kenneth looked quite alarmed. Smithells continued in his business-like way, “Now, sir, we will have to remove all the computers in the school including teaching, administration and personal, including laptops. We will also be removing all servers that go with them. We will also have to remove for checking all floppy discs and CD-ROMs. We will return them, of course, once we have searched through your files for any evidence. It could take some time.”

“How long will you be with our teaching computers?” Stoate looked even more alarmed. “Information Technology is an important subject in the school and is used in all sorts of other subjects around the school. Also, boys will be using the computers for a wide range of examination work, for both IT and other subjects. And you realise that without computers, our administration will be all but impossible. You will be causing us massive inconvenience.”

“Quite so, I do understand, Mr Stoate. We will look at the teaching computers first. I will have a good number of experts to look at them. Should we find nothing untoward, we will return them straight away. For the forty-five teaching computers with their servers, that will take about five to six weeks. After that we will start on the admin system. I reckon that you will have them back in about eight to ten weeks and the Bursar’s system, it will be about twelve to fifteen weeks. In the meantime, you will have to use the low-tech approach: paper and pens. A bit slow, maybe, but quite reliable. For the administration, you will have to dust off your typewriters. As for the examination work, I’m sure that the exam boards will listen, or boys can do the work on their computers at home.

“Now Mr Stoate, just before we start, I must tell you we must also investigate your own personal financial dealings. May we have your permission to access all your bank and building society accounts and your personal share portfolios? The same applies to you, Sir Kenneth. I would ask you to make your way home, and I expect to call in at three o’clock this afternoon. We shall also be investigating the role of Staunton, Hardy, & Co.”

Sir Kenneth snorted, “What if I am not there? I am a busy man and have an estate to run. I have better and more important things to...”

Smithells cut him short, a testimony indeed to his presence and professionalism. “Sir Kenneth, I yet again have to remind you that I am a police officer leading an inquiry into an allegation of serious criminal offences. You

will be at Gilham Park at three o'clock when I shall be interviewing you as to your role as Trustee of the Draycott Foundation. As with Mr Stoate, I will also need to conduct a thorough investigation of your financial affairs. If you do not wish to cooperate in the way that I hope you will, I shall arrest you, caution you and conduct my investigation with you at the police station. I suggest you go home now, Sir Kenneth. If you are not at home when I get there, I shall issue a warrant for your arrest. Do I have to say more? May we make a start, Mr Stoate?"

Sir Kenneth left, continuing to grumble about his influence with senior police officers and members of the judiciary. Stoate rang Alistair Carter-Barr, the school's solicitor who rushed *post-haste* from his office in Tanswold High Street. Detective Commander Smithells went out to the officers who were awaiting their final instructions. Large clear plastic bags were distributed from the back of the van and groups of officers dispersed around the school to pick up every single computer, networked or free standing. Dunstan Stoate's machine was the first to be disconnected and carefully wrapped in a plastic bag, a careful record being made of its location and the machine serial number. Eileen had gone down into the basement to recover her trusted old typewriter. As Smithells' officers left the room, Stoate sat down in the old armchair and contemplated what other horrors were coming up that day and what he should say to his staff. At least he had more space on his desk. They would find nothing in his machine other than what Ball and Collinson had written, as he had no idea what else to do with the damned thing.

The bell for break rang and Stoate went to address his staff, only to be confronted by Smithells who, having made sure that his operation was proceeding smoothly, had decided to conduct his interview with Dunstan Stoate to investigate his role of Trustee. Smithells set up a tape recorder on Stoate's desk. Just as Stoate had seen in police dramas on the television, Smithells started speaking into the machine, "Interview conducted between Detective Commander Richard John Smithells and Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate *re* allegations of fraud in the case of the Draycott Foundation, in the presence of Alistair Douglas Carter-Barr, solicitor for Tanswold School. This interview is being conducted on Friday 8th May 1998 in the Headmaster's office at Tanswold School, The Hermitage, Tanswold, Middle Riding of Yorkshire. The time is 10.22. Mr Stoate, I must warn you that you do not have to say anything, but what you do say may be used in evidence. I must also warn you that it may harm your

defence if you omit to say anything that you substantially rely on for your defence...”

The interview was detailed and thorough. Storate realised immediately that he could not pull the wool over Smithells’ eyes nor could he try to shift the blame. The best way forward was to tell him everything he knew in as much detail as he could, because Smithells was clearly an expert in these cases and had briefed himself on the Draycott Foundation surprisingly well. Storate, by his own admission, had been highly negligent in his role of Trustee, and very foolish to have entrusted the handling of such a large sum to one man. But it seemed clear to Smithells that Storate had had no part in the fraud, and his dereliction of duty was not a crime. It could be handled in a disciplinary procedure by the Governors of the School. Everything Storate had said was backed up by the school’s solicitor. Documents had also been handed over that made it clear to Smithells that the Headmaster could not have known about the fraud, as the Bursar was clearly giving him and the Governors a false picture. Although the accounts in respect of the Draycott Foundation appeared to have been audited, it was soon clear to Smithells that they were fabrications. As soon as he got back to the police station, Smithells would lay additional charges of false accounting and deception.

Storate had also been most willing to discuss details of his personal financial dealings, of which he was surprisingly knowledgeable for someone who had so little interest in the petty ways of finance, accountancy, or banking. He had even given the police the key to his flat, so they could collect all the details of his bank and building society accounts. Smithells became increasingly satisfied with his interview with Storate, as it seemed to square up nicely with what Smith had said at the police station. Not many villains with things to hide would be so open. There may well have been some things that were well hidden, but Smithells had a fine nose for sniffing these out.

While Storate was in his office with Detective Commander Smithells, the staff had gathered for their emergency staff meeting. There was an excited buzz as staff had not only seen all the police cars but had been visited by police officers who had removed computer terminals from classrooms and offices in the English Department. Andrew McEwan was not in the least bit amused, nor was Peter Brett who had been doing some data-logging with his fourth-year physics set. Miles Stanton had his gown on and was pacing about nervously, for he knew that the school was heading for a major crisis. Eventually he called the meeting to

order in his characteristic manner, “Yes, please! Thank you all very much for turning in at such short notice. I am afraid that the Headmaster appears not to be available now and there is a most important matter he needs to talk to you about. I suggest that we meet here at one o’clock, during lunch.”

The importance of this most important matter was made clear to Carol Wilson, the Head of Information Technology, thirty minutes later. She had settled her third-year class into their exercise on the computer when Sergeant Apps and Constables Mace and Oates came in without so much as a knock on the door, moved in amongst the boys who had, as was the rule, stood up on the entry of the policemen and started unplugging the computers from the network one by one and wrapping them into the large plastic bags. The first group of boys were calling out indignantly, “Miss, the policeman’s made us lose our work!”

“Don’t care what you’ve lost, kid,” growled Constable Oates, “but I know what you should get instead. Shall we thump your head or kick your backside?”

Mrs Wilson stood there gaping in stunned silence, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. Outraged by this uninvited intrusion into her lesson, and the way the policemen had just waded in to seize the computers, it took her some seconds to get over the shock. Once she had gained control over herself, she let out a shriek at the policemen, which stopped them in their tracks. “STOP AT ONCE!” she yelled in her tone that would send the most aggressive guard dog whimpering back to its kennel. “How dare you interrupt my lesson in this way? How dare you speak to my pupils in this way? Don’t you realise that you should shut the computers down properly, before turning them off? Leave my room at once!”

Sergeant Apps strode up to the desk and confronted Mrs Wilson in a patronising way that was calculated totally to undermine her authority in front of the boys. The intrusion of Smithells and the Fraud Squad onto his immediate patch had displeased him, and he disliked schoolteachers at the best of times, let alone ones that shouted at him. He had been shouted at enough at school, and in those days that was just the beginning. And he always thought that Tanswold School was rather snooty, and its staff should be brought down a peg or two. He eyeballed her and hissed, “Now look here, miss, I’ve got a little job to do, which I have been ordered to do, I have been paid to do, and I will do, whether you like it, ducky, or lump it. And I will do it in my way. If I need advice from a teacher how to do my job, I give you my written promise right now that I will stop being a copper and become a bloody social worker. So, if my officers and I decide that

we will unplug your computers in this way, that is what we will do. Right now, if you screech at me or my officers once more, I shall charge you with obstructing a police officer from discharging his lawful duties, and I will take you down to the station. Got it dearie?"

Mrs Wilson got it and slumped into her chair. The boys milled about aimlessly; they had not enjoyed their close view of the police in action. During the tutor period, the boys had been writing on "What I want to do". Several decided that instant to rewrite their submissions, changing the title from "I want to be a policeman". Within half an hour all the computers had been cleared out of the first IT room. Meanwhile, Mrs Wilson's colleague, Ian Kuracz had been totally unaware of Sergeant Apps' activities around the corner. What he did know was that the network had crashed in a particularly spectacular way such that even his expertise could not start it up again. Finally, all the computers sat there in a trance, and Mr Kuracz went through to the IT office to find Apps and his men taking away the server, which gave out a sound like a belch when it was unplugged. To Kuracz's technical ear, this did not sound healthy. Sergeant Apps made it quite clear to Kuracz that his presence in the office was not at all welcome, let alone his advice on how to handle a computer. Twenty minutes later, Sergeant Apps was clearing out the second IT room, seizing even the boys' discs. Nothing was left to chance and by lunchtime, the IT suite was bare.

Two days later, Sergeant Apps was carpeted by Smithells for his ignorance in handling computer hardware. Like all computers of that time, these machines had to go through a special shutdown program before they could be switched off. Because Apps had merely pulled the plug out on the machines, including the servers, the configuration of the network had been severely damaged. It took Smithells' experts the best part of a week before they could get anything meaningful from the machines at all. At the subsequent disciplinary proceedings, Sergeant Apps was demoted back to Constable.

Just as Storate thought that things could not possibly get any worse, they suddenly did. Detective Constable Owen came trotting up and announced to Storate that they had found several items in the boiler room. Owen produced a copy of a magazine that Storate would have preferred not to have existed let alone that his students knew about it. He shuddered and went back into his office muttering, "What the hell is that? Get rid of it!"

Storate slumped into an armchair and contemplated some therapy from his cocktail cabinet. He got up again and went over to the window. As he looked

out, he could see the computers being loaded one by one into the back of the lorry, along with all the ancillary equipment that Smithells' men could find. Boxes of folders from the office were being loaded onto the lorry, as well as a box full of magazines the contents of which he did not wish to know. And he saw the film crew from the BBC filming it all, and they pointed the camera at him. He stepped back and barked his shin on the coffee table.

As he nursed his injury, Stoaate felt a deep gloom coming over him. His authority over his school had been undermined by the uninvited intrusion of Smithells and his officers. When Stoaate had first become a Headmaster in the early seventies, Smithells would have been a small boy. Stoaate would have caned him for such a non-deferential attitude to his authority. Now, not only had Smithells used the Law to walk all over his authority but also was using it to walk all over his school as if he owned the place. Smithells and his officers had come in as an unwelcome invasion from the real world, something that Stoaate had built his school to protect himself against. In the world of Dunstan Stoaate, there was tradition, discipline, responsibility all bound by a matrix of the Anglican Church. Boys would follow healthy competition both in work and in play. They were fed with wholesome food and followed wholesome male pursuits like rugby football, CCF, athletics and cricket. And he would turn out real men, who were real adventurers, took risks, and if those proved fatal, well that was regrettable but tough. In the old days, inappropriate actions could be easily dealt with by a few well-aimed strokes of his cane. Although nowadays they had to do the Birds and the Bees in Personal and Social Education, cross-country runs on cold days in skimpy running shorts could be used to expunge any dirty thoughts that might arise from this on impressionable young minds.

Now the real world had invaded with pornography and policemen. In the old days, policemen were deferential and saluted the likes of headmasters and called them "sir". But today they had been arrogant, rude and even threatened to arrest him. As for hard-core pornography, he had never come across it before; if he had come across a boy who showed even the slightest inclination to homosexuality, he would have caned him until he did not. And if a boy had come up to him in the same cocky manner as DC Owen and had showed him that filth, he would have tanned his backside to kingdom come. What would come next? Drugs?

What did come next was a loud roar from Miles Stanton's office down the corridor, "You walk in here and demand to know things like that and you expect me to talk to you. Get out of my office now!" Stoaate saw a revolting apparition

leave Mr Stanton's office carrying a clipboard. It trotted up to the Headmaster and, with a familiarity that Stoate found most offensive, announced itself as Darren from an agency whose name Stoate did not catch. And Stoate stepped back to ensure that he did not catch anything else from Darren, his mouth open with unspeakable horror and disgust. Before Stoate could say anything, Darren started his vile inquisition, "Well, Dunstan, I couldn't get much out of that old codger. Have you got anything to say for my readers? They like something to tickle them. Something sensational, eh?"

"No comment," said Stoate becoming more outraged by the second.

"Bursar with his fingers in the till? Eh? Have you got some filth you can give us? Five million knicker goes walk about; that's a lot of dosh. Few orgies? Sun, sex, sangria, know what I mean? Few bimbos in the office, nudge, nudge? Keep me in booze and women for couple of years."

"No comment!"

"Cops were saying in the van that they've found porn. Now there we have something for the readers. You got some dirt on your staff or boys? Kinky master set up a porn site on the web? What goes on in the dormitories, eh? Got my drift, eh Dunstan?"

Darren went on to describe acts that were so revolting that it made Stoate thankful that he had never come across them when he was at boarding school. Stoate was not going to enlighten this monster to the fact that the only bed in Tanswold School was in the sick bay. Those few boys who had to live away from home lodged with families in Tanswold or Rockwood. As Darren continued his disgusting ego trip through the depths of human depravity in his East End drawl, Stoate was finding it ever harder to control himself. When this thing that looked as if it really ought to be in prison poked him in the stomach, it was too much. The pent-up fury of the day was stronger than Stoate's revulsion at touching the revolting creature opposite and Stoate hurled him at the wall on the other side of the corridor. He picked up the winded heap, took it out of The Hermitage and tipped it into the trailer of grass clippings that the gardener was about to take to the compost heap.

"That's what it feels like," Stoate hissed. "The compost heap is the best place for the filth you are and the filth you represent. In case you are thinking of pressing assault charges, may I remind you that you are a trespasser and a good number of policemen have just witnessed and applauded what I have done."

Darren got out of the trailer and brushed himself down. He saw the line of pigs applauding the old buffer who was waddling back into the house. His mind was homing in on an article on elderly men of dubious taste and went on to see if he could get some dirt from some of the boys. It would be a sensation.

Stoate felt weak and sick. He asked Eileen to get him a light lunch. It was getting near to one-thirty, and it was time to tell his staff what was going on. He put on his gown and went down the corridor to the Common Room.

The entire staff had been summoned to the Common Room, and a sign had been put on the door to the effect that nobody was to knock under any circumstance. With his usual “Yes, please!” Miles Stanton called the meeting to order.

“Good afternoon, colleagues,” Stoate started hesitatingly, “I must thank you for your patience in what has clearly been a trying morning. I am sure that you have heard rumours concerning events that have occurred recently and may well wonder at what is happening with all these policemen around. Those of you who have been around for a long time may well remember the Draycott twins. Many of you who weren’t here at the time will have heard of the Draycott Foundation that was a most generous bequest to the school from their grandfather after they had sadly died in a dreadful air accident. This legacy was invested to provide a source of income to the school. It is my sad and dreadful duty to tell you now that the Draycott Foundation has been subject to fraudulent dealings on a massive scale, and that its value has been reduced to a tiny fraction of what it was originally worth. The school has lost fractionally under five million pounds.”

A shocked gasp went up around the room. Stoate continued, “I am sorry to have to tell you that the Bursar, Mr Smith, was involved with what I have been told is DIY stockbroking and lost most of it in the stock market crashes. He was arrested last night at the end of what I can only describe as a rather stormy meeting of the Governors. The police operation you have seen today is because of the information that the Bursar gave to the police. The investigation is being carried out by Detective Commander Richard Smithells of the Fraud Squad. He has ordered as part of this investigation that all the computers in the school are impounded and their contents searched. He has taken away a large amount of administrative material as well. I can only apologise to those who had their lessons disrupted, and even more so for those who have had your own personal machines seized. I did question Mr Smithells on that matter, but he was insistent that even personal machines should be part of the investigation. I will also make

representations to Detective Commander Smithells about the behaviour of one or two of his officers, which seems to have fallen well below the standard that I, for one, would expect of a police officer.

“Additionally, you may well have seen a strange looking creature called Darren. He is from what I can only suppose is the gutter press. He is quite distinctive; he looks like and speaks like an East End criminal. If you see him, call Charlie Gallagher who will get him off the premises. Under no circumstances are any of you to speak to the press. A press statement will be released later. You must not discuss this with the boys; get them on with their work this afternoon to avoid anything untoward. Nor must you discuss it with parents. So, there we have it. Are there any questions?”

The first question was straightforward enough. “When are the computers in the IT suite going to be returned?”

“Detective Commander Smithells tells me in about five to six weeks’ time, though it could be longer. Yes, I appreciate that it will cause problems with coursework, but those are minor compared to the rest of the damage this scandal will cause.”

Thereafter, the questioning became more searching and Stoate was soon on the defensive. He fended the questions off with an aggressive arrogance that progressively outraged his audience.

“Headmaster, is it not the duty of the Governors to supervise the handling of the school’s financial resources? Have not the governors failed in this duty of supervision? What is going to be done?”

“I have no intention of discussing any perceived shortcomings of the governors with the staff. Your role is to implement the policy that I... I mean the Governors and I decide. We are not prepared to discuss any matter of that kind with you. As regards what is to be done, that is not for discussion here, and I am in no way going to countenance any staff input into any decision that I... I mean the Governors are going to take on this. I will tell you that the Bursar is facing police charges.”

“In the absence of a Bursar what are departments going to do about purchasing, and paying for materials already ordered?”

“You will have to put any orders on hold if you can. If you have already taken delivery and have an invoice whose payment is necessary, you will have to pay yourselves and claim the money back when everything gets sorted out.”

A gasp of disbelief rose from his staff. “Will we get paid this month?” demanded one angry voice.

“I do not know how long this will take,” Stoate replied, “and it is quite likely that your pay will be delayed as the Bursar has all the figures and all the administration files have been impounded. As far as I am concerned, I think you should be professional about it and accept the situation. Our priority is to get the administration up and running again. When you get paid, and you will be paid, I don’t know, and it is not my immediate priority.”

“I have a mortgage to pay and my family to look after.”

“That’s your problem. If you chose to live in an...”

The meeting dissolved in uproar, and Stoate heard the mention of that term he loathed so much, the Unions. If his staff had big mortgages, that was their problem; no, it was not his fault that Tanswold was an expensive area. He opened the Common Room door to hear the warning bell that signalled that lessons were due to resume in five minutes. He returned into the Common Room, faced the uproar that was going on and applied his technique when faced with a less than cooperative maths class. “QUIET!” he roared. “The bell has gone for afternoon school and I suggest you make your way to your classes pretty quickly.”

This time he left for his office wishing the day would finish. It had started with a major police raid on the school and was now culminating in a major revolt from his staff. Eileen had brought him a salad, and he was thankful for the sustenance. When he had finished, he noticed that the police vans had gone and the school now looked as normal as it could do, although the space on his desk was a constant and niggling reminder of the abnormality of the situation. As well as that, there were still groups of boys standing around outside some of the huts that still served as classrooms. The tramping of feet on the floors upstairs suggested to him that there were boys still waiting to go into the classrooms upstairs in The Hermitage. He looked at his watch and realised that afternoon school should have started fifteen minutes ago. Punctuality had never been a strong point at Tanswold School, but the sloppiness of time keeping in this instance was too much. He went back to the Common Room. As he opened the door, he saw that the staff had their hands raised. Nobody noticed him standing in the lobby and the meeting carried on.

“...Anyone against? No? Are there any abstentions? The motion is passed unanimously that this meeting has no confidence either in the handling of the Draycott foundation by the Governors of the School, or in the management of

staff by J L Dunstan Stoate. We will pass the details of this to our respective unions and there will be meetings with representatives next week. Now I think we need to get to our lessons...”

Stoate shut the door and went back to his office. He placed a *Do not disturb* sign on his door. This time he poured himself a large whiskey and sat down in his armchair. Although a vote of no confidence was even more insulting than having to be interviewed by Smithells, the worst thing that could happen was that he would get letters from the teaching unions demanding meetings with him, and some union official would lecture him on the rights of those who worked for him. As far as he was concerned, he paid his staff, albeit below national rates, and he expected them to do as he told them without question. If they did not like his management style, they could go. As far as the vote of no confidence itself was concerned, he would divide and rule by holding interviews with each of the staff one by one. If they still expressed support of the motion, they would have their contracts terminated at the end of the year.

He rang Alistair Carter-Barr who came over straight away. They had two important things to do. The first was to work out a press release, because there were several reporters who had gathered at the school. With the help of several policemen who had arrived in the operation to clear the school of its computers, Charlie Gallagher had managed to get the assembled press corps out of the school grounds and outside the school gates. Stoate and Carter-Barr agreed the statement, which Eileen typed out on her old typewriter. Unfortunately, the shift key was not working, and the statement had a rather amateurish look to it:

The governors and headmaster of tans old school have had the difficult and unpleasant duty of reporting serious financial irregularities concerning the draycott foundation. the school is working closely with the police to resolve the matter and has taken the difficult decision to suspend the bursar until further notice. the headmaster would like to stress to all parents and pupils that this matter should in no way affect the day-to-day operation of the school, which will be open as normal on Monday 11 may 1998.

Dunstan Stoate asked Carter-Barr’s opinion on the issue of no confidence. Carter-Barr thought about it for a couple of minutes. His client could always argue that it had no validity as only the Governors had the power to pass such a

vote to make it meaningful and the staff had no representation on the Governing Body. Stoate could deal with the matter in his own way, and Carter-Barr approved Stoate's strategy in investigating the matter. Of course, he would do all he could to assist in any legal implications. Eileen returned with the copies of the Press Release and Mr Carter-Barr went out to make a statement to the press assembled at the school gates.

For the first time ever, Dunstan Stoate did not go to the church service that marked the end of the week at Tanswold School. Firstly, he did not wish to run the gauntlet of the press assembled at the school gates. Secondly, he wanted some quiet time to think things through. He asked Eileen to bar any telephone calls other than from the four senior governors or from Detective Commander Smithells.

Stoate contemplated the next steps, and what he would say to the Governing Body the following Thursday. He was surprised how easily he could think things through, given the stresses of the day and his second whisky. A vote of no confidence from his staff was an insult he could ignore, but not one from the Governors. It did not bear thinking about. He would argue that Tanswold School needed his hand on the tiller to steer it out of this crisis. To extend the metaphor further it could also have been argued that it was his and Sir Kenneth's negligence that had navigated the ship onto well-charted rocks in the first place. Currently, Tanswold School was not only not a happy ship, but also one that had been holed beneath the waterline.

Stoate also wanted to see the building programme through. It was unquestionable that the hut that served as a dining hall would have to be replaced. The kitchen was inadequate. The roof was always giving trouble and some of the structure was rotten. The lavatories were not designed for the volume of traffic that used them. The water supply was inadequate, and the drains were always blocking. Stoate hated local authorities with their petty regulations on trivia such as hygiene and dreaded a visit from the Environmental Health Officer. At any rate, to withdraw would mean that Hillman's fees would have been wasted and that Carlton Quinn Construction would charge a vastly higher price than their quotation when eventually they would get around to building.

In the absence of the Draycott Foundation, the school would have to take out a bank loan, although Stoate felt sure that an appeal to Old Tanswoldians would raise something. After all, the Science and Technology Block and all the other buildings had mostly been paid for that way, and the bank loans had been

relatively small and easily paid off. The possibility of a loan had been discussed by the Bursar – damn him, it was his bloody fault that they were in this mess, and the repayments would be horrendous, about five hundred pounds per boy per year. The fees would have to go up by an enormous percentage to make it up and to pay for the usual inflationary pressures. A pay cut for staff might help, but the mood they were in showed that there was little good will between Dunstan Stoaite and his staff. No, they would have to expand the school; the entrance exam, which was pitifully easy as it was, would have to be made easier still. They would have to tap into the disillusionment of parents who were not satisfied with the performance of their local schools (not many locally as Goyder's, Alverston Grammar and Rockwood were excellent schools). Nevertheless, Stoaite had heard of a couple of little independent grammar schools that were struggling...

Over in Gilham Park, Sir Kenneth was regarding what was going on as nonsense. He had been waiting in his study for an hour and a half and had given up on Smithells. He had tried to attend to some estate business, but the events of the last twenty-four hours kept on haunting him. It was bad enough that the business into which he had put so much money (Sir Kenneth had little respect for the altruistic aims of education) had lost nearly five million pounds of its assets. If only Smith had talked to him... After all, he did have considerable business acumen. And Stoaite had not come out of it so well either. If Stoaite had worked for him, he would have thrown him out on the spot, friend, or no friend. It would not be a good idea for the Governors to get rid of Stoaite as the old fool only had two or three years left to retirement. Stoaite was a good front man, to use modern management speak, to get the school through the crisis.

Perhaps it was all a bad dream brought on by a particularly evil hangover.

Sir Kenneth's bad dream was soon going to turn into a full-blown nightmare. He left his study and went down to the stables where he spoke to the forestry manager to discuss the felling of some trees. He got on the phone in the estate office and dealt with quite a few bits and pieces before driving down in the estate Land Rover to Gerald's Covert to look at the preparations for the grouse-shooting season. He drove up onto Gilham Moor to check progress on the shooting butts for the Glorious Twelfth. He was driving back down and had passed through Gilham village when he noticed that he was being followed by two cars, one of which had a blue light flashing. He pulled over and he saw Smithells and Detective Inspector Mallinson get out of their unmarked police car and come over to the Land Rover. Smithells was not looking very pleased.

“So, there you are, Sir Kenneth,” Smithells said, “we’ve been looking all over for you, and I still have several squad cars on the job. I thought I had told you to be at home in Gilham Park for when I came to see you. I cannot say that you have been over cooperative. My officers and I have spent the last hour and a half searching for you.”

“Good God, Smithells, this is outrageous” shouted Sir Kenneth who had forgotten that Smithells was immune to his bluster. “Do you not realise who you are talking to? I am the most important landowner in this area, I have a large estate to run, and I am far too busy to wait around for the likes of you. I know the Chief Constable personally and most of the judiciary. And when I speak to him, you will be down the ranks to constable.”

Smithells stood there unmoved until Sir Kenneth had finished, before staring him straight in the eye, “Kenneth Richard Baines Rounce, I am arresting you on suspicion of being an accessory to fraudulent transactions involving the Draycott Foundation contrary to the Fraud Act and the Theft Act 1968. You do not have to say anything but anything you do say will be recorded and may be used in evidence. I must warn you that it may harm your defence if you omit to say things you come to materially rely on in your defence. Get in the car; we will discuss this down at the station.”

“How dare you?” yelled Sir Kenneth. “I shall be suing you. You know that I have many friends in the legal profession and on the judiciary, and they will screw you to your last penny. This is intolerable!”

“So you keep on saying, sir. I have an entirely professional interest in the Old Boy Network and fraud, sir. Get him in the car and take him down to the nick.”

For the officers delegated to take Sir Kenneth down to the nick, the journey was one of purgatory. Sir Kenneth kept up an almost continuous diatribe about his connections with the Chief Constable, senior members of the judiciary and did they not realise his importance as a landowner and his business success and that this whole thing was quite outrageous, and he was appalled at the lack of deference they had to a man of his breeding and he would be arranging for prompt legal action to be taken. All of this was reported to Smithells who took time to consider the action to take with the partners of Staunton Hardy & Co of Manchester. Sir Kenneth was left to cool off in the cells.

“One of the nobility for you, Sarge,” said one of the constables cheekily to the Custody Sergeant. “Reckons he’s a man of breeding and knows the Chief an’

all. Not one of your common villains, joining Smith, accessory to fraud. Got one of your luxury suites?"

Sir Kenneth was spluttering with fury. The Custody Sergeant recognised Sir Kenneth as his brother's ex-boss who had made one of his public spectacles out of sacking him. The sergeant had spent many months afterwards supporting and counselling his brother. Therefore, he had a certain debt of ingratitude to Sir Kenneth, and this seemed an ideal opportunity to repay it.

"Sir Kenneth Rounce," started the Sergeant, heavy with irony, as he led Sir Kenneth to the cells, "how honoured we are to have you as our guest. We have set aside one of our best rooms, complete with en-suite toilet and luxury fittings."

"Confound your impertinence, Sergeant!" roared Sir Kenneth. "Just wait until I speak to the Chief Constable. You will be joining Smithells on the beat."

The custody sergeant pushed Sir Kenneth into a cell and closed the door. "I do hope you enjoy the facilities," he replied and, pointing out the flap in the door, continued, "Use this for room service. Sometimes the waiters are a little slow. Detective Commander Smithells will send for you when he's ready. By the way, Rounce, get used to it; you will have a good few months of this after the trial. Not much in the way of huntin', shootin', or fishin' around here. You will have to get used to the company. Not quite in the same league as your judiciary and legal friends, eh? Very low breeding, some of the types you get around here, in fact most of them are a bunch of criminals."

The sergeant closed the door and locked it, writing "Rounce" on the chalkboard outside the door. He opened the flap and hissed, "By the way, Rounce, none of us could give a shit whom you know, you are inside and they are outside, got the picture?"

Sir Kenneth got the picture with the greatest of difficulty. He sat down on a plastic covered bench, which doubled as a bed. There was a second raised bench, which too presumably served as a bed, which meant that he was no doubt expected to share the cell with someone else, which in turn meant that the second person would have to watch him use the lavatory and *vice versa*. A single reinforced light fitting was in the middle of the ceiling, but there was no means of operating it from within. The only thing that could be operated in the cell was the lavatory flush. The stainless-steel lavatory itself stank and there was precious little paper left. Obscene graffiti covered the walls. A small square of glass bricks served as a window, and one could tell the difference between day and night. It was stiflingly hot in the cell. He was outraged by the insolent familiarity of the

people who worked down in this hole, especially the way they had called him “Rounce”. He would report them to Frank as soon as he could get to a telephone.

He could hear the custody sergeant chatting at the desk at the end of the corridor. Presently he heard people arriving and he went to the flap and saw Graham Smith being led back to his cell after having been remanded in police custody at Tanswold Magistrates’ Court. Rounce growled through the flap, “I’ll murder you, Smith. Look at all the trouble you have caused.”

“Shut up Rounce,” was the courteous and deferential reply from the custody sergeant.

All went quiet again and after what seemed an eternity, he heard a commotion going on at the custody desk. A young man was shouting obscenities, while police voices were trying to reason with him and take down details. Keys were rattled in the door to the corridor and finally to the door to Sir Kenneth’s cell. The custody sergeant called out, “Company for you, Rounce!” before saying to the young man, “You’re in luck, Wayne, you’re in with a nob.”

“You’re a knob,” was Wayne’s grateful reply.

“No, Wayne, not that kind of knob, but a nob, a man of means, one of the nobility, landed gentry. So, you watch your tongue. This one hob-nobs with chief constables and the beaks. Now, Rounce, this is Wayne Leach. Wayne is one of our regular guests; housebreaking, taking and driving away, drugs and today it’s assault and causing an affray. You didn’t like Leigh taking off with your girlfriend, no excuse to land him in casualty.”

“What’s this knob in for? Hey! Knob! What are you in for?”

The custody sergeant locked the door again. Sir Kenneth said nothing. This was too bad, putting him in with this aggressive young lout.

“I think I know you. You’re that old geezer that lives up Gilham Park. Thought I knew your name. Did a job on your offices last year. You got me six months in a Young Offenders. Me and my mate are coming to do your place. Big pad innit? We’re going to trash it and you. I’m going to trash you now.”

Wayne grabbed hold of Sir Kenneth’s jacket by the lapels and pinned him back. Sir Kenneth pushed him off and hissed at him, “You do that to me once more and I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life!”

“I’ll have you for assault,” shouted Wayne, who picked himself up off the floor and yelled through the flap, “Oi! Sergeant! I demand my rights! This old perv you put me in with has just put me on the floor! I want my brief!”

The sergeant ignored him. A drunken tramp was taken in and put in the cell next door. The sound of him being sick repelled Sir Kenneth and was ignored by his roommate. The tramp fell asleep snoring loudly, punctuated by a deep hacking cough. Above the noise, Sir Kenneth could just overhear the custody sergeant talking about the chief going suddenly but the hacking cough prevented him hearing more.

Without warning Wayne treated Sir Kenneth to a light and sound show that made him feel quite sick. At the end, Wayne used all the remaining paper, before going over to the door with his trousers still around his ankles to shout through the door, "Oi! Sergeant! No bog paper. Give us some bog paper!"

Wayne stood at the door with his trousers still around his ankles until the sergeant passed a fresh roll through the flap. As Wayne flushed the lavatory, Sir Kenneth was beginning to feel a natural need of his own and hoped that Smithells would come back to the station to interview him before he burst.

It was to be a forlorn hope. Sir Kenneth went to the lavatory and stood there to relieve the pressure. The resulting reaction from Wayne could not have been more humiliating. He opened the flap and yelled down the corridor, "Oi! Sergeant! This old pouffe you've put me in with! He's just flashed at me! He's a perv! I demand my rights! Where's my brief?" And to Sir Kenneth he shouted, "I'll tell my dad and my brother. They're real 'ard and they hate old gay pervs like you."

It was an eternity for Sir Kenneth in this dirty stinking little dungeon in over intimate company with this monstrous foul-mouthed little misfit. Eventually, the custody sergeant came down to take him up to the interview room. The duty solicitor, Anna Drewery, was present.

Detective Commander Smithells ordered Sir Kenneth to sit down. Sir Kenneth started to protest about the absence of his own solicitor and would have enlarged on his stay as a not very grateful guest. In a quiet voice Smithells cut him short and said, "Sir Kenneth, I started on this case at one o'clock in the morning. I have interviewed a number of people today about it. I have charged the Bursar of Tanswold School with theft and fraud. I am now very tired and if you bluster once more at me about your high-level connections, I will terminate the interview, and you will go back to join your little friend Leach in the cells. I will go home, catch up with my sleep and come back tomorrow afternoon. The choice is yours. Shall we commence the interview?"

Smithells leaned over to switch on the tape recorder and pushed the microphone between himself and Sir Kenneth Rounce. He switched on the tape recorder and started to speak into the machine, "This is an interview between Detective Commander Richard John Smithells and Kenneth Richard Baines Rounce concerning my investigation into the allegations of fraud concerning the Draycott Foundation. Also present are Detective Inspector Lisa Jayne Mallinson and Anna Frances Cowley Drewery, duty solicitor. The time is nineteen twenty-three..."

Smithells interviewed Sir Kenneth in depth. The answers coincided very neatly with Stoate and could be corroborated with the documentation provided. Anything untoward would be shown up in the detailed analysis of the school computers. Still, it would be a good idea for Smithells to send some officers over to Gilham Park to seal off Sir Kenneth's study and the estate office. Sir Kenneth reluctantly agreed (after Smithells offered to prolong his stay) and some officers were dispatched with Detective Inspector Franks to Gilham Park. As a result of the interview, Smithells felt that at the present time there was insufficient evidence to bring a charge of being an accessory to a fraud and discharged Sir Kenneth on police bail. Unlike many cases involving the theft and fraud of a massive sum of money, the Draycott Foundation case was going to be, in police parlance, a "quick fix"; most cases that Richard Smithells dealt with were "stickers". Now he would get some sleep before going over to the nick at Manchester to interview Mr Hackett. At least he knew where his next witness was, and he would not be going very far.

Not very far was where Sir Kenneth Rounce got when he rang Sir Frank Hasland, the Chief Constable, when he got home from the police station. Sir Frank was surprisingly not as helpful as he normally was in such cases. "Sorry, Kenneth, old chap," he said, "I've had a spot of bother myself. Police Authority is investigating my expenses. They think I've had my fingers in the till. Load of rubbish, of course, but I'm taking immediate retirement, so there is not a lot I can do. The thing is that Smithells can't be bought by anyone; he's one of the top officers in the field. I know plenty that thought that they would get away with it, but Smithells had them and sent them down. I can't interfere at Tanswold, now. So sorry that you have had such a rough time."

Sir Kenneth went to the drawing room to join Lady Monica and poured a stiff gin and tonic. He was glad it was evening; the day had been as appalling as any he could remember.

In his office, Dunstan Stoate would have agreed with him. He had heard about Sir Kenneth's arrest. Unusually for him, Stoate left his office and went home early. The press pack had dispersed, and the only signs of their presence were the wads of chewing gum trodden into the pavement. The BBC van had gone home as well. As Stoate passed the newsagent, he shuddered as he saw the billboard that proclaimed in large black letters the headline *Police probe fraud at top school*. The television news, both national and regional, showed the horrific footage of all the computers being loaded into the van by Smithells' officers. Carter-Barr's reading of the press release sounded very lame.

Chapter 5

The tone of the rest of the Summer Term was set by what awaited Dunstan Stoate when he arrived for work the following Monday morning. Charlie Gallagher was waiting outside his office and was carrying a copy of the *Sketch on Sunday*. “I thought you’d better see this, Headmaster. I don’t think you will like it.”

He was right. The contents chilled him. Under the title *Porn and Fraud Probe at Public School* there was a two-page spread, with pictures of Stoate and the police vans outside The Hermitage. The obnoxious Darren had supposedly managed to collect quotes from around the school, which contained material that Stoate would have never thought possible in a school such as Tanswold. The whole article was a tissue of lies that centred on midnight romps in the dormitories. It had clearly never occurred to the editor to check the basics such as the fact that Tanswold School had never had any dormitories. There was a self-righteous editorial calling for strict controls on the safety of vulnerable boys from aged bachelors like Stoate.

“How did the filth get into the boiler room any way, Charlie?” Stoate asked. “I cannot imagine for a minute that it would be any of our staff. Do you have any idea? Where did you get that paper? It’s not really your style, is it?”

“Paul showed it to me, Headmaster,” replied Gallagher. “I have no idea where the magazines came from; probably one of the plumber’s lads. If it is one of ours, I’ll murder him before you do. Anyway, I’ll put my ear to the ground. It’s certainly libel.”

Libellous it certainly seemed and within minutes Carter-Barr, the school solicitor, was in Stoate’s office looking at the paper with a mixture of incredulity and disgust.

“I didn’t think one could do half the stuff written here,” said Mr Carter-Barr when he had finished reading the article. “It’s amazing what filth goes through some people’s minds. Obviously done it himself or got it off the Internet. We

could certainly start proceedings, but you know as well as I do how long these cases can take and the expenses that they can run up.”

“It must be libel. Surely we will be able to claim massive damages?”

“Oh yes, this would probably net you at least a million, if not more. Win the case, and you could make up the shortfall in the Draycott Foundation, but don’t hold your breath.”

“There’s no question about it. They have libelled the school in their article and editorial. What they have written is an obscene fantasy, even if we did have dormitories in the top of The Hermitage. And what they have written about me, people will start all sorts of things. I don’t want filth written on my car and so on. I mean there is surely no doubt in a judge and jury’s mind about the facts.”

Carter-Barr felt sorry for his client. He sipped his brandy before replying, “Agreed. I know it’s not true, you know it’s not true, everyone in Tanswold knows it’s not true. Still, these gutter tabloids have a whole army of legal boffins who can persuade a judge and jury that two and two make six and can alter the entire laws of mathematics to suit. Besides the *Sketch on Sunday* have a huge fighting fund just for these cases; their lawyers virtually have offices in the building, and the Editor is well used to court and has become quite an expert on jurisprudence.”

“Would they not settle out of court?”

“Very unlikely, unless of course you are like the late Robert Maxwell. The *Sketch on Sunday* has a policy to fight all libel and slander litigation. As I have said, they have huge fighting funds and, even when damages are awarded, to them it’s just small change. For the victim it’s too late; the damage is done.”

“Can’t things be moved forward quickly?”

“We can issue the writ today, but they will certainly contest it. They are contesting cases three or four years back. Ours will have to join the queue, I’m afraid. It could take five years before we get a resolution.”

“It had crossed my mind that the compensation would pay for our new dining room block which we need urgently.”

“No such luck, I’m afraid. You will need to look for other ways of financing the new dining hall. And you will probably need to finance this action too. You may well have to invest two hundred thousand pounds to get this action going, my fees, barristers’ fees and so on. You will get it all back in the end, of course. Remember that this is going to take some time.”

Suddenly, the telephone interrupted the two men's deliberations. Stoate picked it up and had just the kind of call he was dreading. It was Doctor Prentice, who was not happy at the gossip that he had overheard in his waiting room that morning. "Stoate!" he shouted so that even Mr Carter-Barr could hear, "What the bloody hell's going on? If you had heard what my patients were saying in the waiting room... Do you realise that I am paying six-and-a-half thousand pounds a year to send my son to your school? And I am not at all happy at hearing of fraud and pornography. My son is not going to be associated with the kind of disgusting goings on as reported yesterday. You had better be pretty convincing for me to continue to pay these fees. I have a reputation to maintain."

It took Stoate all his charm and negotiation skills to persuade the irate doctor that the fees were definitely worth paying and that his son was going to get a first-class education at Tanswold. It brought it home to Stoate the extent of the damage limitation that would be required and that the damages for libel would have to come pretty damned quick if Tanswold School were to weather this particular storm at all. He instructed Mr. Carter-Barr to start immediate proceedings against the *Sketch on Sunday*, its editor, Andrew Bater, and the reporter, Darren Kaye.

As Mr. Carter-Barr left, Stoate called his senior management team, Miles Stanton and David Woodhall. "Gentlemen," he started, "I hardly need to tell you of the crisis that we face. We now have not only the scandals of fraud and theft of the Draycott Foundation, but also we have been libelled by one of the gutter tabloids with allegations of filthy goings on in the dormitories at the top of The Hermitage."

"I wasn't aware we had any dormitories, Headmaster."

"I wasn't either," replied Stoate, "and we are starting libel proceedings. That doesn't remove the crisis in the fact that we have no bursar, nor do we have any computers for the administration, or for teaching for that matter..."

Stoate felt relieved that, in this crisis, there were tasks he could delegate to his senior management colleagues. Even though he had not himself steered the ship onto these particular rocks, he had stood by while an incompetent helmsman had done so. Now he would be able to ensure that his subordinates took the responsibility of dragging the ship off the rocks and limping it, holed, back to harbour. He would, of course, subsequently take credit for the expert seamanship that such an operation would require. They decided that a parents' meeting be called at the first convenient opportunity to explain to the parents what was going

on; that would be a week on Thursday. As regards the likely non-payment of staff until they could get a new bursar, they would just have to appeal to their professionalism.

Which is what they did in an emergency meeting held at lunchtime on the following day. To say that the appeal initially fell on deaf ears may have been an exaggeration, but it was certainly on rocky ground. The meeting was long. At the start there was a stony silence, but as the meeting progressed it became increasingly stormy. Stoate lost control at an early stage and found himself fighting a desperate rear-guard action which involved several personal attacks on staff, casting into doubt their competence and commitment. At least one teacher ended up in tears and had to be taken out to be comforted by colleagues after one of Stoate's more ill-mannered and intemperate remarks. Stanton and Woodhall had to come several times to the aid of their leader in order to pull him from the holes into which he had become so adept at digging himself. There were demands that Sir Kenneth Rounce should be there in his role of Chairman of Governors, although it was later agreed that his presence would have probably led to a strike. There were ominous mutterings of that anathema to Stoate, the teaching unions. That they did not walk out on the spot was a powerful indication that the professionalism of the staff was not in question. The mood of the staff was not improved by the fact that they had completely missed their lunch and had to go straight to afternoon school.

It was a disconsolate Stoate that went back to his study after the meeting and his discomfort was increased by the telephone on his desk. It was John Ellison, the regional officer for the *National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers*. "Good afternoon, Mr. Stoate," he started, "I've had my attention drawn to one or two issues at your school, I'm afraid, and I would like to discuss them with you at a mutually convenient time. I suggest..."

"As far as unions are concerned," Stoate replied testily, "no time is ever convenient. You are there solely to cause trouble, and I have had enough trouble for several schools for several terms. I have no intention whatever of meeting you, Mr. Ellison."

"I should be a little less hasty, if I were you, Mr. Stoate. My members have a legitimate grievance. They are working for no pay, and you have asked them to pay for student materials out of their own pockets. They have families to support and mortgages to pay. You do understand that?"

Stoate did not understand; he had never had a family, nor had he ever had to buy a house on a mortgage. He had substantial private income on which he could survive adequately without the benefit of a monthly salary cheque. So, his answer was not very helpful, “Yes, I am aware of their need for payment, and they will be paid once we have a bursar to look after the school finances. Until such time as we appoint a bursar, we will all have to tighten our belts. We will pay them what is owing, but they will have to wait. I have no further comment on the matter.”

“I don’t think you know what it is like to have a mortgage nor do you appreciate the cost of housing, Mr. Stoate. Many of my members are paying four hundred pounds a month on their mortgages and they have families to look after. How long is this going to take? Will you explain things to their bank managers?”

“If they live beyond their means, that’s their problem,” shouted Stoate and slammed the phone down. He felt like a large rat in a very tight corner. He picked up the phone again and rang Sir Kenneth Rounce only to find him *incommunicado*.

Although Stoate did not know it at the time, Sir Kenneth was currently very much in deep *communicado* with Detective Commander Smithells who was going through his books with a fine-toothed comb. Unlike Dunstan Stoate’s financial affairs, Smithells had come across several matters which, although not directly relevant to the Draycott Foundation, were none the less of great interest to him.

Stoate called Eileen through to him. “We don’t seem to be a happy ship. Someone has called that man from the NASUWT, and he started to lecture me on the way we should run our school. I never asked for the Bursar to squander our money, and I didn’t reckon on the police taking away all our administration computers. Could you alert Carter-Barr to this as we might get into some legal hot water? I’m going for a stroll to clear my head.”

Eileen went back to contact Mr. Carter-Barr, while Stoate went for a stroll in The Hermitage Garden to enjoy the warmth of the spring sunshine. His feelings about the happiness of his ship were confirmed when he saw a youth doubled up on the bench normally reserved for the Headmaster and Senior Masters. As Stoate approached the boy to remonstrate with him for his insubordination, he saw that not all was well with the lad. Thinking him to be drunk, Stoate marched up to him and yelled, “Good heavens above, Parker, do you mind explaining as

to (a) why you are not in class and (b) why you are sitting like that on a bench reserved for senior masters only?”

“Sorry, Sir, I was excused to go to the toilet. I don’t feel very well, in fact rather sick, Sir.”

“Are you drunk? Were you in the town at lunchtime? Or is it drugs? You had better be pretty damned convincing if you are not to be suspended,” replied Stoaate aggressively, not being in the mood for cock and bull stories about not feeling well.

“No Sir, I was in lunch. I had the chicken fricassee,” and to prove the point convincingly, Parker vomited violently into the lavender. Comforting distressed and sick teenage boys was not Stoaate’s forte. Feeling queasy himself, for the sight of vomit nauseated him, Stoaate took him to the sick bay where Matron was dealing with four other boys who had reported in sick with much the same symptoms. Stoaate went back to his office, muttering “If the staff aren’t revolting enough, now I have to deal with an epidemic. Whatever next?”

What next was revealed the next day—an epidemic. It seemed, as Stoaate looked out of his window at the boys arriving for school, that numbers seemed rather thin and some boys appeared to be unusually pasty and pale. After morning registration, Charlie Gallagher knocked on the door. “We’re about a hundred down today, Headmaster,” he said. “I have talked to Matron about those who were unwell yesterday and she said that they had all eaten chicken fricassee. None of the staff have been taken ill.”

“Seems to fit in, Charlie,” Stoaate replied. “They missed lunch yesterday because of my meeting about the absence of a bursar. They were ready to revolt and I virtually had a riot on my hands. In some ways I am half surprised that any have turned in this morning. So, it seems to be something in the dining room?”

“I don’t know yet, Headmaster, but I will find out when I ring round. I don’t think I will get everybody though.”

Gallagher was right. The school switchboard was jammed, and he could not make out-going calls. It was the irascible Dr Prentice who confirmed Stoaate’s fears. “Stoaate!” he barked down the telephone at his surgery, “What the devil do you think you’re playing at now? Not content with exposing your students to public ridicule, you are now trying to poison them! I have been up all night attending to my patients; all bar one are pupils at your school. All of them have *salmonella* food poisoning. I’ve got six others puking their guts up at my surgery or stinking out the gents. They all appear to have eaten some muck called chicken

fricassee for lunch yesterday. I have to report it to the Environmental Health, as it is a notifiable disease, so you should be hearing from them soon.”

Stoate did hear from them soon. At morning break, the Chief Environmental Health Officer, Mr Turner, had arrived at The Hermitage and was waiting to see Mr. Stoate, who was not keen to meet him. Wouldn't Charlie Gallagher do? No, he would not; they wanted to see the Headperson. Stoate bridled at that diminution of his position but at last was persuaded to see him. It was not one of his more enjoyable meetings; Stoate hated what he called “petty officialdom” almost as much as he detested the unions. And this petty official was not only going to do things by the book but was also getting ready to throw it at him and hard.

“Mr. Stoate, I am here to carry out an investigation into a major outbreak of *Salmonella* food poisoning which appears to have its origin in the school kitchen. We are here to see what the source was and if any food hygiene regulations have been broken. I trust that from now on that I will have your fullest cooperation, which up to now has not been all that forthcoming.”

“It sounds a lot of fuss over nothing,” replied Stoate. “A few boys have a gippy tummy and they go bleating to their doctors. They just want to use it as an excuse to skip school. A few squitters did nobody any harm. No, the doctors bleat and get petty officials to interrupt the smooth running of the school.”

“I do not believe that I am hearing this,” countered the EHO. “Mr. Stoate, you clearly have no idea of what *Salmonella* food poisoning is about. It is not, as you put it, a gippy tummy with a few squitters; it is a serious and potentially life-threatening illness, which is particularly dangerous to the elderly and very young children. Now I am not suggesting that any of your boys are in immediate danger themselves, but the illness is very contagious and can easily be passed on to their grandparents or very young brothers and sisters. The boys will have serious diarrhoea that lasts ten days or so and will be seriously weakened. I don't think that many will be back for at least three weeks. After that, they have to send in samples until they are clear.”

Turner produced a small plastic vial in the lid of which was a narrow spoon. Stoate's jaw dropped as Turner described in crude and graphic detail about how a sample was taken. Stoate spluttered, “How revolting! You don't have to go to the level of the sewer. Perhaps it's natural for a man who spends his life with cockroaches.”

Turner was not impressed with Stoaate's interruption and continued, "Not very nice, is it? I shall carry out my investigation and will report to you straight away. I must warn you that if any breaches of regulations are found, there are heavy fines. Meanwhile you will have to make alternative arrangements for feeding your students, as the kitchen is now closed forthwith and until further notice."

"You can't do that!" Stoaate spluttered.

"You still have not grasped the seriousness of the situation. We are here to investigate a major public health incident. We are closing your kitchen now. What you do for the staff and remaining students must remain your business."

As if Stoaate needed the EHO's lecture to be confirmed, a lanky youth staggered past his window and was violently sick into the border. Repelled by the sight of yet more sick boys littering the school, Stoaate went down to Matron's room while the EHO went to sort out the kitchen. No fewer than ten pale boys were sitting trembling from fever in the room, none of whom took the slightest bit of notice as Stoaate put his head around the door. Stoaate saw the EHO standing outside the boys' lavatory which was next to the dining room. "Classic *Salmonella*, Headmaster," said the EHO and turned to go to the kitchen.

The catering arrangements at Tanswold School had been inherited from Benyon Hydronics when they had occupied The Hermitage. The school dining room had originally been the staff canteen. There was a separate kitchen in The Hermitage that had previously served luncheons for the directors and their corporate clients, while the staff canteen had its own kitchen. These arrangements were carried on by Tanswold School; the headmaster, senior staff and governors dined in some style in the Old Dining Room in The Hermitage. The other staff had their own table in the school dining hall.

The catering itself had originally been carried out by a family company whose directors had sons in the school. They had produced quality food in both kitchens at preferential rates. For reasons known only to Graham Smith, the erstwhile bursar, they had lost their contract to cater for the school in favour of an in-house catering manager. It was an act of incredible graciousness, oiled in no mean part by Dunstan Stoaate who was more than satisfied with them, that the company agreed to continue to provide the catering in The Hermitage. Part of the deal was the refurbishment of the kitchen in the old house.

Graham Smith appointed Cyril as the catering manager. The latter appeared to have impeccable credentials, which, if the Bursar had bothered to check them,

were utterly false. He had not run his own kitchen in a top Liverpool hotel; he had been a porter in the sandwich bar of a department store. Cyril (nobody could remember his second name) was a slovenly man who had little idea of, let alone pride in, the quality of his work. He had the attitude that anything would do, cutting corners wherever he could; this rapidly rubbed off onto his staff. If he could save on the budget, he would. It was even said that he had his fingers in the till, but nobody could ever prove this. His office was a pigsty. Fortunately for Cyril, the Headmaster considered supervision of the catering arrangements as way below his level. As long as the senior staff dined in style over in The Hermitage, they would remain ignorant of the true situation in the school kitchen. True, there were complaints, but Cyril dealt with these with an economy of incivility that was breath-taking. Stoate would ignore complaints of this nature, passing them on to the Bursar who did nothing.

The EHO was not impressed when he met Cyril in his tiny office. Mouldy cups remained undisturbed by the sink in the corner. Cyril had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth for the whole time that the EHO was talking to him. The EHO could hardly understand Cyril's answers, as they were, to the untrained ear, grunts. Cyril's desk was covered in papers, but he had little clue what they were about, nor did he care. The EHO was more than a little disturbed about Cyril's lack of knowledge of basic food handling techniques or even the most elementary hygiene.

The EHO's suspicions were more than amply confirmed as he started his inspection of the kitchen. Although by no means the worst (some of the curry houses and not a few chippies had made his iron stomach turn), there was plenty for him and his team to be getting their teeth into. He and his team took swabs around the work surfaces, many of which were made of chipboard that had swollen up as it had got damp. They took photographs of the cardinal catering sins of food being kept lukewarm, uncooked meat dripping blood onto cooked meat and dirty microwave ovens. Cyril had been caught even more unawares than Stoate and had not even had the time or gumption to remove yesterday's fricassee, which he had intended to serve up again at lunchtime. When asked about samples kept from previous meals, Cyril looked completely blank.

The EHO went on to sleuth underneath fridges and behind cupboards with the zeal of a man on a mission to eradicate every germ, innocent or otherwise, from all the kitchens of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. Here there was an entire ecosystem that he found, from bacteria to moulds growing on the damp wood of

the building. Benyons had never intended these buildings to be other than very temporary and would certainly have flattened them years ago if they had stayed on in the Hermitage. There were woodlice feeding on the moulds. There were several holes whereby mice could come and go at will to pick up free goodies and around the heating pipes several generations of cockroaches had lived unmolested. Top predators were represented by Cyril's dog who refused to let the commotion disturb her from her chosen place next to one of the cookers. All of this was noted carefully by the EHO and his team.

After that, the EHO decided to spend a little more time in communion with the appalling Cyril. He noted all the caterer's comments on a tape recorder to be used as evidence. Several more serious offences came to light during the interview. Eventually, with an air of a cat that had just caught a bird, the EHO trotted up to see the headmaster. Meanwhile the boys who had not been laid low by food poisoning were waiting in line. If they had been dogs, their tails would have been wagging, and they would have been dribbling.

If Stoate had had a tail, it would not have been wagging to greet the EHO who had several books to throw at him. ("The last bloke I took to court was fined £500 for every single offence. There are at least thirty serious breaches of food hygiene regulations. You don't need me, Mr Stoate, to tell you how much that will add up to. And there will be our expenses to pay. And you are responsible ultimately for what happens in your school.") By the time that the EHO and his army of petty minions had left to check the kitchen in The Hermitage, Stoate was in no doubt that the school was going to be taken to the cleaners. Even if the whole army of cleaners was to tackle the kitchen, Stoate had been informed that there was no way that he was ever legally to re-open that kitchen or dining room. He was already in deep enough legal waters, a fact that Carter-Barr reinforced as Stoate made yet another desperate phone call to the school solicitor. Warily Stoate went to the end of the corridor to wash his hands before retiring to luncheon in the Old Dining Room.

Luncheon in the Old Dining Room was a melancholy affair. Stoate and his senior colleagues were halfway through the first course when it occurred to Miles Stanton that there was no provision for the boys. "Is it true that the EHO has ordered our kitchen to close?" he asked.

"Not this one in the house, thank God," replied Stoate who always thought about himself and his own comfort on these occasions.

"No, Dunstan, the school kitchen. What about the boys?"

“Ah, the boys,” replied Stoate, “I have thought of that, but there are one or two loose ends to tie up. Miles, could you get the remaining boys into an emergency assembly and tell them the situation? Tell them that arrangements are being made, but they should bring in sandwiches tomorrow.”

In reality, Stoate had not thought of anything, but did not dare to admit it to his colleagues in case they thought that he was losing his grip. When it was mentioned that many of the staff would also be hungry that afternoon, Stoate was characteristically dismissive. “They will have to be professional,” was his final word on the matter.

On return to his study, Stoate looked out of the bay window at the lovely garden in the spring sunshine. He tried to ignore the procession of parents arriving to pick up their seriously ill sons; Matron had decided to clear the sickbay. With an air of gathering gloom, Stoate noticed that some had had to change into their PE kit, a distressing and revolting side effect of this ghastly disease. Stoate decided he ought to find out the worst from Matron, but he went the long way to clear his head and seek inspiration.

Instead Stoate found desperation. In the lavender bed next to the seat that he had turned Parker out of the previous day lay a tall sixth-form girl whom he recognised as Gemma Proudlock, daughter of the Reverend John Proudlock, Rector of Alverston. Miss Proudlock had a strange demeanour about her that reminded Stoate of a cat rolling in catmint. Stoate stormed up to the supine girl. “Proudlock!” he bellowed, “What the devil do you think this is? Do you think you are on the beach?”

The girl stirred and what came out of her mouth was barely intelligible. Proudlock seemed to have a ghostly pallor about her that alarmed Stoate who suddenly felt way out of his depth with this one. Either the girl was extremely ill or was high on drugs. Even Stoate realised that bluster was not the way forward with the girl. Something about the girl convinced him that it was the former and that he had better do something. Sick students littering the school were bad enough; corpses in the Headmaster’s garden would definitely not do. Her state helped him to decide that doing something useful like carrying her to the sick bay was not his job. Instead, he prodded her and snapped, “Pull yourself together, Proudlock, and get yourself to the sick bay, girl!”

He took the short cut to Matron’s. He immediately wished he had not. Firstly, he came across several boys were grumbling about their lost lunch and were making what appeared to be derogatory remarks about him. It was a sign of

Stoate's preoccupation that he did not round on them and order them to his office. Secondly, just as he arrived at Matron's room, a boy rushed out of the sick bay stark naked. He was clearly trying to get to the boys' lavatory across the other side of the reception area but did not get there in time. Stoate cursed and decided to go straight back to his office.

When he got there, the images of the ghostly girl and the nude boy haunted him in a ghastly juxtaposition and gave him indigestion. He helped himself to a brandy to steady himself and sat back in an armchair for half an hour, before looking out of the window across to the Headmaster's garden. There he could just make out the stockinged legs and black shoes, which made him realise that Proudlock had not pulled herself together, nor had she got herself to the sick bay. He rang the sick bay on the internal phone, but found it was engaged. He rang Charlie Gallagher instead to get her shifted, but that extension too was engaged.

Stoate poured himself another brandy, barred any call to his extension and sat back down in his armchair. He needed time to think. The only thoughts that came to him were along the lines of his life's work going down the pan. It was a disgusting but entirely appropriate metaphor, given the nature of the illness that was raging through the school. Damn that Smith with his fingers in the till! What else had he done? Not only had he had police officers doing the school over, but also petty officials with their damned silly regulations about food hygiene. So what if a few boys had the squitters? He had had them in his time, and they hadn't done him any harm. In the current climate, half the parents would sue. And they would bleat about the psychological damage their Johnny had suffered because he had had to trot to the bathroom several times and some damned liberal judge would agree. What next? The thought of the Headmaster at Goyder's rubbing his hands in glee at Stoate's misfortune annoyed him even more. And there was the very real prospect of some slimy creature from the NASUWT coming quoting verses out of this strange tome called the Burgundy ¹Book and demanding to know why he wasn't paying his staff. There was one ray of sunshine amidst the gathering gloom. The EHO had found that the kitchen in The Hermitage was in good order. Even that fact had a sting in the tail; it would be reported to the court.

Stoate was distracted from his train of thought by an ambulance siren that sounded ominously close. He saw the ambulance rush past and pull up outside

¹ At that time, the Burgundy Book was the manual containing the conditions of Service under which teachers worked in schools. It was called this as its cover was a deep burgundy red.

the door to the reception area. His manner could only be described as gormless as he watched a small crowd of boys and one or two sixth form girls gather. One or two appeared to be distressed while others were there just to stare. Matron came out, and it occurred to Stoate that he ought to appear to be concerned.

Gemma Proudlock was carried up to the ambulance with a drip in her arm and was loaded gently into the back. One of the paramedics came over to Stoate, addressing him in a manner that was not all that deferential to the Headmaster of Tanswold School, “You the one in charge ’round ’ere?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I am the Headmaster.”

“You should know, as a matter of fact, that this girl is very seriously ill, and you ought to call her parents. We will have to take her over to The Dominican in Alverston. She shouldn’t have been left, you know. She is seriously dehydrated and that can do some pretty nasty things. The state she’s in, it’s touch and go.”

With that the ambulance man got into the driver’s seat and drove off with siren blaring. Stoate collected his thoughts and decided in favour of ringing the Director of the Dominican to give him a piece of his mind about being dressed down by a mere medical orderly. Matron could have the unpleasant task of breaking the news to the Reverend Proudlock. With a new sense of purpose, Stoate strode back to his study.

There was little sense of purpose in the school’s activities for the rest of the afternoon. Miles Stanton’s emergency assembly for the remaining pupils, promising jam tomorrow if they brought it in with them, did nothing whatever to quell their hungry stomachs. His comments about fasting nourishing the soul were received like a lead balloon. The pupils in the lower school were truculent because they were hungry, and the staff were thoroughly bad-tempered not only for the same reason, but also because the pupils were difficult, and they were not being paid. Many a lesson was characterised by bad tempered confrontation, and many a practical activity had to be abandoned. There was a queue of boys waiting outside the Deputy Headmaster’s office to be admonished by Mr Stanton.

The news of the food poisoning outbreak was broadcast on the evening news. At least eight students from a top local public school had been taken seriously ill with suspected food poisoning, and one girl had been taken to the Dominican Hospital in Alverston, where her condition in intensive care was giving cause for concern. The school’s kitchen had been closed, and an investigation was under way.

Stoate arrived at work the next morning to find a letter from the Headmasters' Conference asking him to account for what was happening at Tanswold School in order that the HMC would be able to dampen down speculation that might be damaging to the independent school movement as a whole. The Reverend Proudlock's subsequent telephone call did not please Stoate. Gemma was now critically ill at The Dominican Hospital and he and his wife were extremely distressed to hear how she had been left lying in a lavender bed and there had better be a pretty damned good explanation for the lack of action. And why had it been left to Matron to contact them? Why could he have not done it himself? Stoate's explanation of the action taken sounded pretty damned feeble. By the time he put the telephone down, Dunstan Stoate was in a pretty damned foul temper.

As a result, he called an immediate emergency staff meeting in which he castigated the staff for the fiasco that occurred the day before. His voice rose to a blare as he concluded, "Parents spend £6500 a year to send us their sons and daughters, and they damned well expect them to be taught to the highest standards. These were not in the least met during afternoon school yesterday. You are the professionals and it is up to you to ensure that the material that you present is stimulating for all classes under all circumstances. I was appalled to see the number of boys outside Mr Stanton's office. You have to fight your own battles, and it is up to you to maintain the highest standards of teaching and learning. That is what I pay you to do and damned well expect you to do."

Stoate left the staff room with his gown trailing behind him and went straight back to his study, shutting the door before anyone could leap on him and tear him to pieces. In the staff room there was uproar, which Stoate could hear from his study. He would not have been surprised if Andy McEwan was ready to beat the door down.

Instead, the knock on the Headmaster's study door was gentle and Eileen came through. "A couple of sixth formers to see you, Headmaster."

Two girls and a boy came through and stood nervously as Stoate settled himself behind his desk. He was not particularly pleased to see them, but it was infinitely preferable compared with most of the visitors he had received recently.

"Sir, Gemma Proudlock is our friend and she's very ill. Could we go over to see her in hospital?"

Although this seemed at first sight a reasonable request, Stoate was feeling particularly bloody-minded that morning and decided at that instant that he

needed to be seen as authoritarian. He rounded on the three young people, reminding them that they were there to pursue their studies and that Tanswold School was not a college where the students could go in and out at will. “If you want that,” he concluded, “go down to Goyder’s!”

“But Sir, you left Gemma lying for at least forty minutes and didn’t do anything about it. The ambulance man said so...”

Accusations of this nature were not going to be tolerated. Stoate went scarlet and ordered the students out. They left hurriedly with the two girls in tears, while Stoate sat back, satisfied that there were still a few things he could control. His conscience was something he dealt with once a week on a Sunday morning during the General Confession. And it was always cleared by the Vicar in the Absolution of Sins. He was occasionally unsettled by visiting clergy who preached the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. He had had something to say last time when one such sermon challenged him to be born again. By contrast, the Vicar of St Mary’s, Tanswold, was a fellow Byland Forester, whose preaching could be relied on to reassure Dunstan Stoate that, whatever he did, there was always something in the Bible that justified it. There was nothing in the Ten Commandments about “Thou shalt be nice to thy employees”, and he had sufficient wealth not to covet his neighbour’s ox, ass, or servant girl. He had not murdered anybody (putting aside that rather unfortunate incident in the RAF – besides if the other bloke had known what he was about, it would not have happened) nor had he committed adultery. He had a little (or rather a lot) of difficulty with “love thy neighbour as thyself”, but he worshipped God on a Sunday morning which was the most important thing; next in line was the Tanswold Lodge of the Byland Foresters. Other than that, the most important man in his world was Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate.

That was the way it was going to remain, despite the invasions of Detective Commander Smithells, the EHO and his damned silly little regulations, a bunch of whinging students (and their parents) and those appalling men from the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers.

Stoate’s self-satisfaction was short-lived. The Director of the Dominican Hospital rang to tell him that he had interviewed the paramedics who had picked up Gemma Proudlock and had spoken to the doctors treating her. Did he realise that the girl was critically ill? He had concluded that, quite frankly, he would have said much the same sort of things, but possibly rather more forcefully and certainly less politely and that the matter was now closed. Stoate was seething at

this when he saw an old car driving away from The Hermitage which contained four sixth formers, including the three he had berated twenty minutes before. On the verge of apoplexy, he rang the Head of Sixth Form.

Over at Gilham Park, Sir Kenneth Rounce was having an apoplexy. During his investigation into the fraud concerning the Draycott Foundation, Detective Commander Richard Smithells had unearthed several financial cans of worms that were the results of Sir Kenneth's business dealings. Some of these involved overseas accounts which further investigation revealed that they had some very unsavoury connections.

The unravelling of these would take many months of his team's time, if not years, and, by the time that it would come to trial, it would be quite likely that Sir Kenneth would be dead. Looking at the enraged and spluttering figure opposite, Smithells reckoned that the latter process might take as little as ten minutes.

Mr Galliford, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Taxes, had just pulled up in his Rover, and was now being ushered in by one of Smithells' constables. Sir Kenneth's meeting with justice over his overseas business dealings might well have been a prospect in the distant future; his nemesis concerning his tax affairs was much more imminent. Mr Galliford was an expert on tax evasion. The extent of Sir Kenneth's non-payment of taxes on his behalf or his employees' behalf would have been obvious to even the most junior of Mr Galliford's team. Not that the employees had not had tax deducted by Sir Kenneth, he had merely omitted to pass it on to Her Majesty's Inland Revenue, along with such trivia as National Insurance contributions or pension payments. The unpaid monies had helped to subsidise Gilham Park's lavish entertainment of various socially respectable or elite groups. That former employees were not able to claim unemployment benefit or draw anything other than the most basic pension did not concern Sir Kenneth one little bit. Suspicions had been raised many years before, but because of Sir Kenneth's influence, nothing had been done.

Unlike his predecessor, Mr Galliford could be bought by nobody. His father had been an employee of the late Robert Maxwell, losing his pension rights as a result of the scandal that his late employer had perpetrated. Mr Galliford was determined that it should not happen to anybody else. Now that there was a *prima facie* case of this very malpractice, Mr Galliford was going to pursue it to the end. At the door to Sir Kenneth's study, Constable Ryan did not think that the end of a primer fascia, whatever that was, was worth pursuing. What annoyed

him was the fact that he was not able to take part in the police rugby match that afternoon.

It was coming clearer by the minute that it was increasingly doubtful that Gemma Proudlock would take part in any future at all. As that Wednesday morning progressed, her condition became more serious, despite the best efforts of the doctors at The Dominican hospital. When her Sixth Form friends arrived at the hospital, they were met by the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock.

“I am so glad you came,” said Proudlock, “Gemma is very weak. She will appreciate seeing you.” At the sight of their friend who was so desperately ill, Gemma’s friends burst into tears. When they had recomposed themselves, they all went into the single room that was off the ward. Gemma opened her eyes briefly and tried to smile. She even tried to say something, but it only came out as a mumble.

At that point, nurses and porters arrived to take Gemma to intensive care. The prospects were not good.

When the distraught Mrs Proudlock rang to tell the Headmaster of Gemma’s being in intensive care, Stoate refused to take the call. Stoate had given strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed by anybody and refused absolutely to talk to Mrs Proudlock. Therefore, Mrs Proudlock’s telephone call got put on hold and lost in the internal phone system for twenty minutes. Stoate was too busy giving a young maths teacher the rounds of the cookhouse. For Stoate, this was a chance for him to exercise his manly management skills rather than to pacify a hysterical parent whose daughter had had a rather worse than average dose of the squitters. It was a cruel turn of fate that a bug in the school switchboard allowed Mrs Proudlock to overhear Stoate’s last comment on the internal phone to his deputy, as Stoate eventually instructed Miles Stanton to deal with the call.

Stoate had a sense of well-being as a result of his manly display of a strong management line. It had whetted his appetite for luncheon, which he took in the Old Dining Room. He was delighted to see that Donald and May Blance were going to join him. As they were relaxing in the anteroom with their pre-prandial glass of sherry, Miles Stanton came in and took the Headmaster aside.

“I’m sorry to bother you with this, but I’m afraid that I got a phone call from Mrs Proudlock to say that Gemma is in intensive care.”

Stoate breathed in deeply while he slowly took in the import of this news. “This is bad news,” was Stoate’s comment as it dawned on him that, being *in*

loco parentis, his actions towards Gemma had been less than constructive. Should The Reverend and Mrs Proudlock decide to take him to court over his handling of the matter, he would need all his evasive skills and influence of the Old Boys' Network to get him out of that particular spot of bother. His conscience was clear; it was not his fault that the chef had infected the school with *Salmonella*. It was Cyril's problem and he would have to face up to the consequences.

"Bad news, Dunstan?" May said as Stoate sat down again.

"I'm afraid so. The Reverend Proudlock's daughter got a rather bad dose of these squitters and is in intensive care. Puts a rather uglier complexion on it, what? Donald, I think we may be in trouble. Rather a lot has happened this week and we need to decide as to what to do about it."

Stoate ushered his guests into the dining room and over starters the Headmaster outlined to the governor the problems that had beset the school that week, starting with the libel action against the *Sketch on Sunday*, and going through to the outbreak of food poisoning and its consequences of the closure of the school dining hall and the severe illness of The Reverend Proudlock's daughter. Over the main course, washed down with an excellent claret, Donald and Dunstan decided that these issues should be discussed at the forthcoming Governor's meeting the next afternoon; the Draycott Foundation was out of their hands and the monies contained therein were negligible anyway. For the rest of luncheon, they discussed ideas of how finance could be raised. They returned to Dunstan's theme of the previous weekend. A major expansion of the school to generate extra fee income seemed the most attractive option.

Fortified by his excellent luncheon and uplifted by his discussions with the Blances, Stoate returned to his study to deal with these friends of Gemma Proudlock who had so blatantly disregarded his orders and authority. In order to demonstrate that the authority of the Headmaster was never for negotiation, Stoate decided to suspend all four of them. He had given instructions to the Head of Sixth Form that they were to be grounded outside his office on their return. Now he rang through again to order that they were to be escorted one by one to his study, and he would suspend each one, with a view to possible expulsion. While Eileen was typing the suspension letters, Stoate started to ring the parents to explain his course of action.

The subsequent telephone conversations varied in manner from the frosty to the downright confrontational. At the end, Stoaate was ready for his prodigal Sixth Formers.

Right on cue, their old car came slowly down the drive and disappeared behind the Sixth Form block. Stoaate watched Mr Burgess come out to escort them to his office and got ready to receive Gemma's best friend, Lucy, in his study.

"Stand there, Simpson," Stoaate ordered the nervous and distraught girl, when she arrived at his study. He eased himself behind the desk and stared at her straight in the eye. He continued quietly but fiercely, "You may or may not remember that this morning I gave you and your friends an instruction. Did it sink beneath those little brunette locks of yours? Did it enter what passes for a brain in that little skull of yours? What was my instruction, girl?"

"Sir, Gemma is our best friend and she's..." At this point Lucy burst into tears.

"Pull yourself together at once, Simpson!" yelled Stoaate. "I am not concerned about Proudlock at the moment. I am very concerned and not a little bit angry that you and your friends decided to disobey the order that I gave you this morning forbidding you to travel to Alverston. You are here for one purpose only, your academic studies and the outcome being results that will bring credit to the school. I will not tolerate anything or any action on behalf of a pupil in this school that will jeopardise that outcome, nor will I tolerate the kind of grave breach of discipline that occurred this morning. Stop that damned silly noise, girl! Are you on heat or what? I run this school on military discipline, which means that what I say goes, staff included. Until some damned soft liberals made it illegal, I would have caned you for this. That is a course of action that is not open to me. What is open to me is that you will be suspended from school for a period of ten school days. Your parents have been informed, and they will be coming to collect you shortly. You will appear before the Governors' Disciplinary Committee who will decide whether there is a future for you at Tanswold School. As far as I am concerned there will not be one and you can join the louts and tarts at Goyder's at any time. Now get out!"

Lucy turned to leave. Her distress of the morning and anger of this unjustified, unkind and sexist tirade was too much to bear. She turned and did something that she, or anyone else who knew her, never thought possible. She

turned back around, walked up to the desk, leant over it staring the Headmaster in the eye. “Mr Stoate! I think you are a CALLOUS BASTARD!” she screamed.

Stoate was not used to pupils calling him a callous bastard. He had rarely come across such gross insolence. He went purple and bellowed in a voice that could be heard through most of The Hermitage, “How dare you speak to me like that, Simpson? No little bitch talks to me like that. You get out of my office NOW! You get out of my school NOW! YOU ARE EXPELLED!”

Dunstan Stoate was now ready to do murder, and he made short and brutal work of the other three Sixth Formers.

The news of the suspension and expulsion of the Sixth Formers got around the school, or rather the staff and pupils that were still present, and it was greeted with universal disgust. To say that the parents of the Sixth Formers were outraged was to understate their reaction. Instead of going quietly with their children, they congregated in reception and went up to the Parents’ Room. Mr Simpson was beside himself. “The whole thing is quite monstrous. Lucy summed Stoate up well with her phrase, and Lucy wouldn’t say boo to a goose. What has she done? Is it a crime to go and visit her best friend seriously ill in hospital? I’ll break that bloody man’s neck with my bare hands. Now she’s been expelled. I’m going to take this one to the papers.”

“I would hasten slowly on this one, David,” replied Mr Weston.

Mr Simpson hastened slowly, down to the headmaster’s office.

“The headmaster is too busy to see you now, Mr Simpson. The letter concerning Lucy’s exclusion is being sent to you by registered post and you should receive it tomorrow.”

“I am demanding to see him, not tomorrow, nor the next day, nor at the Governors’ Disciplinary Meeting, but now, and I mean NOW!” Mr Simpson’s voice rose to a blare.

“I’m sorry Mr Simpson; the Headmaster told me that he was too busy to see you.”

Stoate came out to see what the commotion was and immediately wished he had not, because he had no desire whatever to see what he had just seen, and more importantly it had just seen him, and was about to see him regardless.

“I am demanding an explanation from you now, Stoate, about this outrageous treatment of my daughter. And it had better be pretty bloody good...”

“How dare you intrude into my office like this?” Stoate shouted back, his face livid with anger. “Your daughter chose to disobey an order that I gave to her

in person and when I dealt with her, she was grossly insolent to me. I am NOT going to tolerate any such challenge to my authority while I am Headmaster of this school. Those who chose to flout my authority in this way should not be surprised to see that they are dealt with severely. If they do not like it, they can join the tarts and louts at Goyder's. I would suggest that that would apply to your daughter, Mr Simpson."

"How dare you call my daughter a tart, Stoate? Have you no bloody sensitivity, man? My daughter was at the bedside of her seriously ill best friend, a girl who is ill as a result of the negligence of this vulgar institution you kid yourself is a public school. And your personal negligence, as you failed to help her for a good hour, in case you got your hands covered with something. The papers and the court are going to love this, Stoate."

"There is a law against slander, Simpson," said Stoate, "and I would remind you that the school and I would not hesitate to sue should you say anything about rumours that you have heard about any actions of mine. We have successfully sued in the past and will do so in the future. By the way, you are still liable for the fees for next year, under the contract signed on our acceptance of your daughter. I don't normally talk about such matters in polite company, but you are anything other than the kind of person I would consider as polite company. The Bursar will send you an account for next year's fees."

David Simpson was by now trembling with rage. Normally a well-spoken man, during intensely stressful moments such as this, he tended to slip back into the Dales dialect with which he had grown up. He leant over the desk and thrust his face suffused with anger into Stoate's, who backed nervously away. He spoke through clenched teeth, "I'll tell thee this and I'll tell thee for nothing, I'll not pay a penny! Besides, Stoate, your school owes us four thousand quid, what your bursar 'as nicked off with'. Shame about the bursar with fingers in the till, eh? And I'll tell thee something else that you and your poncy public-school types can think about. I pulled myself up by the bootstraps. As a nipper, I worked hard on the farm when you, Stoate, were pissing about in your plane. We didn't have electric and just cold water to wash in. I've worked bloody hard to get to where I am now, thirty years of hard graft, to better ourselves. And I was determined to give our kids the best start in life and you've bloody wrecked it. I'll see you in court!"

Simpson turned and slammed the door. Yet again Stoate felt like a very large rat in a very small corner, or was it a cockroach? Being one to mix his metaphors,

Stoate was also aware of chickens coming home to roost, an unpleasant feeling bearing in mind all the upset caused by suspect fricassee. His cocktail of similes extended to the skill he had had to show to regain control of his crashing Vampire, and what would be required to stop Tanswold School figuratively ending up in a smoking stinking crater. His frank and not very constructive exchange of views, conducted at full volume, suggested that Tanswold School might end up that way literally. It had attracted an audience that had gathered outside The Hermitage, which was eagerly awaiting Act Two.

They were to be disappointed. Stoate dismissed his fan club with an economy of incivility that convinced them that Biggles was definitely going off his trolley. The sound of mock applause only convinced Stoate that he was rapidly losing his grip. He sat back thinking dark thoughts about self-made men who “had to break the ice off the water”, and who made their “brass in Bradford”. Although he had modelled Tanswold School on the best traditions of the English public school, he had not attracted the class that they took for granted. Instead, his school was attracting the sons (and daughters) of the vulgar rich, whom he disliked only marginally less than the vulgar poor. He had always been brought up with money, with every conceivable luxury, and much preferred the genteel company of those with a similar background. He never gave a thought to the genteel poor.

The next day, Stoate kept well clear of the staffroom, and his telephone remained barred. That evening, there was to be a parents’ meeting and the governors’ meeting at which the agenda was to be picked up from the shambles of last week. Stoate cancelled all appointments and told his Deputy, Miles Stanton, to deal with them. It would save him from having to face up to angry parents, of whom he had had more than enough. Staff were substituted to cover his maths lessons, and he got Eileen to stick a note up in the staffroom with the work that he wanted the boys to do. Stoate vowed that he would give Miles Stanton the most glowing reference possible if he managed to extricate them from this particular mess. If he didn’t, they would all go down together.

Stoate thought carefully about the questions that would be asked, and how he would control the parents’ meeting that evening. He decided on the approach that would show him as a leader with authority, immune and insensitive to a crisis. That was how the British Empire, of which he was a devoted fan, had been built. To admit any responsibility would be to show weakness, and that would not do. He also had to demonstrate that he was actually doing something about

it, and that was rather harder to do. If a parent did get out of hand, he would lecture them on the need for tradition, discipline and remind them that they, too, had responsibilities. He did wish that Sir Kenneth would attend as Chairman of Governors, but he still seemed to be entirely *incommunicado*, probably something to do with that damned man Smithells. Sir Kenneth would have dealt with any truculent parent in the same way as he would an errant estate worker at Gilham Park.

He fortified himself with a splendid luncheon in the Old Dining Room, in which Miles Stanton briefed him on the latest complaints from the parents about food poisoning and no catering facilities.

“You told them that everything was under control?” asked Stoate.

“Naturally, Headmaster,” Stanton replied with a slight sense of irritation, “I told them that the school was looking into the provision of alternative catering arrangements as a matter of extreme urgency and that provision would be in place soon.”

“As long as they don’t ask what we mean by ‘soon’. The Governors are going to look at that question this evening. All this fuss about a few squitters! If youngsters ate what we had to when we were boys, they would have stomachs of iron, what?”

Eileen poked her head around the door. “Dunstan,” she said, “The Reverend Proudlock is on the line. He wants to speak to you urgently.”

“I’m not here,” Stoate replied, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary. “Miles, you go and talk to the Red Rev.”

Stoate did not like Proudlock at the best of times. In his view, Proudlock’s ministry was focused too much on the young and did not reflect the true dignity, tradition and discipline of the High Anglican Church. Worst of all, Proudlock was a socialist; proper clergymen were, like Stoate, pillars of the Conservative Party. Besides Stoate considered both the Proudlock children, Gemma and Samuel, to be rather ineffectual.

A few minutes later, Miles Stanton returned, looking rather too serious for Stoate’s liking. “Dunstan, I have some bad news. Gemma Proudlock has passed away in intensive care at the Dominican. Mr Proudlock is coming to pick up his son. You had better lie low.”

Stoate wanted a meeting with the Red Rev even less than the one he had had with Mr Simpson. He lay low in the Old Dining Room, having given instructions to Miles and Eileen to say that he was not on the premises.

Stoate, Donald Blance and Sir Ronald Wiseman felt they deserved their dinner in the Old Dining Room that evening. The parents' meeting had been a public relations disaster. It had started off quietly enough. Dunstan Stoate had stood up and addressed the assembly, "I know that you will all have heard the sad news about one of our students, Gemma Proudlock, who was taken ill in the recent sad episode of food poisoning and who died today. I know that you would wish to share with me the grief that the school feels at this sad time. I would suggest that we have a minute's silence."

The minute's silence that ensued was the calm before the storm. Stoate continued, "You will also be aware of some very unfortunate publicity that the school has received concerning the mismanagement by the school bursar of a substantial sum of money contained in the Draycott Foundation. This was a legacy..."

"How much money was involved, Headmaster?" asked a parent.

"I am not sure of the exact figure, but it is substantial."

"I read it was in the region of five million pounds," another voice piped up from the audience. "The information was in every newspaper."

"Headmaster, how could you be so pitifully unaware that your bursar had his fingers in the till?"

The carefully prepared replies that Stoate made seemed very lame, and the parents were ready to do murder. They had been appalled by the bad publicity that the school had been exposed to, and that it would jeopardise their children's chances when they applied to university. It would take years to rebuild the reputation of the school. What was going to be done? Why was the Headmaster not willing to take responsibility for the loss of the Draycott Foundation? Should he not resign, or better still be sacked in the way that others had been in the past? Stoate was furious about this last question and made a quite unjustified personal attack on this parent stooping so low as bring the man's boys into it, describing them as over-indulged layabouts. He lectured the parents about the need for solidarity in everything that had happened. Could they not put up with these outbreaks of illness in the same way that their parents had when they were at school? Stoate made an impassioned demand for total loyalty, otherwise the school might as well pack up now. Donald Blance and Sir Ronald pitched in their contributions to the sour atmosphere of the meeting.

Their pleas fell on a good number of deaf ears, and when they had not, they went down like lead balloons. The meeting degenerated into an unseemly and

undignified slanging match that was similar to the Governors' meeting the previous week. A large number of parents got up and walked out. When it was time to conclude the meeting, there was very little to conclude.

Stoate and his fellow governors walked back to The Hermitage, trying hard to ignore the loud conversations that some parents were having about "arrogance", "blithering incompetence" and "looking for somewhere else to send our Andrew".

The kitchen in The Hermitage had excelled itself and a splendid buffet awaited them in the Old Dining Room. Donald Blance and Sir Ronald tucked in, while Stoate helped himself to an aperitif. It was Sir Ronald who opened the deliberations, "Bit of a sticky wicket, eh, Dunstan? You did your best under some pretty below the belt bowling."

"Bit of a disaster, Ronald," replied Stoate, "we're going to have to do something pretty radical if we aren't going to sink without trace. First thing we've got to do is to sort this Bursar business out. It's done our reputation no good at all. On top of that are these damned squitters and that girl dying. I just cannot get hold of Kenneth. He would have sorted the parents out."

"I can't either," Donald chipped in, "can't think what the devil he's up to. He has never missed a meeting, and he would have enjoyed tonight."

The other governors were arriving and helping themselves to the sumptuous buffet and the excellent wine on offer. Conversations centred on the excellence of the food and wine, leading to the usual reminiscences of holidays spent in *Bordeaux* and *Champagne*. The atmosphere was more like a high society gathering in a country house hotel than the board of directors of an organisation in possibly terminal crisis.

At 7.30 p.m., the governors filed through to the Old Library and sat around the long table. At the head of the table, Sir Kenneth's chair remained empty. Sir Ronald Wiseman spoke up first, "We do not appear to have a chairman tonight. This is most unusual, as Kenneth always attends. I have not been able to contact him, nor does it seem that anyone else has, either. I propose, therefore, that, as Vice Chair, I should take the chair in his absence."

Lionel Hyland raised his hand. He was a stickler for ensuring that matters were always carried out according to the constitution. He had a detailed knowledge of committee minutiae and many a meeting had been delayed while he ensured that a particular proceeding happened exactly to the rules of the constitution. While the governors would often ride roughshod over what was

morally or even legally binding, they had learned always to follow the constitution to the letter.

“Ronald,” he said, “we have never been in this position before, as Kenneth has attended virtually every meeting of this governing body. According to the constitution, we cannot make any policy decisions without the Chair. In the absence of the Chair, the Chair has to give his written delegation to you as Vice Chair. He has done that in the past, and I am sure that he would be quite happy for you to take the Chair tonight, but none of us have received such delegation for tonight. Indeed, no-one seems to be able to raise Kenneth at all.”

“If that is the case, there seems to be very little point in holding the meeting at all,” Sir Ronald replied, starting to get hot under the collar. “What we decide tonight cannot be implemented, even though we are holding a crisis meeting? This is ludicrous!”

Stoate chipped in, “We need to discuss things urgently, even if we have to have a constitutionally correct meeting to rubber stamp them. We need to sort out the catering arrangements for the immediate future, regardless of the new dining room project. I am getting it in the neck from parents who are complaining that their little Johnny is coming back hungry. You saw that tonight. One parent accused us of troughing it in the Old Dining Room while the boys went hungry. I replied that it was not our responsibility; that rested with the Bursar...”

“We don’t have a Bursar, Dunstan, as you well know,” interrupted Dr Cox. “We cannot set up anything until we have a Bursar to pay the bills. No company will give us anything unless we can pay for it. Are you going to say to them, ‘You’ll get your money when we get our new Bursar’? I know what the answer will be.”

“So, Henry,” replied Stoate dustily, “you mean to tell me that we cannot do anything until we have appointed Smith’s replacement?”

“Precisely that, Dunstan.”

Lionel Hyland took up the theme, “The Bursar of Tanswold School is a major appointment. We cannot initiate the process unless the constitutional procedures are followed properly. Unlike for teaching staff, the Headmaster cannot advertise on his own initiative for a Bursar.”

Donald Blance came in, “It appears we have a logjam. We cannot do anything until we have this situation resolved as regards the Chair. I shall go and ring Kenneth now. He must be at home.”

Donald Blance went to the telephone and dialled the number for Gilham Park.

There was a reply, “Yes, Sir Kenneth is at home, but he is not available... No, we cannot take a message for him... Yes, sir, I appreciate it’s important... It’s more than my job’s worth... I have been given strict instructions by Detective Commander Smithells and Mr Galliford. Now if you don’t mind, sir, Carlsborough are in the play-offs and I’m watching.”

Donald Blance slammed down the phone and went back to the Old Library defeated. “There is clearly something badly wrong at Kenneth’s,” he announced.

“What? Has he been taken ill?”

“No, it sounds like he’s in trouble. I heard mention of a Detective Commander Smith-alls, or something like that. The man who answered sounded like a policeman. He was annoyed that I had disturbed his football.”

Stoate looked ashen and spoke gravely, “You will all know that Smithells is from the Fraud Squad. He is investigating the Draycott Foundation. He quizzed me but found nothing wrong. It looks like Kenneth could be in real trouble. Those of us who can, must do our level best to get that damned man off his back and back to investigating the theft of the Draycott Foundation, which is what he should be chasing, not hounding our major benefactor. Ronald, you know the Chief Constable. Can you get on to him?”

Sir Ronald Wiseman went to the phone and got Sir Frank immediately.

“Ronald, lovely to hear you. What can I do for you?”

“We have a little problem here at Tanswold School. Kenneth is our Chairman of Governors. We cannot get hold of him, as one of your bods, Smithells, has got hold of him. What’s going on? Can you get Smithells to lay off him?”

“Unfortunately not, old chap. I’ve had to retire in something of a hurry. Police Authority is investigating my expenses. Load of tommyrot if you ask me. I can’t do anything about Smithells, anyway. He’s our best Fraud bloke and nobody, not even I, can put him off if he’s on the scent. I’m afraid he’s smelled a rat with Kenneth and he’s digging furiously.”

The Governors could not proceed with their meeting, which was postponed for yet another week. The seriousness of the situation was starting to sink in to Stoate, and he walked home alone without saying anything.

When Stoate got back to his study the next morning, the sight that greeted him made him heartily grateful that it was Friday. Among the now customary letters of complaint from parents who were not a little annoyed about their sons

(and daughters) being made so ill, there were some letters giving notice that sons and daughters were to be withdrawn from the school. (“*Our decision was made after the appalling meeting held last night. We are not going to pay £6500 a year to be insulted in this way.*”) There was a letter from the EHO reporting into the investigation of the school kitchen, which confirmed a serious outbreak of *Salmonella* food poisoning. Traces of *Escherichia coli* 157 and substantial *Campylobacter* contamination had also been found. The matter had been placed into the hands of the legal department with a view to a major prosecution.

Finally, there was a letter addressed not to him, but to the school chaplain, the Reverend Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax. It was from the Reverend Proudlock. It read:

Dear Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax,

I write to you in some distress after the death of my dear daughter Gemma. My wife, son Samuel, whom you will know, and I are still coming to terms with our grief. Nonetheless we do rejoice as Gemma knew and loved the Lord Jesus Christ and we know that she is with Him in Heaven.

*Therefore, I would ask that the church service you have on a Friday afternoon will be a celebration of Gemma’s life, with uplifting music and readings. Several of her friends have offered to give readings that were Gemma’s favourites. I am sure that you would like to discuss these with the students concerned. As for music, Gemma’s favourite hymns were the choruses **Make Way; Majesty; Be still, for the presence of the Lord; I the Lord of Sea and Sky.** I do hope that these will give as much comfort and pleasure to the school as they did to Gemma.*

Our son Samuel has asked to come back to school so that he can hear this tribute to his sister. I have made a copy and sent it to the Headmaster, whom I am sure will support the idea.

Yours sincerely
John Proudlock.

The Rector of Alverston was wrong. Dunstan Stoate knew about his church in Alverston. It had grown from a congregation of 20 to 300, but most of these were young people who did not dress up to go to church. They sang these ‘happy-clappies’ and danced in the aisles. They used modern day language, which appalled Stoate, who had great sympathy with the Prayer Book Society, loved

the poetry of the Authorised Version of the Bible and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Religion was a private affair, to be done with due dignity, tradition and ceremony. Stoate disliked young people in the church, dressed up or otherwise, and could not tolerate children who were a rude disruption to the order of religious activity. At St Mary's Church in Tanswold, what few children there were, had to be taken by their parents to the porch if they were noisy and were kept out in the cold until they quietened down.

Stoate had heard about these modern chorus songs and shuddered at the prospect of the words getting into St Mary's church, let alone being sung. What was worse, was that Proudlock had re-ordered the church. He had got rid of Victorian pews replacing them with comfortable chairs. Historic glass had been replaced with etched plate glass. There was a public address system. In Stoate's view, vicars who could not speak up to be heard throughout a church were not fit to be vicars at all. Stoate sent for the Chaplain.

"Piers," he started when the Chaplain came into his office, "have you read this extraordinary letter?"

"Yes, I got it this morning. I was coming to talk to you about it, Headmaster."

"As far as I'm concerned, I am not going to have our church service reduced to a common entertainment. I will do most things for parents, but I will not have the traditions of religious life in the school tampered with. I'm sure you understand what I mean. I will preach the sermon today and I will choose hymns of due dignity to remind the school of the order of mortal creatures before God."

"What do you think the Reverend Proudlock would say? He did request this."

"I know he has lost his daughter, and he would do well to reflect on the fate of all mortal flesh instead of allowing drug-crazed young louts to dance up and down in his services. Some of his preaching is quite outrageous and against church tradition. Do you know that he has preached for over forty minutes on many occasions? He has even had women preaching in church! If I were you, Piers, I would forget that that letter ever existed. You are to choose bible readings that reflect on the mortality of Man."

Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax agreed. He always liked to ingratiate himself with the Headmaster, of whom he was in considerable awe. His was a travesty of the Christian ministry, which he had joined for an easy life and good social standing. After leaving Theological College, d'Arcy-Fairfax had been such a disaster as a curate that his vicar and PCC had asked him to leave. It had become quite clear that any parish that had him as their minister would have folded rapidly. Even

so, d’Arcy-Fairfax still had fantasies to be a Bishop. Stoate had appointed him precisely for his social standing, his membership of the Byland Foresters and his unstinting support for high Anglican tradition. Like Stoate, d’Arcy-Fairfax was wrapped in the traditions of the Anglican Church, with a love for pomp and ceremony. He was the third son of Lt-General Richard d’Arcy-Fairfax, a soldier of exceptional talent and bravery. Piers had inherited little of his father’s brain, and even less of his bravery, but a great sense of his self-importance and self-preservation. In other words, he was a chinless wonder, disliked by the staff and loathed by the boys. Confidential counselling of the latter was always reported in detail to the headmaster, and several had had their backsides tanned as a result of their revelations to the Chaplain. He was also the headmaster’s eyes and ears in the staffroom, with several overheard conversations getting back to the headmaster. It was no surprise that he was known as d’Arsehole.

The headmaster dictated a reply to The Reverend Proudlock:

My Dear Proudlock,

I am in receipt of your most extraordinary communication concerning a celebration of your daughter’s life.

While I sympathise with your loss, I must remind you of the purpose of a church service, which you have clearly forgotten. Our church tradition is centred on solemn meditation of profound divine mysteries, based on the deepest theological scholarship. They cannot, and will not, be held in the same casual manner as a pop radio request show.

Yours sincerely

J L D Stoate

Dunstan Stoate settled down to write his sermon for the afternoon. It was a golden opportunity to remind the school of the divine order of things, and he wrote with relish the bit about retribution. Just as he was finishing, Stoate heard a large vehicle pass by on the drive but paid no attention. It was time for him to go and teach a maths lesson, something he had not done for several days.

When Stoate returned from his lesson to go to luncheon in the Old Dining Room in The Hermitage, he smelt frying but put it out of his mind. It was only when he had finished his luncheon that he noticed a queue of boys going into the stable courtyard. Although it was orderly, he nevertheless decided to see what

was going on. The sight that greeted him was not pleasing. A large old bus marked 'Bill's Bun wagon' had parked in the stable courtyard and boys were coming out carrying sandwiches, beef burgers and chips and other unwholesome and presumably unclean nutrition. Pushing several boys out of the way, Stoaate hurled himself up the steps to order Bill and his Bun wagon off the premises.

"WHAT THE DEVIL IS THE MEANING OF THIS?" he yelled, "How dare you bring this thing into my school without permission? Who gave you permission to bring this contraption here? Get it out of here now, before I call the police."

"Not so hasty, Granddad," replied Bill, "No one gave me permission, but several of your lads asked me in. They're hungry. They don't have a dining room anymore. They tell me you've got your own to pig out in."

The term 'Granddad' and the insolent manner of this man stung Stoaate into a paroxysm of fury. "Get this thing out of here, NOW," he yelled, "and the filth it contains that you say is food out of my school and never ever come back."

"Not as easy as that, Granddad. The Environmental Health have checked me out. I'm kosher, you see. I keep things clean around here. I make sure everything's cooked. No dodgy fricassee here. That's why my kitchen is still open and yours isn't, eh? Oh, I hear they're going to take you to the cleaners."

Bill burst out in laughter.

The use of this pun was too much for Stoaate and he rounded on the boys, pushing them out of the bus. One boy fell out of the bus and hurt his back. "Get up, Baxter," roared Stoaate at the groaning youth on the ground. He only just avoided reinforcing his order with a hearty kick in the kidneys and longed for the days when he could have done just that. A sullen crowd stared at their Headmaster and Bill was shouting from behind the counter, "You can't do that to my customers. Go on, Granddad, gerrout of it!"

From the crowd several voices joined Bill, "Get out of it, Biggles! We want to eat!" The mood of the boys was ugly and they were chanting, "We want to eat! We want to eat!"

Stoaate marched furiously back to his study and called the police.

By the time the police had arrived, Bill had finished serving his customers and had driven the Bun wagon off the site. The policemen reported back to the Headmaster that since Bill had all the relevant licences and all his paperwork was in order; they could not prevent him from trading at the lay-by.

At the end of the afternoon, the students trooped sullenly to church. None of them liked the church service at the best of times, with its ceremonial and the long-winded prayers from the Chaplain that were like Shakespearean speeches. Many of Gemma Proudlock's friends were hoping that there would be some kind of tribute to their late friend.

They were to be disappointed. The Chaplain and Headmaster processed up the aisle behind the choir as they sang the processional hymn, *Disposer Supreme and Judge of the Earth*. Lusty singing was not a strength of Tanswold School congregations. The voices of the choir, Stoate and the Chaplain could be heard clearly above the mumble from the congregation and the organ. Lessons were read and finally Stoate came up to the pulpit and started his sermon.

"This school is founded on the Christian Tradition as practised by the Church of England for three hundred and fifty years. The pillars upon which it rests are Tradition, Discipline and Responsibility. The Church of England has a fine tradition of worship, which focuses on the solemn and dignified ceremonials of its services. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer has been at the heart of this and many of the fine hymns that we sing. They look at the deep and profound mysteries of the Holy Trinity. We have a fine literary heritage in the Authorised Version of the Holy Bible. They form a trinity of beautiful poetry that must help us to be enraptured to higher planes of consciousness and holy thought. It is only then that we can even start to consider the solemn mysteries that pertain unto the Supreme Deity.

"It is a matter of some distress and not a little disgust that there are churches and clergy who have moved away from the fine traditions. They have reduced worship to the level of the discothèque. They use a liturgy, if it could be called that, that seems to have come from a teenage magazine, and some of the so-called music cannot be even described in a civilised place..."

With that, Stoate launched himself into a vicious attack on modern church life with its emphasis on brotherhood and sisterhood. His antipathy towards The Reverend Proudlock's ministry in Alverston was so thinly veiled that those who worshipped there knew exactly what his target was. "To benefit fully from church participation," he continued, "you must be able to understand at a deep level these profound and solemn mysteries, which can only really be accessed through the Greek and Latin of the church of old. Those who cannot cope with such deep study may get a glimpse through the beautiful poetry of Thomas Cranmer. Our church services are to give you that academic background that will

not only allow you into the mystery of the faith but will also act as testimony of your social standing. For nobody should dare to come into the presence of the Supreme Deity with the same casual approach that you go into a discothèque.

“The main strength that you will build up for yourselves if you finally manage to understand mysteries that are beyond the common man, is the success and status of membership of the Anglican Tradition, in the eyes of the Supreme Deity. Your understanding will make you pleasing to the Supreme Deity, which is something that is not open to the ignorant and vulgar poor. It is only those who have the financial means to support the church that can aspire to its membership.

“You would do well to consider the *Parable of the Talents*. We give you the talents, in the form of tradition, discipline and responsibility. You will go and do things with the talents, and you will secure the top jobs and make your own way in the world. If you cannot, for whatever reason, you will be judged by the Supreme Deity and you will be thrown out. What very little you have will be taken away from you and you will be left naked. We have seen this in the miserable episodes of the past week. Some in the Sixth Form have clearly thought otherwise and it has brought judgement on them and we have seen that in our midst this week...”

At this reference to his sister, Samuel Proudlock could bear it no longer and burst into tears. Stoate noticed the boy’s distress and interrupted his appalling peroration. “Proudlock!” he barked, “Stop crying now... Leave the church at once! Out now! Go and wait outside my study!”

A murmur rippled through the congregation and Stoate rounded on his audience, “This is precisely the point I am making. Ill-discipline is what is an abomination in the sight of God. He ordains those in charge. Failure to respect one’s elders and superiors will lead to judgement. Is it any wonder that there is judgement when there is no deference to authority? That is why I expelled Simpson and suspended three of her friends.

“Jesus is the example of manly behaviour. He didn’t burst out blubbing at the least little thing. (The Headmaster had chosen to omit John Chapter 11 v 35, *Jesus wept*.) He stood up to things like a man and so should you. There is no place in the elite that are those accepted by the Supreme Deity for those who break under the least difficulty. Heaven is not for those who cannot hack it.”

At the front of the church, the Chaplain nodded his agreement. He disliked displays of emotion and found the counselling of mixed-up teenage boys particularly distasteful, especially when they talked about crushes on other boys.

During the previous term, Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax had heard so many such revelations that he had felt it prudent to challenge the matter in his Lenten addresses.

At the back of the church, Andrew McEwan was as black as thunder. Married to a Non-Stipendiary Minister and himself a Deacon in the Alverstonshire Deanery, he knew the Proudlock family very well and had preached at Alverston. As Stoate resumed he muttered to one of his fellow Christian colleagues, "If Jesus were in this place, he would be beating the living daylights out of that man!"

Finally, Stoate concluded his sermon and left the pulpit. The Chaplain stood up and started the prayers, "O Lord, in thy manifest wisdom, bend thy ear to the supplications of thy servants, gathered unto this place. Imbue in us, we beseech thee..."

It was now time for the Chaplain to announce the final hymn, *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*". It had long been his complaint that the boys did not have any feeling for the poetry contained in *Hymns, Ancient and Modern*. He had been so exercised by this that he had even taken the matter up with Andrew McEwan, as Head of English. He was so appalled by the latter's answer that the Hymnbook would do very well as an anthology of bad verse and Victorian purple pomp, that he reported the matter straight away to the Headmaster. His desire for feeling was about to be fulfilled beyond his wildest expectations.

As the organ growled out the tune *Picardy*^{*}, it was quickly evident that all mortal flesh in the congregation was keeping silence. Only he, the choir and the Headmaster were singing. The musicality of the event was not enhanced by the latter's contribution with his bass voice; Dunstan Stoate was tone deaf.

The service came to an end, not a minute too soon. Stoate swept out of the church with his black gown trailing. He was sure that his sermon had had the desired effect of reminding his charges of their sinful mortality, and they had to work hard to pay their way into the church and God's elect. If it had not, they only had themselves to blame. He had done it for himself, anyway.

He was deluding himself. The congregation had not been spurred to strive for higher and mightier things; the older pupils and staff had found his sermon

* Author's note: Although I have never visited the Picardy area of Northern France, a young French man described it to me as the "arsehole of France" (his words, not mine). The grim tune *Picardy* would therefore be fitting. If this is untrue, I would be very happy to visit it, as long as my wife and I are put up in the finest country house hotels!

not just pompous and self-important, but outrageously insensitive. True, the late Gemma Proudlock had been mentioned, but in a way that suggested she was the vilest of felons. Several Christian boys had decided that agnosticism was more attractive, and several agnostics declared themselves atheists. The school's Christian Union gave up its struggle for existence that afternoon. The younger boys had little idea of what it was about in the first place. After the service, at least two had gone into an ice-cream parlour in the town and asked for a Supreme Day Ittey, much to the bemusement of the staff. Andrew McEwan was beside himself, almost drunk with anger, and he and some other Christian colleagues split away from the brown and black mass heading back to The Hermitage and made for The Feathers.

Only the Chaplain was pleased. Having always preached an elitist church, d'Arcy-Fairfax admired the Headmaster's style in standing up for traditional English values in a flowing tide of mediocrity. Gutless to the last, he made sure the coast was well clear before locking up the church and making his way back to The Hermitage.

Stoate arrived at his office to find Samuel Proudlock waiting nervously outside. He had had a dreadful fortnight, and someone was going to have to pay. It would not be Eileen; she had on several occasions proved more than a match for him and he was in some awe of his secretary. But young Proudlock was eminently suitable for the purpose. In the old days, Stoate would have given him a long lecture on the kind of manly behaviour that had made the British Empire, before reinforcing his argument with six sound strokes with his cane. The latter was now illegal, so no longer an option.

Chapter 6

At Gilham Park, Sir Kenneth Rounce found that his options were restricted as well. He had spent a very unpleasant couple of days with the undivided attention of two financial experts, Detective Commander Richard Smithells and Mr David Galliford, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Taxes. The latter two had found Sir Kenneth's financial affairs most interesting, and worth every minute of their valuable time. After much consideration and advice from the Crown Prosecution Service, it was felt that there would not yet be enough evidence for there to be a criminal prosecution. The Inland Revenue should investigate all matters of the running of the Gilham Estate over the past forty years, with a view to recovering very substantial sums of underpaid taxes and non-payment of employees' National Insurance contributions. As well as that, the Crown Prosecution Service gave instructions for there to be an on-going investigation into the possibility of fraudulent misuse of employees' pension contributions.

"Sir Kenneth," said Mr Galliford smoothly, "you must understand my position. I am a public servant; my duty is to the taxpayer. It is quite clear that you have used the Estate as a means of living in aristocratic luxury. Not that I object to that, as long as the money to support your and Lady Monica's lifestyle is raised legitimately."

"Of course, it's raised legitimately," barked Sir Kenneth. "What the devil do think I do here? Launder drug money?"

"Nobody is suggesting that, Sir Kenneth," replied Mr Galliford unruffled. "When I say 'legitimate', I mean that all monies owed to the Inland Revenue and to the DHSS through National Insurance have been paid in the manner and proportion that the vast majority of taxpayers would expect it to be. What we are talking about here is tax evasion on a very considerable scale. I have my team working on it. There is a vast amount of work still to do, but my estimate on what I have seen so far is close on five million pounds in underpaid tax. Naturally, there will be interest as well, which we will have to calculate. As well, there is

the non-payment of National Insurance that adds up to about a million pounds. I would suggest that the final figure we are talking about is close on eight to ten million pounds.”

“This is outrageous,” countered Sir Kenneth, “you will ruin me. Typical damned socialists taking money from families of good breeding to squander on the idle poor...”

“I totally agree, Sir Kenneth,” Mr Galliford replied, “it is not just an outrage, it is a scandal. You have misused money that is rightfully used by the Inland Revenue for the benefit of all. You have, in effect, stolen money from your employees who trusted you to pay their taxes and National Insurance for them. When you discard an employee with as much thought as one of your cigar butts, they find themselves high and dry. I know your type; my father lost his pension due to his employer having his fingers in the till. If anyone questioned him, he would run squealing to the libel courts...until he dropped his fat carcass over the side of his yacht.”

“What I do with my employees is my own business! They should consider themselves damned lucky to work for me.”

“Judging from your record as an employer, Sir Kenneth, that’s not what I would say. There is no way that I would wish to work for you. Your track record is not good. You have exploited your employees and used your influence to their detriment. Professionally, it’s no business of mine, but personally speaking, I find it contemptible. For your information as well, I am not, as you put it, a damned socialist. Remember that for the last twenty years, or so, the Conservative Party, which you so lavishly support, has been in political power. You wouldn’t call Margaret Thatcher a socialist, would you?”

“Well, Galliford, what are you going to do about it?”

“Mr Galliford to you, if you please, Sir Kenneth. You would do well to remember that it is my job to protect the interests of the taxpayer, and...”

“To hell with the taxpayer!” Sir Kenneth interrupted, “What about the person of good breeding that made the country what it is, or bloody well should be!”

“Sir Kenneth,” replied Mr Galliford loftily, “I am reminding you that I am here to protect the interests of the vast majority of people who are not born to privilege like you, and, unlike you, pay their taxes. When I talk of taxpayers, I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that you are not one. I have dealt with plenty of tax evaders in my career as a public servant. Some get into trouble because they haven’t a clue. They mean well and do their level best to work with

me to put matters right. I will bend over backwards to help them, and we sort it all out in the end. Others are downright crooks. You are thinking of yourself as an astute businessman, but you are, in fact, incompetent and arrogant beyond belief. There is little I can do to help you.

“You do understand that I have the power to have you closed down and could have turned you out this afternoon. I have to tell you that this course of action is very attractive to me. Be that as it may, I have decided on a different course of action, not because of any sympathy to you, Sir Kenneth, but so as to maximise the return to the taxpayer. Gilham Park will be taken over by administrators. You and Lady Monica will have no part whatever in the running of the Estate. The income of the Estate will be turned over to paying off the Exchequer. The amount owing, I would imagine that this would take a very considerable time. Meanwhile, we will be realising certain assets of yours, starting with those that will be most easily disposed of. Your collection of large cars will be the most obvious place to start.”

“You can’t be serious!” Sir Kenneth spluttered, “How are we going to get about?”

“There is always the bus, or you could walk, or buy a bicycle. That is not my problem, Sir Kenneth. Compared with what I will have to do, your transport problems are of little consequence. May I have the keys to your Bentley?”

“Certainly not! This is outrageous...”

“Well, I could rethink my plan and close you down, Sir Kenneth. I could apply to the courts for possession, starting proceedings this afternoon. You and Lady Monica would be required to move out within weeks; that way, I could raise about three million pounds by the sale of all your assets, bar the clothes you stand up in. That would not cover all the monies owing for which you would still be liable, including interest. I can’t see you making it somehow. This is why I want the Gilham Park Estate to work off its debts. In fact, if you cooperate, you will be given a small allowance of ten thousand pounds per annum. You will be required to be at the disposal of my managing agent to do any work he requires of you.”

“Ten thousand pounds per annum?” Sir Kenneth replied incredulously, “That’s less than a tenth of what I live on now. How am I expected to live on that?”

“In the same way as your staff do. You were not the most generous of employers, were you? And you will be paying tax and National Insurance on it. A new experience for you, eh? P.A.Y.E?”

Galliford could not resist a laugh at this, but Sir Kenneth did not share his joke. Galliford continued, “By the way, don’t count on your substantial financial assets either. They have been frozen, while we investigate them. So, it is ten thousand pounds per annum for you and Lady Monica, before tax. It will enable you both to live, just about. You will have to think about cutting your cloth, if you would pardon the expression. If you want any more, you could always take a bar job, or work at B & Q. They take on older people as a matter of policy. That’s for you to decide not me.

“I will let you in on some of the decisions that my administrators have made. As well as disposing of your fleet of powerful gas-guzzlers, we will be emptying out the stables. Your horses will be auctioned next month at Trentham’s. Some may well fetch a good price. There is a good amount of tack in what were your stables. That again will be auctioned off.”

“Not all of it is mine,” replied Sir Kenneth feebly.

“Well, you must advise the owners to remove their property by next Friday, otherwise we will assume it belonged to you.”

“The foxhounds belong to the Hunt.”

“The foxhounds, well, they will have to be moved out or put down. They are a savage bunch; no one will want them in their house.”

“Damn it!” shouted Sir Kenneth, “The Hunt depends on me for its very existence. We are due to hold a meet in a fortnight, followed by the Hunt Ball which we have held here every year in my lifetime and my father’s.”

“As for the Hunt, Sir Kenneth,” replied Galliford acidly, “the sooner it’s disbanded and consigned to the dustbin of local history, the better. You have until next Friday to find those loathsome dogs somewhere else to go, or they will be put down. What you tell your society friends is your business. Although it’s no professional business of mine, what you and your friends did ten years ago in the primary school at Great Wratton still makes me feel sick! As for the perversion of justice, that still sticks in my throat and a great many others as well.”

Galliford went silent for a moment while Sir Kenneth stared at him lividly. Galliford’s eyes had strayed to Sir Kenneth’s riding crop that was lying across the desk. He had to suppress an overwhelming desire to mete out similar

treatment to Sir Kenneth to what his niece had received. Sir Kenneth was not worth a stretch for aggravated assault. Galliford recomposed himself. Sir Kenneth was muttering about “damned socialists bringing everything down to the lowest common denominator”.

“I have told you before, Sir Kenneth, that I am not a damned socialist, merely a public servant protecting the interests of the law-abiding taxpayer. The next thing you must understand is that under no circumstances are you to enter the Estate Office without permission of my agent. The lock has been changed. We have all your personal documents, which we will look through. These will be returned to you as soon as we have finished with them. I notice that you are Chairman of Governors at Tanswold School in Tanswold. You will have to resign.”

“Why?”

“Because you are, in effect, bankrupt. Your debts to the Exchequer are more than your assets and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Whichever way we go about things, the early break-up of the Gilham Park Estate, or its continued existence under administration, you are bankrupt. In the first case, you will be legally declared bankrupt by the County Court; in the second case, you have made an arrangement with your creditors due to your insolvency. You are therefore not entitled to be a director of any company, limited or otherwise. This includes Gilham Park and Tanswold School.”

A quiet warble from Mr Galliford’s jacket interrupted his flow. Galliford took out his mobile telephone, pulled back the mouthpiece and answered the call. Sir Kenneth stared at Mr Galliford. This cold civil servant had lectured him and was about to take away everything he had that gave him pleasure and status. Galliford was not impressed by Sir Kenneth’s connections with the Byland Foresters, and it was clear that he would not be leant on from that quarter. The tax people were now getting their grubby paws on what he considered rightfully his, so he would not be able to pay any underworld contact and they would do him over. He looked over to his riding crop that lay on the desk. A few years ago, he would have horsewhipped this little man within an inch of his life. After his experience in the cells at Tanswold Police Station in the company of the dreadful Wayne Leach, he too had no desire whatever to do a stretch for aggravated assault. He therefore had two legal options that were each as unattractive as the other. One would be quick and nasty, the other would be slow

and nasty. He closed his eyes as he heard Galliford starting up again. He sat up in horror.

“That was Severs Clarke and Company, my administrators, Sir Kenneth. There has been one other decision they have just taken. Gilham Park is a fine late Georgian stately home. It would be a shame to keep it hidden. It is going to be opened to the public.”

“WHAT?” yelled Sir Kenneth, “Do you mean to tell me that the hordes of the great unwashed are going to tramp all over my house, to steal my antiques, drop bubble gum in my drawing room? I loathe the vulgar poor; I’ve spent the past thirty years putting them behind bars and they will end up here? Good Lord, man, have you taken leave of your tiny socialist senses? They will barge into my bathroom when I am sitting on the lavatory. Over my dead body!”

“Sir Kenneth, I have told you before that I have the right and the desire to close you down now, starting legal proceedings this afternoon. I have given you the option of staying in your ancestral home and you are still free to take it. It is your arrogant incompetence and blatant disregard for the law that has jeopardised your ancestral home. Now read my lips, as I will say this once more and I will not repeat it. Severs Clarke and Company are going to run the estate as a going concern for a trial period of twelve months, with the surplus to pay off considerable debts to the Exchequer. If the performance of the Estate is satisfactory, the management will continue. In effect, it’s a stay of execution. Before that happens, you will sign a document, which is a legal agreement to initiate the process I am outlining. The legal documents themselves will be signed in the presence of your solicitor, whom I would advise you to instruct to act at the earliest opportunity. I have the form that you must sign to state that I have given you this option, and this will authorise the administration to start.

“If you do not sign, I will instruct solicitors to act immediately on behalf of the Exchequer. I have prepared them to initiate this case, and I only need to ring them now to start proceedings. Possession of Gilham Park would probably occur within six weeks. Once I have started, the proceedings will not be stopped. The administrators will be stood down, and the offer will be terminated absolutely. You would also be liable for their expenses. Even if you do accept my offer, you must understand that any breach of conditions by you or Lady Monica will result in immediate termination of the agreement, and possession proceedings will start at once.”

Galliford picked up his mobile phone. Sir Kenneth was staring at defeat. His social standing would be completely undermined, especially if they kicked him out and he had to move into a council house, next door to a hooligan that he had imprisoned, a prospect that filled him with horror. He went pale and stuttered, "All right, I will accept your offer. Let me sign this form."

"Sir Kenneth, that is a wise choice. Let me assure you, you need not worry about your privacy being invaded. My agent is drawing up plans for you and Lady Monica to have a small apartment at the top of the house. You will have two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room and a kitchen-diner. My managing agent will have an apartment on the East Wing.

"There is some good news, though, now that you have agreed. Once the debt to the Exchequer is paid, the ownership and management of the Estate will pass back to you, or your heirs."

Galliford opened his briefcase and found the document initiating the transfer to Severs, Clarke and Company. Trembling, Sir Kenneth read through it, listening to Galliford's explanation of the terms and signed. He also handed the keys to the Bentley over to Mr Galliford. He had opted for the long and nasty future, which at least did not condemn him to life on a council estate, although it did involve the great unwashed tramping over what was rightfully for him alone to enjoy. There was a more immediate and even more ghastly thing that he had to do, to explain to Lady Monica about (a) the fact that all their cars had been seized, (b) the Hunt would be disbanded, (c) the house was going to be opened to the public. Taking a deep breath, he left the study and walked over to the state drawing room. He would have happily murdered Galliford.

The Rector of Alverston was ready to do murder. Stoate had rung the Proudlocks to inform them of their son's summary detention. John Proudlock was a gentle giant, slow to anger. But he was truly roused on this occasion. In grievous pain at his loss, he sat in the passenger seat of his curate's car mulling over on how he could make Stoate suffer, short of putting the old man in hospital. When the Rector and his curate arrived at Tanswold School, there was nobody about, except Andrew McEwan, who had come in after soothing himself at The Feathers. He immediately offered his condolences to Proudlock and told him where Sam could be found. Just before they parted, Mr McEwan said, "Look, I am sorry to add more at what is a difficult time for you, John. I must give you a

ring when you get home. I think you should know exactly what has happened. I am afraid it's not very pleasing."

As Proudlock and his curate went off in search of Sam, they saw the Chaplain, who immediately darted off the other way. D'Arcy-Fairfax did not feel like getting into a discussion about the afterlife. In his view, only theology students and above should make it through the Hallowed Portals. He did not wish to offer succour, Christian or otherwise, to those grieving the dead. He found their emotional outpourings distasteful in the extreme and had studiously avoided being anywhere that he might be called on to say comforting words. Anyway, such words were often misconstrued, and those to whom they were said would get ideas above their station and that would not do.

They found Sam sitting at a desk crying quietly. They had heard Stoate's voice about a minute before shouting at him to get something written, or he would be there the whole night. Sam hated being told off at the best of times and, being one of the quietest and most cooperative pupils at Tanswold School, he was always careful to avoid doing things that would get him into trouble. He had lost his sister, which made it doubly unfair that Mr Stoate had been so horrible to him, just because he had cried in church. Sam looked up to see his father and ran to him crying "Daddy!" As his distraught son clung close to him, tears welled up in Proudlock's eyes. "Come on, Sam," he said gently, "let's go home."

Stoate came out of his office, shouting, "You can't do that. He is on my detention for an undignified display of childish emotion that jeopardised the solemnity of a serious religious act of worship. Above all, Mr Proudlock, you should know and condemn this kind of behaviour."

"Do you not realise that he has lost his sister, or do you have no feelings whatever for family life?" snapped Proudlock.

"The family comes second to the traditions of the English public school whose main function is to take a boy in and make him stand on his own two feet without him rushing to 'daddy' each time something goes wrong. Floods of tears from a fourteen-year-old are not acceptable, especially in solemn worship of the Anglican Tradition, one that you have so contemptuously thrown away. If you want it in words of one syllable, I want men in my school, not fairies!"

"Jesus wept!" shouted Proudlock, "And I don't mean that as a swearword either. Sam loved his sister. Perhaps you should read your Bible before preaching about it."

“Death comes to us all, and your son has got to learn to carry these kinds of setbacks like a man. I dislike intensely this modern idea that men should show their feelings. Too many let their feelings be known, and it is becoming more of a trend in this school, one that I intend to stop. That is why I decided to make an example of your son. I must remind you as you have clearly forgotten the terms to which you signed when we accepted your son here. I have rights of being in *loco parentis* when he is in my charge, and I will not have them undermined.”

“You are clearly mistaken, Headmaster,” replied Proudlock icily. “You may be in *loco parentis*, but I have a more overriding right as his parent, and I am removing him from your presence now. If you try to stop me, I will ring the Police and will press charges of unlawful imprisonment against my son’s will. Tim, could you take Sam back to the car? I don’t think he should hear what I am about to say...

“Now Stoate, you had better listen to me. I very rarely get angry, but you are one of those rare exceptions. How dare you treat my son in this way? What about my daughter? She was left lying for an hour in a flowerbed. What do think the Coroner is going to say about this? Your handling of this has been a downright disgrace, and you should really consider seriously as to whether you are a fit person to be running a school. I have seen more humanity in Canterill Prison.”

“My dear Proudlock,” replied Stoate with more than a hint of sarcasm, “you have very little idea of the ethos of an English public school. You, as a man of the cloth, should be aware of the need for tradition, discipline, responsibility, patriotism and standing on your own two feet. It is at the heart of religious activity in our church.”

“Not in my church, it isn’t! May I suggest that you look carefully at Jesus’ response to the Pharisees and their religious bigotry. I do not wish to waste any more of my time with you, but before I go, I would suggest that for the sake of your eternal future, you humble yourself before God and do a little repenting!”

“My dear Proudlock, that is the last thing I need to do. What I need to do or not do is between the Supreme Deity and me. You above all should go and learn that religion is a personal thing between oneself and the Supreme Deity. Perhaps you should practise what you preach and do the same.”

“You are impossible, Stoate! By the way, before I go, I am informing you now that Samuel will not be returning to this school. I think that Lucy Simpson was one hundred percent correct when she summed you up as a callous bastard. Goodbye and good riddance!”

“That is your choice, Proudlock. But you will be liable for next year’s fees, as you have not given a term’s notice. And we will go to court to recover any unpaid monies. The bursar will send you an account.”

“Headmaster, you can whistle for it. I have not the least intention of paying this madhouse another penny. Besides, you haven’t got a bursar at the moment. Try to get one who hasn’t got his fingers in the till. Goodbye.”

Proudlock walked back to the car and got in. Stoate went wearily back to his office. He watched the car go up the drive. The Reverend Proudlock was the tenth parent who told him that they were withdrawing their son, and, of course, their daughter had died. That meant that there was going to be a shortfall of about £70 000.

Unusually for a Saturday, Dunstan Stoate went into The Hermitage. As he passed the newsagent’s, he saw a large headline, *Yorkshire Top Nob in Tax Probe*. He bought a copy of the *Yorkshire Post* and when he got to his study, he looked at the county headlines. To his horror, he read that Gilham Park, estate and home of Sir Kenneth and Lady Monica Rounce, had been taken into administration on the orders of the Inland Revenue. A cold chill ran up his spine. What if the Inland Revenue started to investigate the donations given by Sir Kenneth to the school? They were donations to charity, weren’t they, so the Inland Revenue surely couldn’t get their grubby paws on them? Stoate put the thought out of his mind. He turned over the page and one of the announcements caught his eye. It was under “Deaths”.

***PROUDLOCK**, Gemma Ruth Chamberlain, tragically at the age of 17, after a short illness. Dearly loved daughter of Rev John and Ruth Proudlock, and much-loved sister of Samuel. Funeral at St Luke’s Church, Alverston, private burial afterwards. No flowers, please, but donations to The Dominican Hospital, Alverston. Please ring Price Funeral directors, Alverston 2754.*

Stoate shuddered but continued to look at the paper. His attention settled on an article with a biography of the dead girl, describing how she had gained a place at Merton College, Oxford, her achievements as a county athlete and her musicianship on the piano, organ and clarinet. It went on to state how she had fallen victim in the serious outbreak of food poisoning last Tuesday at Tanswold School, collapsing the next day at school. The Coroner was to hold an inquest.

Stoate put the paper down and sank back into the armchair. Damn that man Smith! If he hadn't got his fingers in the till, Kenneth would not have been bothered by Smithells. It was because of Smithells' sleuthing that the Inland Revenue had got involved, and now Kenneth and Monica were finished. Typical of these damned socialists who get jealous of rightly inherited wealth! If a man earned the money, why shouldn't he keep it to himself? Why should he bother with taxes? He remembered Viscount Ridley's observation as to why should a duke pay more than a dustman and he agreed.

And damn Smith for taking on that awful Cyril and not supervising him properly. If he had, there would not have been the food poisoning, and the school kitchen would still be producing good wholesome food, and the boys would be able to do afternoon school with a full stomach. And he wouldn't have all these parents whinging at him and threatening to sue. They sued over anything nowadays if they thought there was a couple of quid in it. Their boys (and girls) had just had a rather bad dose of the squitters, that's all... Until Proudlock died, of course.

Never having met him before, Stoate had been somewhat surprised how young the Reverend Proudlock was, a full twenty years or so younger than a rector should be. He was of that awful flower-power generation, who probably had an LP of *Hair!* a musical that was an insult to the traditions of the Anglican Church. He would soon be a bishop – not if Stoate had anything to do with it. Stoate had always imagined that rectors and rural deans were older and wiser, but Proudlock represented the decline in religious, moral and every other standard, at the heart of which were socialists, communists and liberals. Perhaps he had been a little harsh with Master Proudlock, but the boy should have learned to control himself in church and act with due decorum and dignity. Anyway, he had always thought of Proudlock as a bit of a cissy, who always did as he was told. Stoate had been much more manly in his youth and got up to some real capers. Therefore, he did have a soft spot for the tear-away. Perhaps he should apologise to Proudlock, but no. To do so would be an admission of wrong and a sign of weakness, which would not do.

The top priority was to get a new Bursar, and quickly, for there was a growing pile of bills that were unpaid, and could not be paid, however much they wanted them to be. Some of them were bills from tradesmen who were parents, and they would soon add to the chorus of whinging. Tradesmen who were only tradesmen could wait.

The new dining room would have to be built as a matter of urgency. Now that Kenneth clearly was not going to be in a position to bail them out yet again, the governors would have to apply for a bank loan.

The interest payments would be horrendous and Stoate worked out that they would need at least one hundred more rich bottoms on seats to bridge this yawning chasm. Meanwhile, the costs of the project would be escalating by the day. Damn Smith! Stoate got up from the armchair and went to the cocktail cabinet for medicinal purposes.

Dunstan Stoate was not enjoying his weekend. He continued to worry about implications of the Inland Revenue's investigation into Sir Kenneth's tax affairs, and it seemed that his position of influence was not helping him at all. If Kenneth were going to have to leave his post as Grand Master of the Lodge, it could have unfortunate consequences for the school. The only comfort was that this aspect would be clothed in the utmost secrecy, so there would be no bad publicity. That would not be the case for the unfortunate business with The Reverend Proudlock. The damned man could kick up a lot of dirt for the school, because his daughter had had rather too much bad luck with her dose of the squitters and that drip of a son had bawled his eyes out in a most unseemly manner in church. Ten years ago, Master Proudlock would really have had something to cry about with six fine welts across his backside. Now Stoate had had his authority undermined even more and he was feeling decidedly resentful.

Chapter 7

Stoate had appreciated the sermon that was preached in church on Sunday. It had been about how God helped those who helped themselves, provided of course that ten percent at least was given to the church. Those who had more would be given more, while those who had little would have what little they had taken away from them. It was the kernel of the philosophy of the Byland Foresters. Stoate said a prayer to the Supreme Deity asking Him to prosper yet again the Byland Foresters, Tanswold School, and to prosper Stoate to his advantage in all his dealings during the following week.

Unfortunately, the effect of Canon Slater's sermon wore off rapidly. It had occurred to Stoate that the local lodge was rapidly losing its influence. More worryingly it seemed to be losing the power to place money where it was to be used in the most worthwhile manner, which was Tanswold School. If the Byland Foresters were prospering, so would Tanswold School, and most importantly, Dunstan Stoate. Now, their prosperity seemed in considerable doubt, since the Grand Master of the Lodge was being taken to the cleaners by the Inland Revenue, and there seemed to be nobody capable of stopping them.

Stoate set off for The Hermitage the next morning like a galleon in full sail. The wind was taken from the sails by the correspondence that awaited him in his office. After reading it, the galleon was not only becalmed, but it was also on the beach. It had become quite clear to Stoate that the Supreme Deity was not in the least mood to listen to him. Firstly, there was a letter from the Midland and Great Northern Bank expressing concern and demanding that the current unsatisfactory situation be resolved as soon as possible. Otherwise, the Bank would be forced to protect its interests. Additionally, there was a furious letter from The Reverend Proudlock:

Dear Mr Stoate,

My wife, my son Samuel and I are passing through a period of the deepest grief as a result of the untimely death due to the negligence of Tanswold School of our daughter Gemma.

We are even more shocked at your indifference to the feelings of Gemma's friends and ourselves which has crossed the border of callousness. That was particularly borne out by the travesty of a church service you held on Friday and the appalling comments you made in a so-called sermon. Your words speak out against you. I am livid at the treatment you handed out to Samuel, the action of a bully. I am sure you know that bullies are cowards, and your position demands a man of greater stature than that. I am therefore withdrawing my son from Tanswold School with immediate effect. If you wish to attempt to recover the year's fees according to your rather unfair contract, you will have to pursue me through the courts, and I assure you that it would be a high-profile case.

Your actions condemn you too. I have been told that you did little to help Gemma as she lay in the garden, and I have witnesses. I understand that Gemma's condition deteriorated rapidly as a result of your lack of action. I am currently discussing matters with my solicitors with a view to taking legal action for negligence. I shall also be talking to them about your complete indifference to the way that both my children have been bullied at Tanswold. You took no action on the letters I had sent, nor were you willing to help either of them when they approached you through the official channels as instructed by their form teachers and housemasters. Indeed, from what Sam and Gemma told me, you seem to instil a culture in which bullying is positively encouraged...

There followed complaints of several incidents of bullying. These several incidents had been reported before in previous letters, but Stoate had taken no notice. He had always considered Proudlock an effeminate boy who deserved a little roughing up. It had been time that he learned that bullying was only a normal part of the rough and tumble of a vigorous and lively school community dedicated to manly pursuits. The same went for his late sister. Stoate needed a measure of wetness to show how manly he was. This was normally adequately provided by the Chaplain, but it was always worth having several boys to pick on to show that he was no soft touch.

Stoate was particularly annoyed by a long sermon about Sheep and Goats, accusing Stoate of being Pharisaic in his arrogance and lack of humanity and that

he would be called to account. The letter urged him to repent and accept the forgiveness that was freely on offer from the Crucifixion. He despised Proudlock's brand of trendy evangelical Christianity that was very weak compared with his own intellectually sound, muscular and elitist religion. Proudlock should just take what had happened on the chin and shut up. As for his sins, if there were any, Stoate dealt with them every Sunday in the General Confession and during the General Thanksgiving gave thanks to the Supreme Deity that he was not like other men. In short, the Rector of Alverston should mind his own bloody business.

It was unfair, but life was unfair, for Proudlock was everyone else's view of a model pupil. He was intelligent, cooperative and athletic. Despite these qualities, young Proudlock was quiet, rather shy and a sensitive boy. A target for a notorious fifth-form bully, Proudlock had made the mistake of talking to the Chaplain, whom he had innocently believed would give a sympathetic Christian view on the matter. Instead, Proudlock had been summoned to the Headmaster's study and received Stoate's manly view on the matter in an unpleasant diatribe.

It was a legal requirement that all schools, Tanswold School included, should have an anti-bullying policy and a named person who was responsible for dealing with all matters of child abuse. As the Chaplain was the named person, all details would get back to Stoate, whose preferred method was to remove the victim from the source of bullying, i.e., to get them to leave the school. Not surprisingly some parents were furious and had even threatened legal action, but the influence of Stoate and the Governors had always ensured that such action had come to nothing. As few boys trusted the Chaplain, bullying, which was endemic at Tanswold School, went unreported. Since it was not reported officially, the problem officially did not exist. There was no bullying at Tanswold School.

Anyway, it was all part of the rough and tumble of life. Muscular religion required that you took things on the chin, turned the other cheek and stood up to your opponent like a man (and kick him in the balls when nobody was looking). Whatever you did, you did not squeal about it. Stoate had been sneaked on several times when he was at school and had always repaid his debts of ingratitude to the sneaks more than fully.

Now that damned vicar was threatening to expose it all in a courtroom and he felt sure that others would follow suit (in the circumstances, a sickening pun). Two years ago, the Byland Foresters had considerable influence in the legal profession, the Police and the judiciary. However justified Proudlock's

complaints were about the death of his daughter and mistreatment of his son, that influence would have ensured that it would never have come to court and that that particular turbulent priest would have been faced with crippling legal costs. What had happened to the influence of the Byland Foresters that had kept the name of Tanswold School so untarnished up to now?

The answer to Stoate's question was to be found in the letter below the Rector's. It had the familiar Rounce Family coat of arms.

Dear Stoate,

I am so sorry that I have been incommunicado for the last few days. Since this abysmal affair with the Draycott Foundation, I have had this damned policeman and tax inspector prying through my personal affairs.

As a result, I am told that I am ineligible to be a company director and that includes my role as a governor at Tanswold School. I therefore have to tell you and my fellow Governors that I have to resign my post as Chairman with immediate effect. I am aware of my responsibility officially to pass on my nomination for Chair, so that the proceedings of the Governing Body can be constitutional. At the present time, I nominate Donald Blance to act as Chair until a fully constituted election occurs. This will allow you to make important decisions to secure the future of Tanswold School.

Tanswold School has been a major beneficiary of mine in the past. I am afraid that will have to change. I no longer have money that I can invest in the school. This damned minion has told me that he will be investigating all my affairs including my donations and he may well poke his nose in your direction. I am sure you will know what to do...

Although this was not unexpected, the letter still made Stoate's blood run cold. Sir Kenneth was not an altruistic philanthropist. His substantial donations to the school had plenty of legal strings attached; in effect they were loans with no definite pay-off date, although they could be called in. Sir Kenneth had never required any payment up to now. The Draycott Foundation acted as security and that had always seemed to be secure. There was a distinct possibility that the Inland Revenue could stick their noses in and seize the "donations" as part of Sir Kenneth's assets. It did not bear thinking about. The upside was that Sir Kenneth's letter acted to break the constitutional logjam in the Governing Body. Stoate felt an immense sense of relief at that.

The Monday morning staff briefing was a bad-tempered affair. Storate had started it badly with a harangue about the shambles that had been the church service that Friday, ordering that there should be a hymn practice on Thursday lunchtime instead of activities. Andrew McEwan had been particularly blunt. Storate was beginning to detest his Head of English who had always been something of a thorn in his side, being one of the few staff who would really stand up to him. Once again there were mutterings of the unions, lack of pay, no budgets, no equipment. Storate had walked out in a fury, threatening to sack the whole bloody lot of them.

As his blood pressure returned to normal, it crossed Storate's mind that if he took that particular course of action, there would not be much of a school left. He decided to make an example of just one member of staff, a young Geography teacher in his first year of teaching. He summoned him to his office, made a number of spurious allegations about ineffectiveness and inability to keep discipline and terminated his contract with effect from the end of term.

His confidence in his manly approach to staff management restored, Storate went to the Old Dining Room for luncheon. Fortified by a splendid Chardonnay, Storate, Blance, Wiseman and Hyland had agreed the way forward, although many pointers showed it to even the most clueless. A new bursar was desperately needed but where could they get one at such short notice?

Sir Ronald had been thinking about the problem for some time and decided that this might be an opportune moment to share his idea. "I have been talking to some of my friends in the shires. I may well have the solution."

"Shires, Ronald?" Hyland butted in, "We don't want some dead-beat from a loony left council with all their ideas of inclusion. We want to keep this place exclusive."

"I can assure you, Lionel, that I would not talk to anyone other than decent members of the Party. And I think that I have located a splendid chap who helped to raise money not only for the Party but also had Margaret Thatcher's ear. He helped look after the finances of her first campaign for re-election as Leader. He's now down on his luck a bit at the moment, but I think we could help him and, more importantly, he could help us."

"Who is this bod?" Storate asked.

"Crispin Lartington. He's thirty-five and got a fine pedigree, Eton, Balliol, Touche de Veres in The City. Lifelong member of the Conservative Party. Trouble was that he threw in his lot with the wrong people last time, and the men

in grey suits at Smith Square had the knives out for him. He does a bit of stockbroking here and there to keep the family afloat. He has helped several companies to become leaner and fitter. He's at a loose end at the moment. If we could snap him up..."

"I don't like this stockbroking," Blance interrupted, "it's too like what the last chap was up to. Smith has virtually left us destitute."

"This bloke knows what he is up to, Donald. He has kept his family afloat through the lean times and has his daughter down for Roedean."

"As long as he stockbroses with his own money, not ours," said Stoate, "I don't want us to go through the business we had with Smith, and certainly don't want another long session with Smithells. It was because of Smith not being able to distinguish our money from his own that the whole damned business blew up in the first place. At least this bloke has good credentials. I would rather take on someone with a good track record in the Party than have to advertise. Look what we got last time."

"Where did we get Smith from anyway?" asked Hyland.

"The Senior Appointments page of the *Daily Telegraph*," Stoate replied. "We had quite a few applicants. We needed somebody quick and Smith was the least bad of a pretty lousy bunch. He kept on about financial rectitude all the time."

"Until Kenneth told him exactly where to put it! I couldn't abide the runt."

"What's he like Ronald?" Blance asked, "Lartington, I mean."

"A rather cold fish, I am bound to say. He knows what he wants, and he will get it. I would warn you all that he will make considerable financial cutbacks, and I think we too will feel the wind of change, although I have made it clear to him that our budget will be the last that he will put his axe to. If anyone works for him, he is ruthless and expects them to give one hundred and twenty percent."

"It sounds like you have appointed him already," said Hyland giving Wiseman a piercing stare. "Is that not a little irregular? Kenneth would have murdered you. You know that we can't offer such an important position without the proper consent of the Governing Body in a properly constituted meeting?"

"I was not born yesterday, Lionel. Of course, I haven't offered him anything, but we will have to act soon, else we are in serious trouble. The bank is getting edgy isn't it, Dunstan?"

“Yes, indeed. They want to know immediately what is being done to rectify the ‘current unsatisfactory position’ and ‘will not hesitate to protect its interests’.”

“What do you mean ‘protect its interests’?”

“Apparently the school has an overdraft on its current account of about sixty thousand pounds. Normal business practice, I gather. Sometimes we are flush when all the fees come in, sometimes we are lean, but the bills have to be paid, regardless. Normally the Bursar looks after that bit and the bank are happy. But in the present circumstances they could recall the overdraft, and we would have a cash-flow crisis. You know that I’m no financial genius, but I know of plenty of good businesses that have gone down the pan for just that reason. You only need a big customer to be a bit slow in paying and the suppliers baying for their money. The bank gets edgy, or a whiz-kid comes in, throws his weight about and pulls the plug out.”

Wiseman drank from his glass and looked intently at his colleagues around the table, before speaking in a low voice, “Gentlemen, you don’t need me to remind you of the seriousness of the position. In the last three weeks we have gone from the happy position of considering our expansion plans and building programmes to staring liquidation in the face. We have had a good deal of bad publicity. As we eat and drink here, the boys and staff have no such facility. Parents are getting angry and quite a few are withdrawing their sons and daughters. Staff have not been paid, and their professionalism will not last for ever. We are not in a position to provide anything until we can pay a company to do the work. That vile Bun wagon is parked in the lay-by at the top of the drive, and we can do nothing to shift it. Our dining hall has been totally condemned, and we will have to replace it with something.

“Now that we cannot finance the building with non-existent money from the Draycott Foundation, we will have to go to the bank for a loan, which they will hardly grant us during the present chaos. We need a bursar; in fact, we needed one a week ago. If we don’t get Lartington, we will have to advertise. That will take at least a month. The appointee would have to give up to three months’ notice, by which time there won’t be anything for him to come to. We have got first refusal on Lartington at the moment, but there are others who are interested in him. By the way, he won’t come for nothing. He knows our position; everybody does. The Draycott Foundation is the buzz in the financial world about the dangers of DIY stockbroking. He will drive a hard bargain.”

“I fear we have no alternative, Ronald,” said Blance. The full enormity of the situation was sinking in. A retired Managing Director of a very large company with immense assets, he had never stared liquidation in the face, although many of his suppliers had. “Can you get him here to see us and we will hold an emergency meeting of the whole Governing Body to ratify his appointment?”

Wiseman walked over to the sideboard and picked up the telephone. After a few tense minutes in which he had to dial several different numbers, he managed to get hold of Lartington, who agreed to come to Tanswold to meet the Governors at The Hermitage on Thursday afternoon. He would stay at the Quarmby Manor Hotel, a fine country house hotel on the other side of Alverston, one of the best in the whole of the North of England.

There was a palpable sense of relief in the room as Wiseman sat down again and announced, “Lartington is coming, gentlemen.”

“What if he is no good? We cannot afford another idiot like Smith.”

Wiseman sighed, “It’s Lartington or Liquidation. Think about it.”

Stoate thought about it as he went back to his study. Even if Lartington proved a complete imbecile, he could not possibly do any worse than his predecessor with his fingers in the till. Anyway, he would not have got the ear of Margaret Thatcher if he had not been half-decent. The main point was that there was quite a severe risk of liquidation now unless something pretty radical was done. At least it would stave the bailiffs off for another year or so. With a bursar, they would be able to approach the bank for some kind of financing for the new dining room. It was vital that this got going. But what if Lartington did not like them? The thought did not bear thinking about...

As he came to his study, another unwelcome sensation struck Stoate. Instead of a thought, it was an apparition, that of Andrew McEwan, who was looking very angry.

“You will need to make an appointment to see me, Mr McEwan,” said Stoate who was staring another kind of more literal liquidation in the face.

“Rubbish, Headmaster. What I have to say to you will not last long. As you can see, I’m not too pleased. How dare you keep on treating us staff like disobedient third years? The reason that last Friday’s church service was such a shambles must rest with you and the Chaplain. How could you be so insensitive to the feelings of the school when a pupil dies so tragically? Could you not have had some kind of celebration of her life? And how could you look at yourself the

way you treated Sam Proudlock? Have you no feelings? Let me spell it out to you. His sister has died; he is very upset, as are his parents. You treat him as if he had gone out with the rugby team and smashed up a line o' lavvies!"

"Oh, that's very nit-picking, Mr McEwan," said Stoate condescendingly, "even for you. You, as a Deacon, should be aware that church is for considering serious issues, not like your wife's services at your church which are full of pop music and laughter. They are as bad as Mr Proudlock's..."

"You keep my wife out of this!" hissed McEwan.

Stoate was not put off. "They are a disgrace to the Anglican tradition. You use a modern bible that might as well have been written by a journalist from *The Sun*. Our church services are designed to teach the boys how to approach the Supreme Deity with reverence and a deep theological understanding. You should realise that the words of the 1662 Prayer Book and the Authorised Version are the only Holy form of worship which you would like to see be brought down to the level of a pop-concert."

"Will you not patronise me, Headmaster! How much more of this 'Holier than thou' and pious claptrap are we going to have to take? How dare you sack Peter Bromley? Where is your evidence? Don't you realise how hard he works?"

Stoate's blood pressure rose again. "How dare you come in here and lecture me on my management of my school?" Stoate yelled. "Do you want to be sacked as well? You are as incompetent as Bromley! What's more you are a friend of that man Proudlock, and as far as I'm concerned that makes you a fifth columnist, McEwan, and I do not like traitors one little bit. I suppose you preach the same lily-livered liberalism as Proudlock."

"You keep the Reverend Proudlock out of this, Stoate! You need not sack me, for if you do, I will take you and the school to the cleaners. You can be assured, Stoate, that I will not be leaving this madhouse until I don't have to pick up any more pieces from staff and boys who are wrecked by your bullying or have to help people muddle through your bungling."

"I have a file full of complaints from parents about your running of the English Department, McEwan, and I shall be investigating every aspect in detail as soon as all this nonsense is over. Not just your work or lack of it, but that of all your staff. And if anything is found to be amiss, your head is going to be on the block, so you had better reconsider your insubordination."

"You can check my work any time, Stoate. I do things by the book, so if you find that anything is wrong, it is because you have made it up. And you dare start

hassling my staff; you will do it over my dead body. I pride myself in supporting my staff, and I will do it against you. And you had better bear this in mind. My books are selling well. I don't need your money, but I will stay in this madhouse to help my staff to stand up against you. And if you get rid of me, I will still be available to them through the Union."

"I have complaints from parents, McEwan."

"What are these parental complaints, Headmaster? Are you going to show them to me? Come on, if they are there, I want to see them and I can put them right. Where are they? Are they in your filing cabinet? I asked you a question. Where are these complaints from the parents?"

"I won't discuss my sources. I have heard complaints against the English department mentioned."

"Are there any written formal complaints? Or is this just gossip? Or is it your wishful thinking?"

The complaints were just a figment of Stoaite's imagination and there was no evidence for any wrongdoing in the English Department. Andrew McEwan had won a prestigious nomination in a recent *Teachers' Oscars* ceremony for excellence in leadership and inspirational teaching. Andrew McEwan, as well as being a deacon and married to a non-stipendiary minister of the Church of England, was also making a name for himself as an author of historical novels. McEwan's works were beyond Stoaite, whose leisure reading was confined to adventure and war stories.

"If you don't like the way I run my department, you can go and argue it out with the inspectors," McEwan continued. "Are you going to tell those that nominated me for an award that they are wrong. Good publicity, *Super Teacher fired for Incompetence*, isn't it?"

"I will find something McEwan!" yelled Stoaite who was getting more desperate. "There is no way that I will let this pass. There will be something wrong. I will sack you and I will see to it that you are sued."

"And you will have made up false evidence. You have done it before. You seem adept at breaking the Ninth Commandment."

The breaking the Ninth Commandment, *Do not accuse anyone falsely* was an integral part of Stoaite's management style. He had modified the commandment to *Thou shalt not bear false witness unless it is in thy best interests to do so*. He could always justify any lies that he told in that telling them was good for the school and more importantly, good for J. L. Dunstan Stoaite. If

the lies resulted in some unfortunate come back, there was always somebody else to take the blame. It was a philosophy shared by most of the Byland Foresters. As he became more desperate, Stoate started getting personal.

“McEwan, I don’t want one of your Scottish revivalist sermons, talking about God as Father,” Stoate snapped.

“I wouldn’t worry, Stoate. I will not throw pearls before swine!”

The reference to swine angered Stoate further and he yelled, “You call yourself a bloody preacher. God help your wife’s parishioners, with your daughters dancing about in the aisles to rave music, like a couple of whores on heat!”

McEwan put his face close to Stoate, his face white with rage. Stoate backed away.

“How dare you? You keep my daughters out of this,” McEwan hissed, his Midlothian accent thickening all the time. “Never ever talk about them in those turms again! I’m no’ wasting my time here.”

Before Stoate could think of a suitable and vulgar personal put-down, McEwan turned on his heel and slammed the door. Stoate sat down in his armchair. He too was in a white heat of fury. His cage had been well and truly rattled. Stoate loathed people who stood up to him, especially tall, lanky Scotsmen who spoke in a strong Midlothian accent. The world and life of J. L. Dunstan Stoate had been created by himself entirely for his own benefit and not for others. He had deserved it and it was his God-given right. It was perfect and its integrity had to be preserved at all costs. McEwan had challenged it time and time again; he was a flea that irritated Stoate’s view of himself as manly perfection. He would get rid of McEwan by fair means (unlikely) or foul, which he would be able to justify before himself, his Forester friends and the Supreme Deity. He sat down with a glass of brandy to calm himself down.

Although Stoate had heard that the inquest on Gemma Proudlock had started, the events at the Alverston Coroner’s Court were sufficiently far away for him to ignore them, as long as the Coroner did not demand that he give evidence in court. Carter-Barr could earn his substantial fees by taking the rap on behalf of the school. If Stoate did not see any of the Proudlock family ever again, it would still be too soon. He was to be disappointed. Two policemen were escorting Samuel Proudlock into the Headmaster’s Secretary’s office. They had picked him up as a truant in Alverston after he had started a run and had now returned him to Tanswold School. Constable Apps read from the form he had filled in for

the Educational Welfare Officer, “We have Samuel Malcolm John Chamberlain Proudlock for you. Is he one of yours? Right mouthful, unless, of course, you’re taking the piss, Proudlock. We’ll check that up, kid. Giving false information to a police officer is a serious offence.”

“Those are his names, officer,” said the Headmaster’s Secretary.

“I would have thought two at the most would have been quite sufficient,” replied Apps who had difficulty with spelling *Wayne* or *Donna*.

The door to the Study opened and Storate looked around to see who had come to torment him now. He was still rattled after his none-too-pleasant meeting with Andrew McEwan. And he had had enough of policemen to last him until he retired.

“Good God,” Storate shouted, “I didn’t believe in fairies until now. What the hell are you doing here, Proudlock? I would have thought that if there were fairies, they would be at the bottom of the garden, not in my own bloody office!”

“We suspect this youth of playing truant from your school, Headmaster,” said Apps, a little taken aback by Storate’s hostile reaction.

“This ‘youth’, as you call him, whom I prefer to call a ‘fairy’, is no longer one of ours. He doesn’t have the guts to take what is needed to be a Tanswoldian. I had him on detention last Friday and he went bawling to Daddy who has withdrawn him from the school. God knows where he is going to and I can’t say I really care. I now don’t even care if he doesn’t get his hair cut, now that he’s joining presumably the louts and tarts at Goyder’s.”

“Headmaster,” said Constable Oates, “could you turn it up a bit? As a matter of fact, the kid tells us he’s going to Alverston Grammar School.”

Oates butted in, and immediately wished that he hadn’t, “Is it true his sister has died? Or is the kid telling us a cock and bull story?”

“It’s true,” replied Storate. “Fuss he made was pitiful. He disrupted the solemnity of our church service with his bawling. He’s no longer a part of the school and I am not sorry to lose him. Now get that pouffe out of here.”

In the car Constable Apps said nothing. He was considering a short and nasty future in which the least he could expect was a bollocking from the Superintendent. He had already had a rocket from Detective Commander Smithells for his ham-fisted impounding of the computers at Tanswold School. He was still sore after his subsequent demotion from Sergeant. There were still several complaints pending from the public about his dealings with them. In the canteen he had gained the nickname ‘Civility Charles’. He had been brought up

in a tough area of Bradford where they believed in ‘plain Yorkshire speaking’, which everybody else around here called ‘plain Yorkshire bad manners’.

Sam was still very shaken by the whole ordeal. When they arrived at the Rectory, the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock had just returned from the inquest, which had been adjourned. Constable Apps had something of a downer on the Rector, whom he despised as a lily-livered liberal who got in the way of his dealings with villains. He was going to get one-up on the Red Rev this time. Instead, he was about to get his come-uppance, for the Reverend Proudlock was striding towards the car. Giant he was but not looking very gentle.

It was a red-faced Constable Apps who left the Rectory with a flea in his ear. And there was nothing soft or effeminate about it either. An interview with the Super and another disciplinary procedure seemed to be an imminent outcome. This behaviour was precisely the sort of thing that the Superintendent at Alverston Police Station was trying to stamp out with his ‘Courtesy Cops’ initiative.

At Tanswold School, Dunstan Stoate was trying to stamp out the image of Master Proudlock from his mind. By the end of that Monday, he was in a thoroughly bad temper, which had not been improved by seeing Master Proudlock being frog-marched into his office by two of the ignorant oafs that had burst in on his school a couple of weeks before. The sight of the tall, skinny, and effeminate youth, in his running shorts made him feel quite ashamed. Dunstan Stoate hated this skeleton in his cupboard. Anyone who stirred these sleeping dogs could and should expect to be severely bitten.

Several sixth form students, boys and girls, had come to ask his permission to attend Gemma Proudlock’s funeral and Stoate’s reply had been short, sharp and snappy. He reminded them about what had happened to the Simpson girl and the same sanction would apply to them. Indeed, he would stand up in Sixth Form assembly the next day and reinforce his threat, lest there be any misunderstanding.

Stoate knew that Mr Owen at Alverston Grammar School would be delighted to have Proudlock back, and that several parents had made appointments with him to arrange transfers of their children. The thought of him and the other local Heads waiting to pick over the remains of Tanswold School like so many vultures infuriated him. His final act of the day was to write a totally fallacious letter to Mr Owen, accusing Samuel Proudlock of being a troublemaker, including several false accusations of theft.

Chapter 8

By the time Thursday arrived, Dunstan Stoate was in a more optimistic frame of mind. On the Tuesday Stoate had given a firm warning to the Sixth Form forbidding them to attend Gemma Proudlock's funeral. Later he sent out a letter to that effect to all parents, reminding them that their sons and daughters were at a school, not a college, so could not be allowed to go in and out at will. True, Andrew McEwan dropped in for another little fireside chat; there had been another spectacular fireworks display as a result. Stoate spent much of Wednesday brooding about how he should get rid of McEwan, but short of murdering him, there seemed little he could do; Stoate did not fancy spending the rest of his life in Canterill Prison. He had also been annoyed that he was being summoned to Gemma Proudlock's inquest, but later advice from Mr Carter-Barr, the school solicitor, suggested that only a representative need go, and Stoate decided to send Matron.

Stoate was more rattled by the scathing nature of Mr Owen's reply to his letter about Samuel Proudlock:

Dear Mr Stoate,

I was somewhat taken aback by the contents of your letter concerning Samuel Proudlock. My first conclusion was that you were writing about another pupil whom you may have expelled, and got the names muddled up. As a result, I decided to do a little bit of quiet sleuthing, and my final conclusion is that your allegations have no basis whatever in fact.

I have known Samuel from the time he entered this school in Year 7 (First Year) and the kind of allegations you assert bear no resemblance to the Samuel that I know. I have spoken to his housemaster, Mr Patterson, and he knows of no incidents of the kind that you describe. At no point was Samuel anywhere near expulsion. The staff at your school have praised his high academic achievement

and described his attitude and maturity as being more like a that of a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old, rather than a boy not yet fourteen.

I have no intention whatever in redirecting Samuel to the Alverstonshire High School. I am particularly pleased to have regained this high achieving and most charming young man into my school, and I am supported in this by all my staff.

I have spoken at length to Samuel and his father, and both have told a sorry tale of his time at Tanswold School. Samuel is deeply traumatised by the death of his sister and his experiences of bullying, which appears to be endemic at Tanswold School. At first sight, it appears that you have dealt with Gemma's family and friends in a high-handed and arrogant way which transgresses the border of callousness. You will be aware that I have taken into our Sixth Form Lucy Simpson whom you so summarily expelled for the heinous crime of visiting her dying best friend in hospital.

I am outraged that a man in your position should stoop to the level of sending such malicious material in the hope of damaging the future prospects of your ex-students. It is low and clearly the action of a man who is losing control. The stories I hear of your poor management of your staff bear this out, and I would seriously suggest that you consider whether you are a fit and proper man to be running a school of any sort, let alone one of the calibre of Tanswold School.

I have taken the liberty of making several photocopies of your letter, one of which I have sent to the Reverend Proudlock, with whom I have discussed the matter and one to his solicitor, should he wish to pursue the matter further.

I shall enter into no further correspondence with you on this matter.

*Yours sincerely
Brian Owen.*

Stoate did not like anybody telling him how to run his school. McEwan had been doing it for ages from within and now this man Owen was telling him how to do it from without. He had act decisively. If that damned man Proudlock did take him to court, and it seemed likely that he would, they would produce the letter, and it would undermine his credibility as a witness. He quickly destroyed the copy that he had taken and rewrote the letter in fulsome praise of Master Proudlock, an action that stuck in his throat. He made several photocopies. He

was glad that he had not got Eileen to type it on the computer that had just been returned to her. Computer sleuths could dredge out all sorts of deleted rubbish.

There had also been several complaints by parents of Sixth Formers about his high-handed approach to attendance of Gemma Proudlock's friends at her funeral. He had replied that there was no way that he could give in to such pressure and that he expected full attendance by the Sixth Formers on Friday. He decided to ground them all, cancelling all *exeats* for the whole day.

Mr McEwan had left him a memo stating that he would be taking the day off on Friday to attend Gemma's funeral regardless. He could do without the day's pay. Cover had been arranged. If Stoate disapproved, he would have to sack him, with all the attendant noise and bad publicity. Stoate did not feel up to another battle with his nemesis. Instead, he called in Mr Patterson and gave him a rocket for discussing students with other schools without the Headmaster's authority. In future, all communication would be by letter, approved by the Headmaster in person. A strongly worded memorandum went out to the housemasters to that effect.

It was an immense relief for him to see Sir Ronald Wiseman and Donald Blance getting out of their cars. Stoate went to join them for elevenses in the Old Dining Room, and they started to chat about the imminent arrival of Crispin Lartington, the new Bursar.

It was Crispin Lartington's second journey into the wilds of Northern England. Lartington was very representative of the North-South Divide. He had been brought up in a fashionable area of London by parents who were very conscious of their social status. He had gone to Eton and got a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. He had been a regular attender at society events such as Royal Ascot, where his mother displayed her latest minimalist and extremely expensive designer headgear, Henley Royal Regatta, Wimbledon and the Trooping of the Colour. Like many people who had been brought up in such an environment, Lartington had a very narrow and starchy view of social issues. As an Etonian, he had adopted his parents' firm view that only the working classes sent their children to grammar schools, and as for comprehensives, they did not bear thinking about. Lartington did as much as he could to avoid any area in which he would come across the working classes, lest he be contaminated with all the vermin and filthy diseases that they carried. He had thought that Oxford

was desperately far away from civilisation, as he knew it, and that once one reached Birmingham, the civilised world had ceased altogether.

Crispin Lartington enjoyed a rich social life in which black-tie dinners and balls were a regular part. In his teens he had joined the Young Conservatives, fully participating in and enjoying the high jinks of their meetings. Some killjoys condemned these capers as mindless vandalism, but vandalism only occurred on the council estates. His up-bringing, political views and socialisation gave him the self-assured arrogance that enabled him to be ruthless in his dealings with others and completely insensitive to their feelings or the consequences of his actions to them.

In the late eighties, Lartington made his first journey to the North. He had been lured to Durham by some old Etonian friends of his who had failed to get into Oxford but had accepted places at the various colleges of Durham University. Many had now left but still kept a close association with each other and their old colleges; one or two were still writing their doctoral theses. It took a little persuasion to get Lartington to travel north on one of the new electric trains, but eventually he made it and was surprised to see that there were motor cars similar to those he knew in London. They travelled on tarmac motor roads, which were lit by electric lights. There were telephones and new-fangled devices called PCs which not many people knew how to use. There were even baths and flush lavatories. Nonetheless, the working classes that he so despised seemed ubiquitous.

On the Saturday, he had watched the first day's racing at Durham Regatta, in which one of his friends was a competitor and had won one of his races. That night, he and his friends had attended a party in a marquee by the river. It had been hilarious, and it was even funnier when a large group of them had staggered down to the town rowing club's premises. One of them decided to show off his sculling prowess and they launched a single sculling racing shell that they had found. The only oars they could find were the large kind to be used in a four-oared or eight-oared boat, but they still managed to force them into the sculler's outriggers. Their friend made little progress before the shell turned turtle, depositing him in the river. It was a comical sight, watching him spluttering back to the landing stage, weighed down in his now ruined evening suit, one oar floating gently down the river, and the sculling shell with the other oar drifting over to the other side. They went back singing on the tops of their voices:

*Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.*

In the cold light of Sunday morning, the owner of the sculling shell, a thirty-year-old doctor from Sheffield, was not in the least bit amused by the previous night's antics. Nor were his friends. Lartington, who had come down to watch the second day's racing and was still nursing a hangover, was somewhat surprised to find himself confronted by a stocky fair-haired young man in black rowing kit with two parallel yellow stripes, just like the oars had. The stocky man, who had the smallest hint of a Midlands accent, seemed rather annoyed and announced himself as the secretary of the Sheffield University Rowing Club. Did he know who the organiser was of the party last night? It was a genuine surprise to Lartington that there was a university at all in Sheffield, let alone one of distinguished academic standing. That the students rowed as well was even more of a surprise. He had always thought it was cloth caps and coal mines. And this little north-country bumpkin was asking him who the organiser was and did he know what had happened to this blade which was worth £120? He did not have a clue but was rescued by someone who did. Normally he would have pushed this aggressive little tyke into the river, but there were several other young men similarly dressed nearby and he decided against.

One of his friends was rowing in *Senior II* eights that afternoon and University College were due to race a crew from Sheffield University and Polytechnic. The Sheffield crew looked small compared to his University College friends and four of them had been racing throughout the day. It would be a walk-over for the University College First Eight. Lartington stood on a concrete footbridge about fifty metres from the end of the seven hundred and fifty metre course. He could only just see the start, as the river had a slight bend. It was a long time before the race got under way as the University College First Eight had fiddled on at their boathouse. Eventually he could just see his friends backing on to the stakeboat and the race had started. When both crews were in sight, Lartington was horrified to see the Sheffield eight clearly ahead and he saw them increase their rate of striking, leaving his friends even further behind. Just as the two crews came to the footbridge, the number three oarsman in the Sheffield crew lost control of his oar, caught a most enormous crab and lost the

oar completely. The oar swung around, digging into the water and the Sheffield boat, a fine white racing shell that rejoiced in the name *Damfast* became dam' stopped, lurching across the river in spray and expletives, its number three outrigger bent by the force. His friends at University College eased the pressure and paddled over the line.

Meanwhile the Sheffield crew who had just snatched defeat from the jaws of victory recomposed themselves to finish the race. The sight of this tickled Lartington no end. Well, it was all part of the game. It was a shame that the BBC were not there, for it would have appeared on *Auntie's Sporting Bloomers*. Beside himself with laughter, Lartington walked down the riverbank towards the hospitality tent. As he walked, the Sheffield crew went past and their rowing was immaculate. The number three oarsman, a tall, gaunt young man with short hair had a very red face. Lartington was about to call out when somebody else did it for him in a very refined voice, "What's it feel like to have caught a crab, Sheffield?"

There was no reply, except for the Bow oarsman who took his right hand off his oar, raised it and made a two-fingered gesture. Lartington recognised him as the aggressive little oik who had questioned him that morning.

Twenty minutes later, Lartington and his friends recognised a number of small aggressive young men in black rowing kit with two diagonal yellow stripes. Among them was the tall gaunt youth at three and the stocky fair-haired lout at bow who had made the obscene gestures. These two and the rest did not look very pleased. Lartington, his friends and others recognised trouble when it was on its way. It was definitely a time not to be around and a large number of them decided to make a hurried exit.

A hurried exit was not going to be the likely outcome of Lartington's second trip north, although judging from his progress there might be a hurried entrance. Lartington had chosen to motor north in his Mercedes, but today motoring was not a word by which he could describe his journey. The motorway to the North had proved to be a linear car, coach and lorry park. Each vehicle, having made its serial entry, shuffled along serially a few metres at a time, eventually to make its serial exit. Lartington had wanted to arrive at Quarmby Manor, Mid Yorkshire's best country house hotel, in plenty of time to have a good rest, a good long bath and an excellent dinner, so that he could be fully prepared for his meeting with the Governors at Tanswold School the next day. By the time he

had arrived, the good rest and the bath part of the evening's program had had to be postponed and Lartington was in a pretty foul temper.

His mood improved as he was shown his room, which was luxurious and even further after his excellent dinner. He relaxed in the drawing room with coffee and liqueurs. He considered the assignment that he would take on. Since the time that Sir Ronald Wiseman had approached him and persuaded him to come north, he had looked into things in his characteristically thorough way. His conclusion was that they needed him much more than he needed them, and it would give him a strong position from which to drive a hard bargain. He had spoken at length to the manager of the Tanswold branch of the Midland and Great Northern Bank, and brought him down to London, all expenses paid. They had discussed the financial situation of Tanswold School which was a lot more precarious than anyone wanted to admit. He had also looked at Stoa's plans to build the new dining room and the costings. He had heard about the bad publicity surrounding the death of a student due to food poisoning, and provision would have to be made for the fall-out from that. There would be massive fines to pay, and considerable compensation to the bereaved family, should any negligence be proved.

Lartington was an expert in in management and financial accountancy. He had devised a rescue strategy that he had used with many companies that had asked for his advice. His approach was to make the companies leaner and fitter for effective competition in the free market. He believed passionately in the free market economics of Milton Friedman, and his acumen had led directly to the ear of Margaret Thatcher. One had to be ruthless; there could be no passengers. He would axe much of the workforce, and those who were left had to do the work that both they and their ex-colleagues used to do. Loyalty and long service were luxuries that lean, mean companies at the cutting edge of the free market could not afford; indeed, in Lartington's model, the longer one's service, the more likely was redundancy. With the aid of Thatcher's anti-union legislation, new contracts were issued to the staff left, cutting their wages.

If the job could be done cheaper overseas in low wage economies, so much the better. Many of Lartington's solutions involved the production of goods in sweat-shop conditions, where the wages were virtual slavery and the welfare and safety of the workforce were totally ignored. Many companies were persuaded to abandon their North of England operations, and Lartington had contributed single-handedly to the considerable rise in unemployment and low wages that

had occurred in the late nineteen-eighties. His solutions were always “bottom-up”. He regarded working people as economic sub-units at a lower level than the plant that they operated. The higher up the hierarchy one went, the less things changed; his solutions always recommended handsome pay-increases for the Board, and increased perks for the most highly paid staff. Although Labour Party politicians, whom Lartington despised, complained vociferously about “fat-cat salaries”, Lartington was feted, wined and dined in boardrooms all over London and the Home Counties. His remuneration was always handsome.

Now that the impossible had happened and the Conservatives had been routed in the election, Lartington’s solutions had lost favour somewhat and it was the turn of the Right Honourable A C L Blair and his cabinet ministers to be feted in the boardrooms. Although Lartington had managed to maintain a comfortable lifestyle for himself and his family, he longed for something to get his teeth into. Although this opportunity was not a major company, but a minor and impecunious public school that had been beggared by a financial scandal, it would enable him to keep his hand in. He knew how desperate they were. Unfortunately, the teaching could not be contracted out overseas at poverty wages in this case. If they did not like his terms, he would just walk out, and by the end of the week, Tanswold School would be closed for good. Even if he did manage to keep them afloat for another year or two, he would walk away the richer, and that was what mattered.

Lartington went up to his room, put some finishing touches to his proposals, and relaxed in a hot bath, before turning in for the night. He knew that some of his proposals might not go down well with all the Governors. He would have to be ruthless, so he wanted to be on top form for the next day. At least the road between Quarmby and Tanswold would be quiet.

The next morning, after a workout in the gym, a swim and a relax in the *Jacuzzi*, Lartington enjoyed an excellent breakfast, before settling down in the drawing room to read the *Financial Times*. He made one or two decisions on the markets, updated his laptop and sent some instructions to his stockbrokers. He did not have to be at The Hermitage until late morning. He was relaxed to the point of supine decadence.

The mood in The Hermitage was far from relaxed that morning. Although the full meeting of the Governing Body was not until the afternoon, several of the governors had arrived early. Although they knew well that the school was in

a serious crisis, they were shocked to find out how close they were to being wound up by the bank. At least there was going to be somebody who was going to sort out the whole sorry mess. On the other hand, if even at this late stage, he did not turn up, or even worse, walked out, there would be real trouble. Tanswold School would be finished.

Stoate was starting to come to terms with the fact that he was responsible for its demise and that he alone would now have to carry the can for it. He had always been Sir Kenneth Rounce's protégé. While Sir Kenneth was the dominant influence, no blame for anything would be able to stick. Now with Sir Kenneth gone, he was not so sure. True, there were still Donald Blance, Sir Ronald Wiseman and Lionel Hyland, but all three were now getting old and other members of the Governing Body would be sure to jockey for their position. Lionel Hyland was particularly elderly and starting to get frail. One or two Governors were now starting to mutter about Stoate's handling of the whole affair and there were ominous phrases like "Dunstan's becoming a liability" and "mud sticks". There seemed to be a groundswell of opinion amongst the less senior governors that the whole miserable affair was due to Stoate's negligence and that he should be brought to account. Although Stoate had brought many people to account in his time, regardless of whether it was fair or not to have done so, he was facing it himself. In short, if things did go pear-shaped during this meeting, he would be for the high jump. It was not a prospect he relished.

Dunstan Stoate decided that if things did get nasty, he would announce his retirement at that meeting and left the Old Dining Room to go and write his statement. As he sat at his desk, he said a little prayer to the Supreme Deity, beseeching Him that in His manifold wisdom, he would send this new bursar. It was clear that the Supreme Deity was inclined to harken unto Stoate, for a silver-grey Mercedes pulled up and parked outside The Hermitage. A tall man in a grey suit got out and was being received by Eileen in the office outside. Stoate put aside his worries and greeted his new visitor with great effusiveness and charm.

Lartington was not one to mix business with small talk and as soon as he entered the Old Dining Room, he was questioning all the governors who were there about their knowledge of the various scandals that had rocked the school in the past month. He made no direct observations but was taking in their answers one by one. He asked for a detailed tour of the school and was conducted by the Headmaster and the Acting Chair of Governors. As he passed through each area, he asked detailed questions about the staffing, the experience and expertise of

the staff. As he listened to each answer, he acknowledged it with a curt, "I see." He met the groundsmen but declined to shake their hands, pointing out that in this kind of business, one kept one's distance. It would not do to get one's hands dirty.

Lartington commented several times that the classes seemed quite small; therefore, the distribution of resources was inefficient. He ignored Stoate's answer that small classes were at the heart of Tanswold School's academic success. Lartington could not disagree more. It was his influence that minded a working party of right-wing academics to throw out that notion when asked to research it by the Government. He poked his nose into every aspect of school life, though he regretted it instantly when he went into the boys' lavatories.

While going around The Hermitage, Lartington commented about the waste of resources represented by the Staff room; they were there to work, not socialise in easy chairs. The staff workroom, which was a very large room directly above the staff room, was condemned in similar terms. The Bursar's office was derided as totally inadequate. Both Stoate and Blance were getting hot under the collar but knew it was wise to say nothing.

When they had returned to Stoate's office, Lartington started to quiz him about management issues. Lartington was ignoring Stoate's high-handed manner with his teaching staff. They were low in the hierarchy, so they did not matter. On the other hand, he focused sharply on two matters, firstly Stoate's incompetence with financial matters, especially his negligence over the Draycott Foundation, and, secondly, his tendency to expel pupils at a whim. Stoate became quite angry. Lartington ignored the old fool's bluster as mere defensiveness of a very embarrassed man. He was cold and clinical, even more so than Smithells when he was investigating the fraud in the first place. Stoate knew that Lartington was more than a match for him, but also had to be kept on board somehow, as he was the knight in white armour who was going to plug the holes on the badly leaking ship. He had the feeling that Lartington would have made short work of Sir Kenneth. The man exuded an arrogance that barely concealed his contempt for everyone involved, simply because they were from the North. Finally, Lartington announced that he would work in the Bursar's office until luncheon and was not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

"Donald," said Stoate after Lartington had left, "will you join me for a brandy? I think we need it for medicinal purposes! That bloody man thinks he owns the place!"

“I’m afraid to say, Dunstan, that he does,” replied Blance sadly. “He’s got us over a barrel. I’ll definitely join you for that brandy.”

Lartington looked contemptuously around the dingy office from which Graham Smith had caused such a spectacular crash. On the desk was a pile of unpaid bills, bank statements and final demands. There were some letters from debt collection agencies as well. There was a computer in the corner, from which he hoped he might glean something. It was an ancient machine and when he switched it on, it wheezed into life with a death rattle. A series of beeps indicated that not all was well, and its screen became covered with strange symbols, before blanking out completely. With a dull pop from within and a wisp of acrid smoke from without, the machine breathed its last. He was not to know that Smithells’ men had condemned it as useless and had not bothered to impound it. Lartington pulled the plug from the wall and plugged in his laptop. He started to type furiously.

In the Old Dining Room, the entire Governing Body had assembled and were having their pre-luncheon drinks. As they waited for their guest to arrive, there was a tangible air of apprehension. Of those who had had dealings with Lartington, none had found it enjoyable. They picked at their nibbles and made nervous small talk. All of them expected the worst but hoped it would not happen. Eventually, Lartington came in and they sat down to luncheon, accompanied by an excellent Hock.

Lartington seemed easier now and expressed his self-assured opinions on a wide variety of subjects, especially as the Hock took effect. Lartington had a long conversation with Sir Ronald about the various concerts that were on in Town, enthusing knowledgeable about the performances. Stoate muttered to Blance, “At least he’s not a complete and utter philistine. But I think he’s keeping his powder dry.”

At the end of luncheon, Lartington excused himself, got a computer data-projector from his car and connected it to his laptop in the Old Library. Bringing their coffees, the Governing Body of Tanswold School filed through and sat down at the old oak table. The curtains were drawn and Donald Blance stood up to speak.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I start my first governors’ meeting as Chairman in very strange and difficult circumstances. This time last month, we were looking forward to a period of considerable prosperity. Now we are staring ruin in the face, and, as you know, Sir Kenneth has had to resign for

reasons that are not unconnected with the sad affair that has so nearly brought us to our knees. He asked me to take the chair until such time as proper elections are held to appoint a Chairman. It has cleared a logjam that will enable the Governing Body to proceed effectively in a constitutional manner.

“As you know, the day-to-day financial operations of the school have been crippled by the fact that we have had no bursar since the arrest of Graham Smith. This has got to a point that not only have our staff not been paid, but more importantly the bills have not been paid either. We now have a deficit at the Midland and Great Northern Bank which the bank is threatening to call in. In effect, they will close us down by the end of next week, unless we can sort the mess out.

“Ronald, to whom we are greatly indebted, has found a way out of this *impasse* in that he has used his considerable network of friends and business associates to find Mr Crispin Lartington, who has kindly agreed to see what he can do for us. Mr Lartington has been working very hard to come up with a rescue plan, which he is putting to the bank and us. Mr Lartington, as you know, has made a very fine name for himself in not only picking up businesses, but also in making them lean, fit, strong and competitive. He will, he has promised, be able to do the same for us. Therefore, I would like to hand over to Mr Crispin Lartington.”

Crispin Lartington stood up, went over to the data-projector and turned it on, saying, “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. When Sir Ronald first invited me to consider Tanswold School, I naturally gave a lot of thought about the problem that you as a Governing Body find yourselves in. Your position is not unique; I have assisted several companies who have been brought to the brink by the actions, largely unnoticed, of an unsupervised loose cannon. Tanswold School is a business, of which you are the directors and my proposals are unashamedly business oriented.

“You will be glad to hear that I have been doing my homework over the last few days. I have spoken at length to your bank manager, to Staunton, Hardy & Co, and other institutions interested in your financial affairs. I have spoken to most of you this morning, and that has shed a little light on the problem as well. I will give you the bad news first. You are technically bankrupt.”

There was a gasp from some of the governors who had still to appreciate the full gravity of the situation. Lartington continued, “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, that is the truth of the matter. Your liabilities far exceed your immediately

realisable assets. In effect you have relied on the Draycott money to be a security for the day-to-day cash flow. Unfortunately, it no longer exists, all bar one hundred k. And your overdraft at the bank currently stands at sixty k. There are ten thousand pounds worth of unpaid bills, and your staff have not been paid for last month. That alone is a liability of one hundred and forty k. You can see how the figures are mounting up. The bank is on the point of declaring you insolvent and taking proceedings to liquidate your assets. To be even more blunt, if nothing is done now, The Hermitage will be for sale by the end of the month. It would attract interest either as a country house hotel, or a corporate head office.

“The good news is that I have the way out of this mess, a solution that will lead Tanswold School not only to be a centre of educational excellence, as far as it is possible to have such in the North, but also a beacon of business excellence. It will be an example that many an educational institution would wish to follow. I will lay my proposals before you. If you wish to accept them, I will see them through to their successful conclusion. If you do not accept them, I will leave this place, and my fees will be added to your liabilities.

“Firstly, I work from the bottom up. I expect the lowest grades to take the most redundancy, and those left to take on more work. I propose a fifty percent reduction in ancillary staff. Those left will work longer hours. As their union is not recognised by the school, a management issue for which I applaud you, I propose an immediate reduction of twenty percent in their wages. This will take immediate effect, and the redundant staff will leave at the end of next week. I will allow them one week’s wages as redundancy pay. The rest will sign new contracts; if they refuse, they will be declaring themselves redundant and no compensation will be paid.

“Secondly, I propose that the teaching staff will take a pay cut of fifteen percent. I do not intend to make any member of staff redundant at this stage, but I will review the value-effectiveness of each department with a view to removing under-performing departments and staff next year. If any staff refuse to sign the new contract, they will be deemed to have resigned with immediate effect. I propose also to freeze all spending budgets to the end of the academic year, with one exception, the Headmaster’s and Governors’ Expenses. My solutions are designed to minimise any disruption to the activities of boards of directors and I can assure you how much that is appreciated.

“The Midland and Great Northern Bank is satisfied with my strategy in dealing with the Human Resources of Tanswold School and have congratulated

me on such forward thinking. I would advise you not to consider the feelings of your staff. Businesses can only be successful if they regard Human Resources as one of a number of economic sub-units the value-effectiveness of which is monitored continuously. For each worker it's got to be hard, it's got to be competitive and anyone who starts to show any sign of weakness has to be eliminated."

Professor MacManners got up and exploded, "Good God, our staff are human beings! They have been loyal, they have feelings and they have families. They are not mere economic sub-units to be thrown out into the skip like a burnt-out drill or knackered computer!"

"That, Sir, is where your view on business differs from mine, but I know mine to be correct. In the free market, it's the survival of the fittest. Lean and competitive companies have no place for outdated luxuries like loyalty, or long-service awards. My best companies ease out the geriatrics when they are fifty-five, so they don't have to pay them a pension."

"We're all geriatrics here," roared the Professor, "and I will have nothing to do with your ghastly solution. No wonder this area has such high unemployment. Decent people thrown out on the scrap heap. I see it every day in Carlsborough."

"I would spare the soft-left ideas of the seventies," Lartington replied icily. "If you have not got the stomach for my proposals, you have one option only. I will spell it out for those of you who are too limited to have understood it already. Tanswold School will close at the end of next week.

"My next proposal involves some investment. A few weeks ago, you were considering a long-overdue replacement for your dining-hall. I have some good news for you. That will go ahead. I have spoken to the builders and architects, who have stated that they are in a position to proceed immediately, once I give the go-ahead, and the Midland and Great Northern Bank will be financing the project. I have stressed the importance of the building being fitted out to be able to serve meals to pupils and members of the teaching staff at the start of the next academic year. Time is of the essence, and I have promised the builders a handsome bonus if the project is fully complete and operational by that time. Staff will be expected to pay for their dinners in future. In the meantime, I have ordered a temporary building to cater for sandwiches at lunchtime. Not a totally satisfactory solution, but it will get rid of the appalling vehicle that was being parked at the top the drive as I came in.

“I propose to have work done in The Hermitage as well. The present staffroom is not a value-effective use of space. I propose that it is closed with immediate effect and redecorated and refitted to house my staff, who will be managed by me as Financial Director, and a new position of Financial Manager. I propose to take over the staff workroom, which is currently in the room directly above the staffroom. I will also require a network of up-to-the-minute computers for my staff and myself. I have arranged with a company from London to install it, with custom-made software. For a replacement staffroom, the current Bursar’s office would be quite adequate. The teaching staff only need a room to attend staff meetings. Their pigeonholes could go there too. With immediate effect, their privilege of free coffee will be withdrawn. They are here to work and not to socialise. I will rent a vending machine for coffee and tea for their use. As for a work room, they can do their work in their classrooms at lunchtime, or better still, at home during the evenings, weekends and holidays.”

“You can tell my staff that, Mr Lartington,” Stoate interrupted. It would give the dreadful McEwan something other than him to get his teeth into. He relished the prospect of this well-heeled Southerner coming face-to-face with pure, undiluted Midlothian fury.

“I will do precisely that, Headmaster, and tell them also that I will put a stop to their widespread abuse of the telephone for personal calls and the appalling wastage of photocopying. They will have to get used to tightening their belts.”

Lionel Hyland had a question to ask, “You say that you have ordered all this stuff and have assurances from builders. Is this not a little premature? Are we not interviewing you as to your suitability as Bursar at this school? And you are now telling us of your decisions on staffing and expenditure policies that would normally be decided by the Governing Body? Is this not rather irregular and more than a bit impertinent?”

Lartington replied icily, “In the normal run of things, you might just have a point. If the financial arrangements of this school had been run competently and supervised properly, you would be able to afford the luxury of choosing a Bursar whom you could feel most at ease with. The financial acumen of this governing body is so poor that if it were seen in a junior member of my staff, it would result in that person’s instant dismissal. I am here to propose a rescue package. I can walk out of here and there is plenty for me to do. I would remind you that if this meeting does not have a satisfactory outcome for me, I will still submit to you my fees for professional services and expenses. They run to five figures. I will

send a copy to Touche de Veres, who have been put on stand-by to act as receivers. It's your choice. Shall I continue?"

Lartington did continue, with a litany of proposals that made it clear that Tanswold School would never be the same again. He went through detailed costings, presenting them from his computer onto the screen. He also went through a list of probable liabilities that would arise from the scandals of the past few weeks. Nobody had realised that Smith had been dipping into the pensions of the younger staff and there were back-payments to be made for National Insurance. Detective Commander Smithells was at that very moment about to charge Graham Smith on these counts.

There was also a gasp of shock when Lartington outlined his plans for the remainder of the Draycott Foundation. Sir Ronald interjected, "But that's what the other man did and that's why we are beggared!"

"The difference between Smith and me is that he was a little North Country bank clerk trying to do what we in London are good at. I am an expert and I will make the Draycott Foundation work. True, it will never work to your original plans, but it might provide some income for a scholarship.

"The Headmaster has told me about his plans for expansion, which you well know and approve," Lartington continued, "and I approve. Your expansion plans will have to be even more ambitious than those proposed. To cover the costs that I have outlined, you will need an extra one hundred and fifty pupils, notwithstanding those who have been withdrawn or expelled. You will need to consider what sanctions you will have to employ against those who break the rules. Expulsion of unruly children is no longer a luxury you can afford. You will have to send begging letters to parents whose children have failed the entrance exam, and you will have to market the school aggressively. I have approached an advertising agency in Town who will help, but you and your staff will have to do their fair share. You can use your forthcoming speech day to do some recruitment. Poach them from local schools, both state and private. Do it by fair means or foul, but you will have to do it.

"Now I have outlined my proposals, I shall state my terms on which I will carry them out for you. I will work here from Monday afternoon to Wednesday evening, at which point I will return to London where I can attend to my other business interests. I will be able to attend to Tanswold School business while I am away as I will set up a link between here and my computer at home. My

Financial Manager will attend to anything that is urgent. I will require a salary of sixty-five k, plus expenses, including the rent on a *pied-a-terre* up here..."

There was a shocked belch from the entire Governing Body at this demand. Stoate stood up and shouted, "That's more than I earn as Headmaster and I work a five-day week. As far as I'm concerned, the Bursar is no more than a bank clerk to keep our finances in order! Your predecessor was paid twenty-five thousand a year. And I wish you wouldn't use that vulgar term 'k'. What makes you think you are worth more?"

"That's the problem. You paid peanuts and look what you got—a monkey and a thieving one at that. The remuneration package that I am demanding is a lot less than my normal rate, which is why I want to attend to more profitable ventures on a Thursday and Friday. I agree with you that Bursars are little more than bank clerks. That is why I am a Financial Director, and I have professional experience and skill, which is what you are paying for. What is more, I had more financial acumen at the age of twelve than all of you amateurs put together. You, Mr Stoate, are just a mere schoolmaster, which, as the novelist Ben McCauley wrote two hundred years ago, is the 'refuse of all other professions'. It is as true today as then."

"And what happens if your solution doesn't work?" asked Hyland. "What do we do?"

"You go under. It's quite simple."

"And you?"

Lartington put on a patronising tone of voice, "It doesn't affect me at all. I will bring in Touche de Veres from London to liquidate you. They will ensure that the bank, the government and large creditors are paid off. They will pay me handsomely as well. The small creditors will get nothing. Let me repeat myself again. If you don't accept my solution, I will leave, get back in my car and go back to London. My bill will be sent to you as soon as I return and I will alert the bank and Touche de Veres. You know the outcome.

"I shall go now, as you will no doubt wish to discuss my proposal and ratify my appointment. I shall be spending this evening at Quarmby Manor, and you will contact me there with your acceptance of my terms, which are not negotiable. I would add that until I find a *pied-a-terre* in these wild parts, I shall be staying at Quarmby Manor at your expense. If I hear nothing this evening, I will drive back to London tomorrow on the assumption that you will be quite happy to choose the liquidation option, and I will inform the Midland and Great

Northern Bank and Touche de Veres to that effect. If, on the other hand, you wish to adopt my solution, I will start work first thing tomorrow. Good afternoon.”

Lartington unplugged the projector and shut down his lap-top computer, slipping each into its case. He motioned to Eileen and told her to take them out to his car. He cleared all his papers into his briefcase and left the room. The Governors sat in stunned silence and remained so until Eileen returned and drew the curtains again. The light flooded in and set off a none-too-edifying version of the dawn chorus. The room exploded into uproar, which Lartington heard as he drove his Mercedes away from The Hermitage. He had them just where he wanted them, by the short and curlies.

A small group of boys were standing agog, in the expectation of one of the antique chairs flying through the window.

In the Old Library, Donald Blance had difficulty in restoring order to the meeting, which had become very ugly for the Headmaster. It had become clear to everyone that there were several governors who were buying for his blood. It was only when Blance picked up a heavy brass lamp and used it as a gavel, permanently denting the surface of the antique oak table, that he managed to regain control.

“That is enough!” he roared at the top of his voice. “What are parents and pupils going to think when they see those in charge of the school rioting like a bunch of common guttersnipes? We adjourn this meeting now and resume after tea. In the meantime, kindly get a grip on yourselves. We have serious issues to face, which need cool and sober heads. If I have to adjourn the meeting again in such circumstances, I will tender my resignation instantly and we will be back where we were. I can tell you this, we won’t have Lartington in tomorrow; it will be the bailiffs.”

Tea was a muted affair. Several of the governors noticed that boys had been watching and it only took one of them to shoot his mouth off to his parents, and there would be more letters of complaint, letters to the press and more bad publicity. Blance could see the headlines *Top School’s Bosses in Slanging Match*. It was evident that the Governing Body had split into two camps and pointed looks were being made at the Chairman and the Headmaster. A detailed lecture on the Facts of Life would be necessary. Blance called the meeting back together and the Governors filed back into the Old Library. The gathering was quieter, but the atmosphere could be cut with a knife.

Blance glanced at the damage that he had done to the table with the brass lampstand. He called the meeting back to order, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have to use this time to consider the options before us, of which there are two. Both of these are, in my opinion, quite loathsome, but we must choose which one will be better for the school in the long run. In fact, there is only one that will give us a 'long run' at all, and that is to allow this loathsome Lartington to come in as 'Financial Director'. The alternative is to face liquidation. We could call in the receivers ourselves and go into voluntary liquidation before the bank does it for us. We do not have the luxury of time, nor do we have the luxury of calling for an inquisition as to how we arrived at this miserable state of affairs in the first place. Professor MacManners?"

The Professor stood up, "I'm sorry Mr Chairman, but I disagree with your comment and feel we should look into what has led up to this. Dr Pennington will second me on this. I propose we discuss this now."

"This is totally out of order," snapped Blance. He could see that the majority were glaring at him and wanted to have this out. He decided it would be politic to allow the debate. Professor MacManners introduced his motion. "*As a result of his negligence in his duty as trustee of the Draycott Foundation and other management failings that have led to adverse publicity for the school, the Headmaster, J L D Stoaate, has lost the confidence of the Governors and should be relieved of his post forthwith.*"

Professor MacManners, who had only recently joined the governors, launched into an attack on Dunstan Stoaate, referring to him as a liability that had mistreated his staff and had shown many failures in his day-to-day management. Above all he had failed grossly in his duty to supervise the Draycott Foundation adequately, allowing a loose cannon of a Bursar to squander it without let or hindrance. He enlarged on this theme for twenty minutes, looking to other governors for support. He got many an approving look.

As Stoaate sat there, he could see from many a sideways glance that he would have to fight to save his job. He had heard of a gangster in America called *The Teflon Don* because they could never get the charges to stick; except that now, they had and this man was doing a very long stretch inside. Stoaate had prided himself in getting mud to stick to others and he would get out of sticky situations squeaky-clean. Now the mud was sticking to him and coating thickly. And, for the master of the metaphor, the knives were clearly out for him. He could not deny that he had been grossly negligent in his role as Trustee, but the same also

could be said for Sir Kenneth Rounce. Instead, he could only rely on the fact that the school needed another scandal, that of a Headmaster sacked for negligence, like a hole in the head. Stoate decided to play his last card. If this did not work, he would be sunk, and in all probability, the school would have gone down with him within days. He stood up.

“I have heard the submission made by Professor MacManners and Dr Pennington,” Stoate started. “I do not intend to stand here and attempt to justify my position, or answer an inquisition, for that is the course that this meeting is appearing to take. You as Governors have known my role in this school for many years and have not challenged it. I have been here to provide the academic leadership that an institution of this kind needs, and my management style, open to criticism, has always had the academic reputation of the school at its forefront. I have always relied on the unstinting support of Governors in my management style, without which my position would have become untenable. Indeed, the Governors would have started to question the strength of my management if it were to have been any other way. I have always made it clear that I am a schoolmaster, not a banker, and the Governors have always demanded that that should be the position that I hold.

“The Governors appointed Graham Smith some ten years ago and gave him free reign to manage the school’s finances with ‘financial rectitude’. They were supportive and congratulatory towards him when the school appeared flush with money. It is in the minutes of several meetings. Although my role as Trustee may not have been carried out with due diligence, several governors discouraged me from so doing, as they had total trust in Mr Smith, even though it turned out that that trust was misplaced. Indeed, as recently as last year, the Draycott Foundation was discussed and I was told in no uncertain terms that meetings of the trustees were not necessary, and my other fellow trustee was particularly adamant. If you wish to take the road of a suspending me while the matter is investigated, I must tell you that several members of the Governing Body would also face suspension for the same reason. I would also point out that such action would also jeopardise the rescue plan laid out for us this afternoon. To follow that route will leave all of us with nothing. I need to lay before you all the implications of all the bad publicity that my suspension or dismissal would bring.

“The unhappy events of the last month has minded me to take retirement, and I am announcing to you that I am considering my retirement as Headmaster from the end of next academic year. It is my intention to play a full role in getting

the school back onto an even financial keel and leave the school in good shape for my successor. You will have the onerous duty in choosing the man or woman to do this. I have to tell you now that I have been informed this morning that the school is going to be inspected next year. Although I could retire before the inspection, I do not consider this fair on my successor, therefore I will remain in post to see the inspection to a successful conclusion.”

The meeting went quiet and Dr Pennington spoke out, “Whether or not the Headmaster decides to retire should not in any way prejudice whether we as Governors should decide to suspend him and anybody else implicated in this miserable affair. I am bound to say that you are trying to wriggle out of this, Mr Stoate. If you had any decency, you would resign and leave now.”

“Where would that get us, Dr Pennington?” snapped Sir Ronald, who did not like seeing his investment in this last-ditch effort to save the school being put in jeopardy. “The school without a Bursar, now without a Headmaster? What message would that send to the bank? We cannot afford the luxury of this argument. Lartington will leave tomorrow and we will be leaving The Hermitage next week. Do you realise that there are pupils who are about to take exams?”

Whether or not they could afford it, the Governors indulged in the luxury of debating Stoate’s suspension with regard to dismissal for gross neglect of duty and financial incompetence. Stoate normally loved being at the centre of attention, but this afternoon he wished that they would talk about any other subject. Eventually a vote was called and Stoate was asked to leave the room. For several minutes, which felt like several hours, Stoate paced up and down the Old Dining Room. He was not enjoying the prospect of getting a dose of his own medicine, which he had so freely prescribed to others in the past. It had occurred to him that he had actually been sacked from every job that he had done in the past, and there was every chance that this form was going to continue. Eventually, Donald Blance came out and put his arm around Stoate, saying, “You are OK, Dunstan. Professor MacManners’ motion was defeated, but it was a pretty damned close-run thing. Only a couple of votes in it, but a miss is as good as a mile. Well, that’s what I say.”

“You know, Donald, I really thought that I was for the bullet just now.”

Stoate and Blance went back into the meeting. Stoate briefly hoped that MacManners and Pennington would have disappeared in a puff of smoke, but they were still at the table and staring at him icily. Stoate sat down wearily. Dr Waterhouse spoke up, “Now that the vote has taken place and we have decided

not to go down the road of dismissing the Headmaster, we need to consider ways in which we monitor more closely the work of the Headmaster and others in positions of high management responsibility. There has to be more accountability from everybody, we included. The buzzword in industry and more so in education is quality assurance.”

“What about Mr Lartington?” asked Mrs Sanderson. “We cannot afford to have him rattling about like his predecessor, especially as he will be the highest paid employee of the school. We could pay six teachers for the rate he’s asking.”

There ensued a tedious discussion on mechanisms of monitoring and quality assurance, which sounded very authoritative. In truth, nobody knew very much about it. Lionel Hyland went into a protracted discourse on the constitutional implications, in response to which the rest of the Governing Body turned their minds towards their lost dinners, for nobody had expected the meeting to last this long. Discussions were neither enlightening nor productive.

Eventually the Governors decided to discuss whether the Tanswold School Trust should accept Crispin Lartington as their new Bursar (nobody could stomach the term ‘Financial Director’), or whether they should forestall him and go into voluntary liquidation. After more highly charged but not very productive discussion, it was agreed that the first option was marginally less unpalatable. A common comment that seemed to sum up the whole discussion was “That bloody man will bleed us dry!” A motion to appoint Lartington was passed by three votes, by which time it was late evening.

Despite their weariness (and Stoate having a thumping headache as a result of the tension brought on by the meeting), Stoate, Wiseman and Blance decided that they ought to go to Quarmby Manor and see Lartington in person. They also wanted to lay one condition to him; namely that he would regularly report to the Governing Body on all major aspects of his work, especially his dealings with the Draycott Foundation.

Chapter 9

Crispin Lartington was as good as his word. He arrived at The Hermitage early the next morning and set to work with a ferocious pace. By nine o'clock he had started to issue redundancy notices to the ancillary staff, demanding that those who were staying be ready to sign new contracts when they returned to work on Monday. Lartington had engaged a decorator to start work on his new offices immediately. He had seen the bank manager to finalise details of the rescue package and had contacted Carlton Quinn Construction, the builders, to make an immediate start on the new dining hall. By lunchtime he was ready to meet the teaching staff who had been summoned to an emergency meeting and was introduced to them by the headmaster.

“Thank you for those kind words, Headmaster,” Lartington started. “And thank you colleagues for giving up your lunch break to meet me and hear what I have to say. Firstly, I have some good news for you. You will be paid your salaries at the next pay-day and all salary owing to you will also be paid. I am sure you will be aware of the crisis the school has been going through, and the Headmaster and I will be depending on you to help us to nurse the school back to good health...”

Although Lartington's speech to the staff was designed to fire them up with enthusiasm, it had the opposite effect, and there was a shocked gasp when he told them of his plans to close the staffroom immediately and they were going to lose their perk of free coffee and biscuits. They were not in the least bit amused when he told them that they would have a coffee vending machine, but the new staffroom would be a strictly functional place for staff briefing only. They were being paid to work and not sit about socialising and drinking coffee. This was like a red rag to a bull, and Andrew McEwan stood up, his face dark with anger.

“If you are taking away our work room, where do you expect us to work?” he snarled. “We have to have the space, and many junior colleagues have no offices. Where will they work?”

“The old purchasing office is the room I have set aside, and you will have the old bursar’s office as your briefing room.”

“We’ll not fit in those dingy holes!” said McEwan. “What’s wrong with them for you? Why can we not have these rooms? You are just a Bursar. Who do you think you are?”

“I,” said Lartington pompously, “am the Financial Director. I have just saved all your jobs, and you need to understand the importance of my position. Without good financial management, which is seen to be effective, your school, or any other business, would soon cease to exist.”

McEwan sat down muttering, “I am not listening to this rubbish!” while Lartington continued his peroration about the importance of image to the school’s financial backers and the parents who were the customers. The staff were the operatives whose responsibility it was to ensure that a first-class product was produced, which was boys with A-stars at GCSE and students with grades A at A-level. Any less was not an acceptable quality product. Lartington was going to assess the value effectiveness of each and every member of staff with a view to making the least effective redundant and giving salary increments only to those who could show an improved pass-rate.

Staff held their heads in their hands as Lartington continued to tell them how individuals would lose pay if the results of their classes were poor and that performance-related pay was a splendid motivator for hard work. Lartington knew that his next item would go down like a lead balloon, that all staff would have to accept a pay-cut of fifteen percent as part of a general belt-tightening. Departmental budgets were frozen for the rest of the financial year, and if any money needed to be spent, staff would have to finance it themselves or hold a jumble sale. Staff would be required to sign the new contracts by the end of the following week, or they would be deemed to have resigned with effect from the end of the Academic Year.

The Hermitage was witness to more uproar within its ancient walls as the staff exploded with fury. The unions were to be called in, but Lartington icily reminded the staff that there would be no union recognition in the new contract, and that any recourse to a trades union would be deemed to be a refusal to sign the new contract. With a lofty “I have nothing more to say on the matter. This is what will happen.” Lartington left the staff room and went to luncheon with the Headmaster.

Stoate was delighted. Firstly, Lartington had succeeded where he had failed in bringing in performance related pay, and secondly, the appalling McEwan would probably refuse to sign and would no longer be a thorn in his side. Stoate decided to use Tanswold School as a shining example to the Headmasters' Conference as to how performance related pay could be introduced in all independent schools. It would be at the centre of his retiring speech to the next annual conference. Tanswold School would be a beacon of management excellence.

In the staffroom, his colleagues would have begged to differ. There was a seething but helpless anger. Some staff were in tears, others were considering their resignations, even though Stoate had reinforced Lartington's statement by adding that he would not write references for staff who left because of the new contract. The professionalism of the staff had been tested to the extreme, and this was the reward. Andrew McEwan, who had stood up for staff so often, was drunk with rage and could hardly express himself coherently. For a fleeting moment, he felt his Christian Faith, which had sustained him through all his battles with Stoate, fail him. He let out several loud expletives and burst into tears.

The Chaplain winced with outrage and said, "Really, Mr McEwan, that is most unbecoming to a so-called deacon of the church. And your wife a minister as well. Not that I approve of women priests. Just you wait until the Bishop hears what you just said. So much for your trendy 'born-again' evangelical talk. Perhaps you should approach God in a more repentant frame of mind and holy pattern of worship. I shall mention your unprofessional manner to the bishop this afternoon. He will not want one of his deacons on the edge of a mental breakdown, nor would the Headmaster expect it of a departmental head."

As d'Arcy-Fairfax left the room, several colleagues gathered around the Head of English. Wrapped up in his theological self-importance, d'Arcy-Fairfax minced up to his room. He was as good as his word and ten minutes later, he had written a memo to Stoate about McEwan's outburst. He rang the Bishop's number several times but was told that the Bishop was on the other line or was in a meeting. D'Arcy-Fairfax felt aggrieved. He knew he would get no satisfaction from the Rural Dean, who happened to be the Reverend John Richard Proudlock. Canon Slater was not much help either. Instead, he decided to ingratiate himself to the new Financial Director but found himself wasting his time. Lartington was a confirmed atheist. After depositing his memorandum in

Stoate's office, he went back to write his sermon for that afternoon on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, which he considered a theological masterpiece.

Replete after an excellent luncheon, Stoate returned to his office. At last things were going his way. The school was now going to expand, the new dining hall was about to be built, and he now had the staff under better managerial control than before. His new financial director was working miracles. True, the previous night had been a pretty damned close-run thing, and the Governors would be looking over his shoulder more, but they would soon lose interest. Stoate read the simpering memo from his chaplain and threw it in the bin. It told him nothing that he did not know already. McEwan had flipped years ago. He helped himself to a brandy and watched one of the gardeners working on the bank that rose on the other side of the drive. He did not know the young man's name; Charlie Gallagher looked after that side. Stoate had noticed the young man leaving Lartington's office with a face like thunder, carrying a brown envelope. Now the man was busy taking daffodil bulbs from a hessian bag, stabbing the ground with a dibber and dropping a bulb down each hole. There were a lot of bulbs, and he seemed to be working to a pattern, though quite what, Stoate could not make out.

Stoate's attention was distracted by a familiar grating sound of an angry voice with a strong Midlothian accent. This time it was faint and was echoing through The Hermitage like distant thunder. Stoate smiled as he worked out that this particular storm had broken somewhere over the Bursar's old office. The new Financial Director had given McEwan something to get his teeth into that was not Stoate for a change. Stoate had often referred to McEwan as a semi houstrained *Rottweiler*; it now appeared that the pompous Lartington was getting a savaging. A few seconds later, he heard the front-door slam, and he saw McEwan get into his estate car and drive off, quite by chance clipping the rear bumper of a grey Mercedes with a personalised number plate. Stoate vaguely remembered something about McEwan's wife taking a funeral that afternoon.

Crispin Lartington, devout atheist, had been visited twice by representatives of the Christian church. He had not been moved at all by the sickly gutlessness of the cleric who had minced into his office. The chaplain was to Lartington the caricature of the unworldly and upper-class twit of a vicar that was portrayed in *Dad's Army*. They were always dribbling on about social justice. By contrast, this one didn't, which made a pleasant change, but had talked at him about theology of mammon that he didn't understand (it sounded like something

footballers shouted at each other). He had spoken in a simpering and ingratiating style without any authority whatsoever. Lartington later described the words coming from the chaplain's mouth as dribbling like treacle. Even though he had become instantly unpopular with the staff, Lartington soon found out that his perception of the Chaplain was shared universally.

His second visitation from an ambassador for Christ did make him move pretty smartly to a defensive position behind his desk. Instead of the simpering gutlessness of the Chaplain, he had to contend with the muscular fury of the Church Militant. Lartington had met angry Scotsmen before, usually union officials, but not a large deacon with veins bulging out his neck, describing him as just a jumped-up little bank clerk. Damn it! He was a financial expert with fine business acumen and a track record to prove it. Here was a large and powerfully built cleric cum schoolmaster ranting about social justice. Lartington had tried to explain his business theory, but it was lost on this man who growled about something about ruin for the proud rich. Lartington resisted divulging his remuneration package, which he considered really quite modest. It took some time for Lartington to convince himself that he was not impressed.

It was clear that at the Chaplain's church service, which had just started, that not many people were being impressed. He had minced up to the front of the church and announced the first hymn. The organ drowned out the singing which seemed even more feeble than usual. The Headmaster and the Housemasters usually would add a little body to the singing, but on this occasion, they were with Lartington in Stoate's office discussing the plans to expand the school and marketing strategies. It started slowly to sink into d'Arcy-Fairfax's none-too-clever skull that there was a second reason for the enfeebled volume, that his congregation was somewhat diminished. He stopped Mr Perry on the organ and said, "It appears that the Sixth Form are not with us. Does anyone know where they are? I think that we shall wait for them."

Some staff knew exactly where they were, but none were willing to divulge that information to the Chaplain. It turned out to be a long wait in which the remaining congregation became increasingly restless and after twenty minutes there was quite a hubbub that was most irreverent. It was becoming clear that d'Arcy-Fairfax had lost control of the situation. He was frantically jumping about trying to restore order, but the more he did so, the more the crowd enjoyed it. Football chants and rugby songs re-echoed around the church, delivered with

a lustiness that, had they been hymns, would have suggested a miraculous revival of High Anglican fervour. Such was the unpopularity of the Chaplain with the staff that those who were there made little more than a token effort to help him. A chant of “d’Arsehole! d’Arsehole!” started at the back and grew in increasing unison and a hostile crescendo. A hassock flew across the nave and into the choir knocking over a large vase of flowers. All pretence of Holy Reverence before the Supreme Deity had evaporated. It finally occurred to d’Arcy-Fairfax that he should abandon the service completely before they started on the fabric of the ancient church of St Mary.

The rush out of the church was such that any staff who tried to control it were carried out and deposited in the graveyard, as were the heavy curtains that covered the doors to keep out the draughts. The horde of Black and Tans went up the High Street, stopping the traffic completely, still chanting “d’Arsehole! d’Arsehole!”, and making obscene gestures, before melting away to their buses. It was particularly unfortunate that there happened to be several press cameramen who were about to cover the arrival of three coaches from Alverston. The Headmaster got wind of the riot when he got a frantic telephone call from the florist who had had her display wrecked by several louts from the Fifth Form. In a state verging on lunacy, he hurled himself out of his study followed by all the housemasters and the Financial Director. Although Stoate was as overweight as he was pompous and his stomach mirrored his self-importance, he put on an amazing turn of speed as he waddled up the back drive to the High Street. The crowd of Black and Tans relished the spectacle of the Headmaster spluttering with helpless fury at the back gate. They changed their chant to “Biggles! Biggles!” Stoate saw his Chaplain running down the High Street trying to shepherd the crowd into the school. Running was not really the right word, rather floating and mincing like a grotesque elf. As far as shepherding was concerned, if he had been a sheepdog on a hill farm, the farmer would have had the vet put him down. D’Arcy-Fairfax rushed up to the Headmaster to tell him his ghastly account and imploring him to do something.

The Chaplain’s question about the Sixth Form was answered in the shape of a coach pulling up, having narrowly missed some boys from the Second Form. They had been to church too, but this service had actually meant something to them, and their demeanour was solemn and dignified.

Unlike Dunstan Stoate. He leapt onto the first bus before anyone could get off and started yelling at the passengers, much to the annoyance of the driver

who told him in no uncertain terms to get off the bus otherwise he would radio for the Police. By this time the second and third coaches had pulled up, and they were disgorging their cargos of sixth formers. Stoate was too preoccupied with the tirade he was making about gross disobedience to instructions and how the organisers of this outrage would be expelled.

“Before you carry on too far, Mr Stoate...”

Stoate turned around to see several parents who were on the Friends of Tanswold School. Mrs Barker was eyeballing him and was in no mood to be trifled with. She continued, “We organised the coaches and paid for them. We think that it was quite outrageous that you should stop Gemma Proudlock’s friends from paying their last respects. Your treatment of Lucy Simpson and the others was disgusting. She was quite right to call you callous and your subsequent behaviour bears this out. Don’t think that you will get her back, either. Mr Owen at Alverston Grammar is as pleased as punch to have her in his Sixth Form, and if you dare lift a finger against any single one of these students, I tell you this for nothing, you will have no Sixth Form left. Parents have agreed that if one student is suspended or expelled, every single boy and girl will be withdrawn. So, there will be no Tanswold School. Do you get the picture?”

Stoate got the picture and off the bus. Almost drunk with rage, he hardly noticed the cameras from the local press, which were getting his picture. He pushed several boys out of the way, while a chant of “Biggles, learn some manners!” rose from the crowd. The very foundations of his authority had been undermined, and it had all but collapsed. Somebody was going to have to pay for this, and Stoate knew who as well. He had summoned the Chaplain to see him in his office on Monday morning to discuss the riot in church. Stoate decided that he would also investigate the visit of the Sixth Form to Alverston with the Head of Sixth Form, Mr Burrows. The outcome for Mr Burrows would be the same as that for the Chaplain.

Stoate’s helplessness was reinforced by his new Director of Finance when they resumed the interrupted marketing meeting. Lartington told him quite clearly that expulsion of pupils was no longer an option, however gross their behaviour was, “Remember that the fee-paying parents are your customers, and the customer is always right. You have lost too many pupils, which does not help your income. You can get rid of ineffective staff as much as you like, but you cannot afford to clash with parents in the way you have this last week. Now I don’t know anything about this Proudlock girl, and I certainly don’t want to meet

her Reverend father, but I do agree that banning her friends from attending her funeral is high-handed in the extreme, and you have risked a lot of income.”

“So, you are telling me how I should run the school?”

“Yes. If you had run it half-decently, you would not be in the crisis you are in now. Today’s banana skin will be in the papers tomorrow. By the way, I heard about the row that there was about appointing me, and I gather that is getting in the papers tomorrow as well. We have got our work cut out; don’t you think?”

Stoate thought about this and had to agree. Although nominally still Captain of this ship that he had allowed to be driven onto well-charted rocks, he knew that his command had been very effectively removed from him by this up-start pilot who had got on board and marched straight onto his bridge. An aviation metaphor did not bear thinking about; there would be a smoking stinking crater with flames still licking lazily around shreds of aluminium. Lartington spoke up again, “By the way, I have given out a press release to the...”

“You’ve done WHAT?” yelled Stoate. “No one talks to the press without clearing it with myself or the Governors, preferably both. I have sacked staff for that!”

“Not so hasty, Dunstan,” replied Lartington smoothly. “In fact, I have cleared it with the Chairman of Governors. It has gone out and will be in the evening paper tonight and the regional paper tomorrow. Nationals aren’t interested. It’s just parish-pump to them. Here, have a copy. I think it should do much to restore confidence from the parents, more than your shouting at them just now. Remember this, Dunstan, I am here to get you out of the mess you got everyone into. I will make the important decisions. You are a schoolmaster and you will get on with the academic side, in which I have not the least interest.

“Now you will all be glad to know that I have also engaged a professional advertising agency to make a promotional film on the school. You know the sort, classical music, shots of rugby scrums, science lessons that go with a bang, the CCF on summer camp. What you will need to do is to decide amongst yourselves what you want to be on it and...”

As Lartington continued, Stoate started to cut himself off from the proceedings. He could not bear any more of the modern methods extolled by his new Financial Director. He had spent his life insulating himself from this kind of vulgarity and he wanted to do so again. Lartington, observant to the minutest detail, had noticed the glazed and vacant look of his “boss” and pulled him up sharply.

“I would keep up with this, Dunstan. You are going to have to get out there and start selling. You wanted to expand the school; this is your chance. You’ve certainly got your work cut out as you are going to need to get one hundred and fifty new pupils. The name of the game is aggressive marketing, and you have got to be at the cutting edge. Tanswold School is slimming down the fat and is going to be lean and mean in the scholastic world.”

“What do you mean by aggressive marketing, Mr Lartington?” asked one of the housemasters.

“You have to get in there. Leaflet the area, adverts in the newspapers. Give them the upside of what goes on here. By the way you have an uphill battle on that score...”

The kind of uphill battle that Lartington was talking about was illustrated well that evening in the local news. A local had taken a video film of the abysmal procession up Tanswold High Street, just as the boys changed their chant from “d’Arsehole” to “Biggles”. There followed library footage to accompany the article concerning the riot in church and that the beleaguered school had called in a financial expert to manage its affairs.

“We’ll need six hundred new pupils to overcome this one!” muttered Stoate into his tea. In his mind’s eye, he could visualise all too easily The Hermitage as a country house hotel. He sat back into his settee. Lartington had left him in no doubt that he was going to have to spend the next few months as a marketing man, a world that was as alien to him as it was vulgar. Stoate associated marketing with rich whiz kids called Tarquin and Arabella, and the morosity that insulted his intelligence on a daily basis from the newspapers.

He would get the staff to spend the Saturday afternoon after half term handing out leaflets in Carlsborough, Alverston and the other local towns. They could also distribute them door-to-door in the local villages. At that moment, a low trick occurred to Stoate. There was a small boys’ school up the valley that he knew was struggling. Previously a boarding preparatory school, it had recently changed its identity and had pupils of secondary age. Stoate had heard on the grapevine that there were some rather vocal and volatile parents. If he could get a few rumours going about the competence of the Headmaster and the financial rockiness of the school, he reckoned on several boys coming over to Tanswold. He had got hold of a recent copy of the newsletter. From it he would use a name of a boy to write a totally fallacious letter to the local paper

complaining that the school was too small to resource its teaching effectively and that the Headmaster, Mr Kendall, was an economic imbecile.

Stoate felt distinctly aggrieved that he could not do anything about the Sixth Form which had so blatantly disregarded his orders and that parents had condoned this insubordination. He would write a strongly worded piece in the Newsletter leaving them in no doubt about his position. He would also murder the chaplain when he saw him on the Monday after half term. He had a small sense of satisfaction that the little maggot would get several sleepless nights worrying about what was coming to him.

Chapter 10

For the staff at Tanswold School, the week's half-term holiday could hardly be described as restful. They had first of all to sign their new contracts which cut their pay by about fifteen percent (with the promise that it would be made up to them as soon as things improved). Trades union recognition, such as it was, was withdrawn, so any appeals to the unions would be in vain. They were given leaflets that had been rushed out at vast expense by a London-based printer with whom Lartington had contacts. The job had been done over the weekend and delivered by courier for first thing on Monday morning. Nobody could say that the leaflets were not impressive, with colour photographs of The Hermitage and various activities that were on offer.

Lest the staff be tempted to dump their bundles in the bin, each leaflet was numbered and records were made of who had what. If there were not at least ten entries for the free prize draw, it would be assumed that the member of staff had not distributed the leaflets and they would be interviewed by Lartington and the Headmaster. Their jobs would be at stake if there were not a satisfactory explanation.

At the same time, the new contracts provided the Headmaster with the golden opportunity, for which he had been waiting for years, to get rid of Andrew McEwan, who had been a thorn in his side for as long as he remembered. Despite the fact that McEwan was intending to resign, he was somewhat annoyed that Stoate had beaten him to it. Stoate was not spared one of his little fireside chats, which so often ended in fireworks. And these fireworks were pretty spectacular as well.

"You cannot do this, Stoate," yelled McEwan, "I have employment rights. You know that? You have not given me formal warnings."

"Not here, Mr McEwan," replied Stoate smoothly, "it's all changed now. Mr Lartington has proved a Godsend if you would pardon the expression. It won't look good in your parishioners' eyes, nor the Bishop, when he finds out."

“What do you mean by that?” shouted McEwan, who had uncharacteristically missed Storate’s pun.

“To spell it out in words that mean something to your Central Belt brain, is that you have been dismissed for incompetence, insubordination, professional misconduct and anything else that I can think of to put on your record. You are finished here, and anywhere else, for that matter. If I have my way, you will never work anywhere again, be it a school, a church, or a refuse lorry. I believe the expression is ‘on the brew’. Very apt for a Scotsman.

“What’s more, I have strongly recommended to Canon Slater and the Bishop, that you be stripped of post of Deacon and your wife will be stripped of her parishes. The Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax and I will be submitting the case to the Rural Deanery in the near future. Your parishes do not want to associate with somebody who’s been sacked for professional misconduct. By the way, don’t expect your friend Proudlock to save you; he is completely outnumbered. Canon Slater cannot abide him and has got a lot of others on his side.”

“This is a complete fabrication, and you know it, Storate,” McEwan shouted with a tone of incredulity in his voice.

“The end justifies the means. You are just the start, McEwan. Proudlock will follow too. You, your wife and Proudlock between you have desecrated church worship in this area with your diabolical so-called services, with your daughters cavorting like bitches on heat in the aisles.”

“Keep my daughters out of this, Storate!”

“No, we want tradition here, McEwan, King James and Book of Common Prayer. Don’t want the plebs like you getting into the Kingdom, do we? You will be defrocked, and God will have no further use for you. To distort a line of a song you might know, *Beelzebub has a devil put aside for you*. It’s nice to think of you and your daughters going back to a high-rise block in Edinburgh. Another Rab C Nesbit, eh?” and Storate burst out laughing as he savoured the demise of the man he loathed so much. His mirth was short lived.

“Are you calling a curse on me and my family? You are the one who needs to watch out. You call yourself a Christian? I suggest you read Luke Chapter 6, the bit about the self-satisfied rich and your Masonic friends. I won’t stoop to your level about Beelzebub.”

The last comment shook Storate. He knew of, but he preferred not to think about, the Bible passage that McEwan had mentioned. Canon Slater eschewed that passage as too upsetting for his congregation. Elsewhere, Storate had heard

some pretty fiery sermons on the subject that left him rattled and in a pretty damned foul temper. He could feel one coming on now.

“Don’t give me any evangelical sermons, McEwan,” Stoate snapped.

“Don’t worry; I’ll not waste my breath. And I’ll not waste any more time with you. I am going to take you to the cleaners.”

“What do you mean by that, McEwan?” Stoate shouted.

“What do you think, Stoate? Let me spell it out for you in words of one syllable. I am seeing the union solicitor this afternoon and will be looking for considerable compensation for unfair dismissal.”

“Unfair? Don’t make me laugh! I’ll tell them personally about your incompetence, work unmarked, coursework lost. I’ll tell the court about every professional and other misconduct in the book. You will be having riots outside your house, and they will take your daughters away.”

“I won’t waste my time on your lies, Stoate. I know they’re lies, you know they’re lies and the court will know too.”

“Oh yes? How?”

“Because you, Dunstan Stoate, are a pretty discredited witness. I know how often you have perjured yourself before courts and you got your way because of Sir Kenneth Rounce’s influence on the judiciary. A couple of days ago, you wrote a letter making scurrilous allegations about Samuel Proudlock. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! I’ll tell you this for nothing, he’s a lot more grown up than you. It will come out in court. I can tell you the tribunal will not be impressed. Not very good publicity, Dunstan?”

Stoate was stung by this sudden and sarcastic familiarity and lost his temper. He shouted, “The end justifies the means, McEwan! I will see to it that you are made destitute and hounded out from any civilised area! I will...”

McEwan put his face close to Stoate and hissed, “I don’t think so, Stoate. You tell lies as naturally as you breathe. You are a perjured witness. Your forester friends are losing their clout, and they are deserting you now. You have lost it, Stoate! You lost control of the school years ago, which is why the Bursar had his fingers in the till and stole our pensions! Now you have that idiot Lartington in and he is fleecing you! You are standing there on your own, and your reputation will soon be in tatters. I am sure that Richard Smithells will be most interested. I am told that a lot of the fraud he investigates is by groups of the Old Boy Network. He uncovers these cans of worms all over the place and

he unravels them. Fraud and perjury often go together. You want to start your retirement at Canterill?”

“This is my school and my work and don’t you forget it. I will do anything to preserve my reputation! Get out of my office now!” was Stoate’s final considered opinion.

McEwan left, slamming the door sufficiently hard that a lump of plaster fell from the ceiling. Stoate was fuming and thinking of all the dirt he could bring up on McEwan. He loathed him enough so as to be not content with sacking him, and he wanted McEwan to be destitute. He genuinely wanted the McEwan family to be consigned to the top floor of a vandalised tower block on the roughest estate in Central Scotland. Canterill Farm in Carlsborough was too close.

Unfortunately for Stoate, McEwan knew too damned much. Stoate had perjured himself in the courtroom on several occasions, and had left several sacked members of staff destitute, the judgements against them leaving them homeless and unemployable. That was when he could rely on Sir Kenneth and the Byland Foresters had real influence in judicial circles. Since Sir Kenneth was now *hors de combat*, many of such influential people were suddenly announcing their retirement. There was almost a daily feature in the *Yorkshire Post* on so-and-so leaving after forty years distinguished service on the bench. Many of these influential people were moving abroad. Did they know something? Had Smithells leant on Sir Kenneth too much and made him spill the beans? The trouble was that McEwan was not going to go quietly and was quite happy to get Smithells involved with him, a prospect that Stoate did not care to think about. If Smithells did get his teeth into Stoate’s dealings with his ex-members of staff, the elaborate tissues of lies and fabrications would ensure that Stoate would spend at least the first ten years of his retirement at Canterill Prison.

Short of murder, Stoate had to find a way of discrediting McEwan. It would have to involve filthy allegations that were entirely false. That did not bother Stoate one little bit; his reputation was the most important thing, and it had to be preserved at all costs. The word ‘costs’ brought Stoate up with a jerk. His plot would have to be put on the back burner while he had to apply his mind to the vulgar business of advertising.

Stoate set about to the distasteful task of contacting parents of all the boys who had failed the entrance examination over the last four years. He loathed having to grovel to people he had previously spurned, but the current situation

called for desperate measures. He composed a letter and Eileen typed it out on the recently returned computer in her office. Stoate's own computer was back on his desk, entirely for decorative purposes.

The next apparition to rattle Dunstan Stoate was Lartington's new appointee, the Financial Manager. Lartington ushered him into Stoate's office without even the courtesy of a knock on the door. Lartington's assistant was a small young man with a very enlarged opinion of himself. A graduate of Oxford University, he had been in the University rowing squad, even though he was considerably smaller than the others. What Antony Scott lacked in size he made up in sheer aggressive arrogance. As a result, he had been hoist on his own petard when during a weight training session, he had attempted to lift a one-hundred-and-fifty-kilogram weight, at least double that of his body. The resulting damage put him in hospital for two weeks and put paid to any further aspiration of himself as an oarsman. He had coached at local rowing clubs, but his antagonism to everyone made him so unpopular that crews would not train with him. No one would wish to get up at six o'clock on a cold dank Sunday morning to be insulted by him.

Like Lartington, Scott had also cultivated a network. To facilitate this, he had joined the Conservative Party, and it was through these connections that he both gained employment in the financial sector and met Crispin Lartington. The two complemented each other and boasted of the dynamism of their share dealings on the London Stock Exchange. Except that, for a second time in as many years, Scott put paid to his career by doing the financial equivalent of his antics in the weights room. He achieved the beggaring of the long-established merchant bank for which he worked by some rash dealings in high-risk equities that left them dangerously exposed. It was only some careful influence in high places that prevented the subsequent investigation from pressing some very serious charges.

After some fairly menial posts in which he found he could not throw his weight about, Scott was pleased to be offered the position by his friend Lartington, which carried a genuinely generous remuneration. Scott had some bad memories of his life at public school. He had something of a downer on schoolmasters in general and Headmasters in particular. And Dunstan Stoate was now finding this out. In their introductory meeting, Scott barely concealed his antipathy towards Stoate, describing him and the governors as "old buffers with the financial acumen of a flea".

“What do you mean by that, Mr Scott?” Stoate snapped, glaring at this shaven headed figure of pure aggression.

“Well, Mr Stoate, you wouldn’t be in this position if you and your cronies knew what you were about. Look at the slack around here. You have had three people doing the job of two. With us, it will be one person doing that job. And the waste that you old buffers generate. You don’t even know how to use a computer. You are a dinosaur. This business is going to be lean, mean and competitive, from top to bottom.”

“Good God, Lartington! Where did you drag this from?”

“Mr Scott is a damned good financial manager and he is right, Mr Stoate. You will have to get used to him. As you well know, I will be away on other business from Wednesday to Friday, and Mr Scott will be running things. He has my full authority to act on my behalf, including the hiring and firing of whomever he sees fit. Remember that your job is to supervise the teaching and learning of this business.”

Scott added his bit, “Mr Stoate, I am going to slim down further the ancillary staff and look at how we can reduce on teaching staff. They have all got to work harder. We succeeded in the first step, cutting the pay bill. We have got rid of Mr McEwan, and you should be grateful for that. We are going to make decisions that will be hard for you. But that’s business. Each has got to pull more than his own weight. There is no space for passengers. It’s got to be hard; it’s got to be competitive. Staff have got to compete for their jobs. If they do well, that’s what they should be doing anyway; if not, their pay gets cut. If there is no improvement, they are sacked. Simple as that.”

“Do you propose to set staff against staff, Mr Scott?” demanded the Headmaster, who had spent the last two decades doing just that.

“It’s got to be hard; it’s got to be competitive,” Scott replied insolently, falling back on his mantra, which he recited whenever the going got difficult. “Don’t know about you, Mr Stoate, but I’ve got work to do. Remember, it’s got to be hard, it’s got to be competitive. Ciao!”

Stoate was close to boiling point. He was now in no uncertainty where he stood. Over the past two decades Stoate had held unhindered sway. Now this had been summarily wrested from him by two louts whose prime obsession was what he always found rather vulgar, money. This latest interaction had made his fireside chats with Andrew McEwan seem the essence of pastoral tranquillity.

Stoate was determined to sink his ex-Head of English, by foul means, having found it impossible by fair.

Stung by the accusation that he did not have a clue about computers, Stoate switched on the PC that decorated his desk. He had found a way that he could disgrace McEwan in such a way that it would destroy his family and ensure that he never worked again. Stoate knew fully that it involved a complete fabrication, but mere mendacity did not put him off. He also knew there was a risk, as McEwan would in theory be libelled and could claim massive compensation. That risk would be reduced if Stoate sent a copy of the press release that he was about to compose to the legal officer of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers. Without union support, McEwan would certainly not have the means to contest such a case himself.

Stoate felt pleased with his strategy. He was constantly enjoining the boys to take risks, recounting many a case where a greater good arose from a risk being taken. After a modicum of cursing and fruitless clicking of the mouse, Stoate managed to get into his word processor and composed a press release to the media, which read:

“Mr Andrew Richard McEwan.

It is with great shock and sadness that the Headmaster and Governors of Tanswold School have found it to be necessary to dismiss Mr McEwan from his post as Head of English. There are three principal reasons for this action:

- 1. It has come to light that Mr McEwan has no qualifications for his post and that the qualifications he had claimed for himself were fraudulent.*
- 2. Mr McEwan has been involved in gross professional misconduct including the falsification of examination coursework.*
- 3. Mr McEwan has stolen a public examination paper and shown it to some favoured pupils.*

Education authorities and the police have been informed. In the light of his nomination and award of a “Teacher’s Oscar”, the matter is even more regrettable, but the overriding consideration must be the welfare of our pupils, and the integrity of the school. As Mr McEwan’s wife is also non-stipendiary minister of the Parishes of Cauldenby and Denton, the attention of the relevant

authorities of the Church of England have been informed. As the matters are now sub judice, the school cannot comment any further.”

Stoate wrote to the Bishop, the Northern Examinations Syndicate and the Department of Education, to have McEwan placed on *List 99*, the list of persons that should not be employed as teachers under any circumstances.

After sending the letters it occurred to Stoate that he should have something up his sleeve in case his strategy went wrong. If they found out that he alone was responsible for a malicious allegation, even the Governors would be hard put to it to support him. He would have to go. Therefore, he devised a back-up plan by which he would make out that the allegations were made up by a sixth former with a grudge. He thought of several who might well have a grudge against McEwan. He had to dismiss the idea as all of them had rich and influential parents and expelling them would not do. He knew of one whose mother was a widow of limited means, who had struggled to send her son to Tanswold School. Stoate had little time for the genteel poor, and this mother would be unlikely to be able to find funds to pay a solicitor to appeal against her son's expulsion.

So that everything would look genuine, Stoate forged a number of letters including three from the parents of Michael Curwen, Anthony Turner and Luke Kernan, boys whom Stoate considered trustworthy and reliable. He would have to get them to gang up and tell the same story about being offered a preview of the forthcoming GCSE examination. He thought of these three in the fifth year who would oblige. They were favourites of his. Like him, they had a spirit of adventure and were cheerfully rebellious at heart. He had often had to punish them, but there was always a twinkle in his eyes when he pronounced sentence. The boys shared his simplistic view of life, and indulged in simple, clean, manly pursuits like rugby, bullying and the CCF.

Stoate forged a letter from the Northern Examination Syndicate alleging McEwan's malpractice and took some photocopies. He got the letters he had written into the last post and went home satisfied that revenge would be sweet.

The Reverend and Mrs Proudlock had felt some relief that their surviving child, Samuel, had had a change of fortune. He had been befriended by Andrew McEwan's younger daughter, Jessica. Although Jess was nearly two years older than Sam, their relationship had blossomed very rapidly into a full-blown teenage romance. If it were anything like their own teenage romance some thirty

years before, Jess and Sam would be hidden away somewhere, snuggled together, having a pleasurable and private moment. By contrast, Sam's parents were sitting close together, holding hands, but this moment was far from private, nor was it in the least bit pleasurable. The inquest into the untimely death of their daughter, Gemma, was being started and the Court rose as the Coroner entered.

It was not a good morning for Dunstan Stoate. He had tossed and turned during the night, while his mind raced through various strategies to revive his ailing school. He had also focused on his resentment at having his authority so completely undermined by his new Bursar (he could not bring himself to use the self-styled title of Financial Director) and his even more appalling assistant. Eventually he managed to get to sleep. He had forgotten to set the alarm and had slept in late.

His mood improved when he glanced through the morning paper and saw the headline *Bent Super Teacher sacked in qualifications row*. His deadly missile was about to blow McEwan from the sky, and he would fall in sheets of flame.

After a hasty breakfast, Stoate left his apartment for the short walk to The Hermitage. Although late for work, he decided to go the long way round to seek inspiration, crossing the road into Packham Gardens. It was a bright morning, and, because it was later than usual, he noticed to his disgust that there were several young couples cuddling in the spring sunshine. He had come this way to gain inspiration, not soft pornography. As the path took him around a bend and through some rhododendrons, he noticed another couple on the grass. Both the girl and the boy, who looked very young, had ludicrously long legs that were entwined around each other. Stoate noticed that the youth had long wavy dark hair, while the girl's was short like a boy's. Both the boy and the girl seemed familiar, and he stood there with his mouth open with incredulity and disgust as he witnessed their full-on snogging. In Packham Gardens as well!

"My God," Stoate fumed, "it seems that fairies are getting everywhere!"

Sam and Jess looked up at the Headmaster. Sam who, unlike his elder and so-called better, was unfailingly courteous, replied, "Hello, Mr Stoate."

"Good heavens above, Proudlock, can't you control yourself? As for you, McEwan, you don't leave much to the imagination, do you?"

The two youngsters stared up at Stoate with a look of contempt and said nothing. Stoate turned away and heard a giggling. "I don't think Biggles was very pleased," laughed Sam. "He'll go and tell d'Arsehole all about it."

“I think he fancies you, Sam. You’d better be careful. I might get jealous.”

“Takes a fairy to know one!”

“He couldn’t do what we do. His girlfriend wouldn’t be able to find it.”

“He wouldn’t find a girlfriend, either!”

Stoate was by now too far away to hear what they were saying, but he knew that their laughter was at his expense. He was livid by now, especially as he knew there was nothing that he could legally do to beat a little respect into Master Proudlock and the McEwan girl. If it ever happened again, he would knock the pair of them into the middle of next week. The only satisfaction would be that that little McEwan bint would be soon back in Edinburgh’s roughest estate.

When Stoate got into his office, he planned out his next strategy. He picked up the phone and rang Donald Blance. Thirty minutes later, Blance was in Stoate’s office, and both were taking their elevenses.

“Donald,” Stoate started, “you might know something about this. Great Daxford School?”

“Yes, it’s a good school with a long foundation, but it’s a bit rocky at the moment.”

“We’re a bit rocky as well. As bad as us?”

“Worse, I think. I know we can’t stand that man Lartington, but at least he’s got us off the hook for the time being. No such luck for them. They’re staggering on, but it’s a matter of time.”

“What sort of state are they in now?”

“They’ve got enough pupils to break even at the moment, but they need to invest a lot in new computers and things like that. They got slated at the last inspection. The main school building is getting old and needs a lot doing to it. It will cost them a fortune. They have done some appeals, but they still have a long way to go.”

“What would tip them over the edge?”

“A wee bit of bad publicity would get some of the parents muttering. If ten pupils leave, they are in trouble. I know old Skinner down there, the bank manager. They all call him Skinflint, and I can quite see why. The tiniest bit of exposure and his branch are calling in their overdrafts. I have seen plenty of good businesses go down. Anywhere else, they would have survived, no problem. Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“If we could get a little rumour going about things not being quite ship shape and Bristol fashion, a slightly public scandal, possibly? Get ten of the pupils to

be withdrawn and the whole lot cascades. We could pick up a lot of them and our problem is solved. The bank gets its money, we get rid of Lartington, and we sail on with a fair wind. We just have to be careful nobody traces the rumours down to us; else we will be taken to the cleaners.”

“You cunning bugger, Dunstan. It’s a bit risky, but worth it. I know Watts, their bursar; we play golf together. He keeps his ear pretty close to the ground. There have been one or two things down there that they’ve managed to keep under wraps. I’ll bring him over to my place and put one or two glasses of a good stiff Hock into him and he will spill the beans. You get yourself over, as well. He won’t know you. He’s not one of us. Just don’t let on you’re a Headmaster.”

“No, no, quite so. I’ll put my engineer’s hat on. But what we could do with is a list of parents. They are hardly likely to give me one if I march in and ask for one. If they have a computer network, I could get one or two of my computer whiz-kids to hack into their administration.”

“No such luck. It’s low-tech over there, typed and photocopied lists. They might just have a computer, but it will be for word processing. It might just have a database. We will just have to get it out of Watts.”

“We could pretend to be helping to get another appeal going.”

“If I can get Watts singing sufficiently, it might just work. We mustn’t lose any time. I’ll get Watts over to my place tomorrow evening, after our golf round. Meanwhile, I’ll refine our story.”

Stoate felt much happier. If this one worked, it would certainly help the school through its crisis. So far, only a few of the letters from parents of Tanswold rejects had replied; only one of these was positive in tone.

Stoate’s happiness was short lived. He was called away from luncheon as a matter of urgency. This did not improve his mood and as he came to his office, he said, “This had better be pretty bloody important to get me away from my lunch.”

“Yes, sir,” said a short portly man who was accompanied by a police officer, “it is extremely important. I have a court order for you, Mr Stoate.”

“And I have an order for you!” yelled Stoate. “Get out of my bloody office!”

“Not so hasty, Mr Stoate,” said the policeman coolly, “you should understand the gravity of this. Contempt of court is a grave offence. You could be fined up to twenty thousand pounds, or six months, or both. Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate, you are being summonsed to appear immediately at Alverston

Coroner's Court to give evidence in the inquest into the death of Gemma Ruth Chamberlain Proudlock.”

“I told Matron, Mrs Marshall, to represent the school. I demand my solicitor.”

“She has indeed. She has been most helpful about the facts. There are several questions that the jury needs answers to, and they need them from you. Come on, sir, the car is outside. Your secretary can reschedule any appointments you may have this afternoon. Your solicitor, Mr Carter-Barr, is at the Coroner's Court already.”

On the short journey between Tanswold and Alverston, Stoaate had that feeling he remembered as he walked to the Inquiry into the accident he had caused with his Vampire. On that occasion he had thought of several ways that he could wriggle out of the burden of responsibility of causing the death of a fellow airman. On that occasion the tribunal had not been taken in. Although he had not directly caused the death of Gemma Proudlock, he had been in overall charge of the situation; now he had to make it look as if he had acted in the manner expected of a man in his position. He hardly noticed things as he went into the Coroner's Court, but once he had sat down, he noticed lots of eyes staring at him, and they did not seem friendly. He muttered briefly to Mr Carter-Barr, the school solicitor, before the inquisition began.

The cross-examination from the Proudlock family solicitor was thorough and searching. Stoaate rapidly showed himself to be somewhat challenged in the field of jurisprudence. He hectored and blustered. He made scathing comments about the other witnesses. His contempt for the Proudlock family was breath-taking, while his arrogance rendered his inquisitor speechless. Seldom in a coroner's court had the taking of evidence become so confrontational.

As Mr Parkinson sat down, the Coroner, who had made copious notes throughout, started his cross-examination. If anything, the Coroner was even more hostile than Mr Parkinson, and at times, Stoaate began to lose his temper. He was fighting a desperate rear-guard action to try to convince the court that all their other witnesses were either imbeciles, or liars, or both, and that he had the monopoly of truth in the matter. As his battle became more desperate, Stoaate relied increasingly on his right to stay silent. And Mr Carter-Barr was not exactly helpful.

“Damn it,” shouted Stoate, “you are making all this fuss about gippy tums and a bad dose of the squitters. Here I am being pursued because little Johnny has come home with a bit of a bellyache and the trots...”

“You seem to forget,” interrupted the Coroner, “that we are here to consider the death of ‘little Gemma’, to put it in your terms, an unnecessary and tragic affair that would not have happened if you had exercised a little more compassion and responsibility. I have had many witnesses in my court, some of whom have been grossly negligent in their actions, which have led to untimely and horrible deaths for some people. There is one thing that they do not share with you, Mr Stoate, and that is your demeanour. They are usually conscience and grief-stricken about what they have done or failed to do. This court has listened to an hour’s bluster from you that is as shameless as it is arrogant. You must be the witness of the least credibility that I have ever had before my court. The jury will, I am sure, take that into account.

“I must also warn you, Mr Stoate, that I am considering that your attitude and demeanour today has placed you in contempt of court. I therefore fine you the sum of one thousand pounds.”

Mr Carter-Barr attempted some feeble cross-examination of various witnesses, but it was clear to everyone that his efforts were a token. On the instruction of the Coroner, they adjourned to consider their verdict. It was not long in returning. They were unanimous that although Gemma Proudlock had died of poisoning from *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli* 157, her death was due to the negligence of the Headmaster and Governors of Tanswold School arising from lack of management care exercised in the supervision of the kitchen. A contributory factor was the personal negligence of the Headmaster in failing to ensure that prompt help was at hand. A report would be sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Stoate was stunned by the arrival of the verdict so soon. Normally such inquests took ages, often years. This one had taken three weeks; the facts were straightforward in this case and the scientific evidence was clear.

As Dunstan Stoate left the court, he buttonholed Mrs Marshall and informed her that she was no longer required at the school. In future, the office staff would carry out all first aid. Mr Lartington would confirm it in a letter. He also composed in his head a memorandum to Lartington to sack Charlie Gallagher. Dunstan Stoate returned to Tanswold School in a taxi, contemplating a nasty future in which the Proudlocks would surely screw him and the school for every

penny they had. The only comfort was that they probably would not have the means required to bring such an action.

Chapter 11

The author of the Proudlock family's misery, and that of many others as well, had enjoyed a second fairly sleepless night. He had felt satisfied with himself when he saw the article on the late local television news about McEwan's dismissal. It was short-lived; the Bishop came on. Stoaate could not believe his eyes or ears when the Bishop told the interviewer that Mr McEwan was the victim of somebody who had a deep personal grudge. The Bishop had gone on to tell the interviewer that all Mr McEwan's qualifications were totally genuine. Even worse for Stoaate was the Bishop's undertaking that he would do everything to clear Mr McEwan's name. Fortunately, they had not covered Gemma Proudlock's inquest in which he had received a real drubbing. It was highly likely that the news of his fine for contempt of court would appear in the regional papers the following morning.

He got up and went to The Hermitage early the next morning. Shortly after he had got to his office, Donald Blance arrived. He had been as good as his word and got Watts to drop his employer right in it, and, more importantly, he had got a list of names and addresses of all the parents who sent their children to Great Daxford School. Now it was time to write a scurrilous little piece about the school, which would be passed to one of the regional papers. Due to the financial pressures applied by Mr Skinner to the school, there had been a lot of stress, which had expressed itself in animosity in the staffroom, accompanied by back biting and a certain amount of washing of dirty linen in public. Watts had told all of this to his friend who had secreted a small tape recorder into his jacket pocket. In the wrong hands, some of it was dynamite that would blow the school away, so Stoaate and Blance made it their business that it should get into as many wrong hands as possible. A little embellishment here and there would make the volatile mixture highly explosive. Although the embellishments were quite untrue, there was enough substance to the tales that would make just the right number of parents lose confidence and withdraw their children.

Meanwhile Stoate prepared a letter addressed to all the parents at Great Daxford inviting them to send their sons to Tanswold School. Special transitional arrangements would be made, and great care would be exercised to ensure the continuity of their education. The letter would be sent out to receive the fallout from the breaking scandal. It would have to be timed carefully.

All this skulduggery had caused something to start to scratch away at the tiny part of Dunstan Stoate's vindictive little brain that passed for a conscience. He thought back to the press release that he had issued concerning Andrew McEwan. He had gambled on the fact that McEwan would not be able to afford a libel lawyer. Now that his testimony had been so denounced in such vehement terms in the Coroner's court, it was quite likely that a suitably litigious lawyer would seize on it. The damned man's trades union would probably pay for such a libel lawyer as well as the legal costs in the pending case for unfair dismissal. In the old days, Sir Kenneth would have had a quiet word; the plaintiffs would have had their case dismissed and the school would have chalked up another legal victory and been a few thousand pounds better off. In the space of a few short weeks, it was all changing. The best hope would be to stall for time, just as the *Sketch on Sunday* was doing with all its libel cases. It was going to take three years for that particular case to get to court; hopefully, they could stall McEwan's case for at least five.

The problem was that Stoate knew full well that his story was a complete fabrication, but he had to justify sacking McEwan in the first place. He had had an inkling that he was going to resign, but Stoate had to be seen still to be able to wield some authority. Now it was just starting to occur to Stoate, who was driven by a self-righteous vindictiveness, that he would have to use the forged letters to back up his story, especially as two senior officials from the Northern Examinations Syndicate had just arrived.

"Mr Stoate," the senior moderator started, "you will know why we are here. We have received your letter and seen your allegation in the papers. The Board is most concerned, and, frankly, we are surprised. Mr McEwan's work is cited as an example of outstanding practice. Certainly, we have never had any suspicion of malpractice. Usually, it is pretty easy to detect."

"Well, I have this letter on your notepaper," replied Stoate, handing over the photocopy.

The senior moderator looked at it and showed it to his companion. "I don't recognise the signature," he said, "and our letters are usually written in a different typeface to that. What other evidence do you have?"

"I have looked into it when I got the letter. I found that he was pretty good at it, and it required some fairly clever detective work to uncover it," replied Stoate.

"Tell us all about it," said the senior moderator. "It will save us a lot of work."

Stoate cursed himself for falling into his own trap and wished he had kept his trap shut. He sat back and tried to look nonchalant. The moderators were staring at him intently. He had to think up something and fell back on the only way he knew of falsifying coursework. Stoate eventually replied, "Well, from what I understand, he would tell the class exactly what to do."

"Doesn't every good teacher do that?"

"No, they are meant to find out for themselves."

"They need guidance, don't they?"

"Not in my class."

In this reply, Stoate was being remarkably honest. He had little clue about this modern phenomenon called coursework and cared about it even less. He would make up the numbers for the marks without even looking at the pupils' work. If the moderator asked for a sample of work from one of his pupils, he would take the pupil off timetable and tell the boy exactly what to write. It was the method that he had employed with his maths sets for years. Such was Stoate's poor understanding of the criteria used that his marks were way too high and were always moderated down. So Stoate told them the method he used to falsify his results; it was the only way he knew.

"Well, it should be very easy to detect," replied the other moderator. "When we uncover this kind of thing, it is pretty obvious. We go through the files. There is hardly any work there. Then we see the literary style of the candidate suddenly change. They start off with some pitiful drivel that is spelt all wrong. Suddenly their prose becomes beautifully elegant. There are the ones who write down word for word what they have cadged off each other, the same down to the last spelling mistake. We have seen it aplenty elsewhere, but never here. If it's here, we'll find it."

"Of course, you will. I have done some pretty careful detective work and caught that Scots bugger out," Stoate said smugly.

“What are we exactly looking for, if that old Scots bugger, as you call him, has been so clever? What you have told us is a pretty unobvious way of falsifying things, almost asking to be caught. What exactly has Mr McEwan done? It would save us a lot of work, if you could give us details, Mr Stoate.”

Stoate went quiet. The silence was broken only after a minute or so by the senior moderator, who spoke in a quiet, but slightly menacing tone, “If there has been any malpractice, we will find it. We are quite expert at what we are looking for. But I would say that if we do not find any evidence for the malpractice you allege, Mr Stoate, we will consider the allegation as unfounded. As I have said before, Mr McEwan’s work has been always considered to be an outstanding example of good practice. You won’t mind if we report our findings to him, as well as you?”

Stoate was visibly shaken and puffed, “No, no, no, you can’t do that.”

“Why not? You have made an extremely serious allegation, Mr Stoate. Mr McEwan is entitled to defend himself.”

“This is in confidence between me and the Board. You had better remember that. Now you get on with what you have to do. I don’t wish to discuss the matter further.”

“There is another issue which we want to discuss. You mention that Mr McEwan has stolen an examination paper. Do you realise the implications of this?”

“Of course, I do!” Stoate snapped.

“You realise that the board is going to have to set another paper. We cannot risk the security and impartiality of the examination. How did he get at it? Are the papers kept securely as required in the regulations? Who is responsible for their storage?”

“I am aware of that,” replied Stoate irritably. “Mr Gonall is responsible for examinations. You had better talk to him.”

“As far as we are concerned, you are head of this centre, so you are responsible. We will report back to you later.”

Stoate would rather that his next visitors had not called at all and it was with a resigned sigh that he led DI Mallinson and Constable Garvey into his office. DI Mallinson started, “Mr Stoate, could you give us a few details about Mr McEwan?”

“What do you want to know?” Stoate asked in a distinctly grumpy tone of voice.

“Facts, Mr Stoate,” replied DI Mallinson sharply. She was determined to get Stoate exactly where she wanted him, metaphorically of course, for if she managed to get him literally where she wanted to, she would be doing a long stretch in the nick.

“What kinds of facts?” said Stoate with increasing animosity. “Mr McEwan doesn’t deal with facts, just fantasies.”

Mallinson did not rise to the bait, for that would play into Stoate’s hands. “Basic ones to establish his role in the school, you know, like date of birth, qualifications, how long he’s been here.”

Stoate went over to his filing cabinet and got a folder and started reading from it, “Andrew Richard McEwan, date of birth 24 May 1952, claims he graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1973...”

“Thank you, Mr Stoate,” Mallinson interrupted. “Tell us about the first allegation you made about his qualifications. Why do you think he falsified them? How do you know he falsified them?”

“To get himself a good job, I suppose. Somebody from his class and background might want to do that to avoid going down the mines. Like all of them from the lower classes, he would lie and deceive his way anywhere. He had too much to say for himself, typical of a man from a council house, council house mentality, all rights and no responsibilities. Get him back down the mines in Central Scotland, if they would have him back.”

“I would like you to know that I am from a council house as well, Mr Stoate, and there aren’t any mines left in Scotland, as you well know. That’s really beside the point and you haven’t answered my question fully. How do you know he falsified his qualifications? What is your evidence?” Mallinson could only thinly disguise her contempt for her interviewee and had to bring all her professionalism to bear on the interview.

“I have heard it from a number of sources. I investigated it myself and found out that he had made up his qualifications. Believe me, Miss Mallinson, I didn’t take the decision lightly. It was a painful thing to do.”

“I can do something to relieve your pain, Mr Stoate, although I find that your motives are rather contradictory. Your previous reply describes him in fairly derogatory terms, and now you’re pained to lose him? It doesn’t add up. We too have done some investigations and your date of birth you gave us tallies with ours. So at least we’re on the same wavelength there. We checked with Mr McEwan first of all. He has a degree parchment from Edinburgh University in

his study. Very impressive document, if you ask me, all in Latin, beautiful calligraphy.”

“It’s a forgery. He bought it from a calligraphic artist’s shop in Newcastle.”

“Did he forge the photograph as well? I thought the camera never lied.”

“A set up! Anyone can hire a gown and academic hood and a photographer. Pay the right money and you can get anything.”

“Including all the extras in 1970s dress and all the 1970s cars in the background. A film producer could with a multi-million budget. Hardly likely for a miner’s son from Midlothian. Besides, we’ve checked ourselves with Edinburgh University. Andrew Richard McEwan, date of birth 24—5 – 52, did indeed attend the University of Edinburgh. He started in 1969 and left in 1973 with a first-class Honours degree in English literature. We can even give you his matriculation number. We spoke to the Dean of the Faculty, who even remembered him as a rather serious but very conscientious student. Would you care to explain this for us?”

“Obviously not the same person, as conscientious is hardly the word I would use to describe Mr McEwan.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He struck us as that when we spoke to him, Mr Stoate. But let’s put that to one side. Now you also make an extremely serious allegation, that he stole an examination paper to give his students an unfair advantage. You realise he could get three months? What evidence do you have to back your allegation?”

Stoate went quiet. He had to think hard about this one. He got the three letters “from the parents” from the filing cabinet and showed them to the officers. Mallinson glanced at them briefly, but Constable Garvey seemed more intent. Stoate would have to brief the boys on exactly what to say when they got back into school and get DI Mallinson and Constable Garvey back in to listen. He said, “As you can see, I have three complaints from parents of boys that Mr McEwan showed the paper to them in the English Office.”

“Have you got the boys’ written statements?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Can we see them?”

“I don’t have them to hand.”

DI Mallinson was starting to become irritated and was finding it ever harder to maintain her professional cool. “Mr Stoate,” she said with more than a hint of menace, “you have made several very serious allegations which could destroy a

man's reputation. You claim that Mr McEwan has stolen an examination paper and you cannot provide the evidence we need to pursue our inquiries into a serious criminal offence. Tell me now, do these statements exist?"

"Yes, they do, but I cannot lay my hands on them."

Mallinson was not going to be put off. She was talking quite sharply now, "You seem to have an orderly filing system. You could easily lay your hands on the parents' letters. Where are these statements from the three boys? When were they made?"

"Early last week, Tuesday, I think it was. The incident happened late on Monday afternoon."

"What time? Where? Who were the boys concerned?"

"About five o'clock in the English office. The boys concerned were Michael Curwen, Anthony Turner and Luke Kernan."

"Why did you not inform us of the allegations? If the parents know, why have they not approached us? We certainly haven't received any such complaint, and I am sure that if there were any substance to this, we would have heard about it. We will investigate further. Do you mind if we approach the parents ourselves? Do you think they would mind?"

In his next reply, Stoaate unwittingly told the truth among his tissue of lies. "I don't mind, but they are away on half term."

"Can we take the letters with us?" asked Constable Garvey.

"I'll give you a photocopy."

"We will want the original letter, if you please, Mr Stoaate."

"Well, that is very nit-picking if you ask me, Constable."

"That's what we are paid to do. Some villains are only caught because we do the nit-picking as you put it. I prefer to call it 'careful analysis of the evidence'," Constable Garvey replied. He was making good progress in his aspiration to get into the CID. "I will take these letters for forensic analysis."

"Meanwhile why do you think that Mr McEwan would have done this?" asked DI Mallinson.

"He was paid a bribe. He's that sort of person and judging from his background, he's bound to. And he has corrupted young people."

"What do you mean by 'corrupting young people', Mr Stoaate?" asked Constable Garvey.

“If you had seen what his younger daughter was up to with the fairy that seems to be her boyfriend. You could tell what she was doing and what his response was...”

“I can’t see how that’s relevant. Tell me more,” Mallinson interrupted, “Please be more specific.”

Stoate choked, and Mallinson enjoyed his discomfiture. Eventually with a little more prompting from the Detective Inspector, Stoate blurted out, “She had her hand over him, and you could see he had an ... And she hardly had shorts on herself, you could see everything. And she’s sixteen and her boyfriend is only fourteen. She’s seduced a minor. She’s bound to have got the ideas from her father. Aren’t you going to do something about it?”

“Who is her boyfriend?”

“I wouldn’t call him a boy, but his name is Proudlock. He’s the son of a vicar as well, although his father is scarcely worthy of the title.”

“Yes, Mr Stoate, we did meet young Proudlock and the younger McEwan girl. She was still wearing the clothing you describe. Lots of young women wear that kind of sports shorts. Whatever they were up to is really their own business. It’s hardly crime of the century. Lots of young lovers do that kind of thing. As for the McEwan girls, their father dotes on them. Never has he laid a finger on them in the way you suggest. I know the Proudlock boy is a lot younger than she is, but my impression from talking to him was that he was much more mature than that age would suggest. I would suggest rather more mature than you.”

The comment stung Stoate who snapped, “What do you mean by that, Miss Mallinson?”

“What I mean is that for the last twenty minutes or so, I have had to listen to malicious allegations that appear to me to have no grounds whatever. Let me tell you in terms that even you can understand. You have branded a perfectly decent man a fraud and a criminal, when he is perfectly innocent,” Mallinson was getting angry by now. “Do you realise the effect you have had on a perfectly pleasant family. Mr and Mrs McEwan and their daughters have now had to go into hiding. They have had threats to have their house burned down. I can only conclude that it was an act of vindictive mendacity on your part because he was one of the few of your staff who would stand up to your bullying. You couldn’t stand that and you were desperate to get rid of him. You had to justify it. You have told lies to the police, you have told lies to the Bishop, you have told lies to the examination board. You have even told lies to the Department for Education.

By the way, they have ignored your request for him to go onto *List 99*. They only respond to actual convictions. And if I get my way, you will be the one with the conviction—at least for wasting police time, or better still perverting the course of justice. There also just happens to be an offence of libel with criminal intent and I would like to bust you all the way to Canterill Prison!”

“How dare you address me like that, Mallinson?”

“Detective Inspector Mallinson, to you, Mr Stoate,” Mallinson interrupted.

“I will make sure that you are disciplined for your uninvited intrusion into a perfectly legitimate case of an employer sacking a particularly disruptive and obnoxious employee. I have been given these documents, and it is my duty as a reasonable employer with a reputation to maintain to protect the young people in my charge. Now get out of my office!”

“Not so hasty Mr Stoate,” replied Mallinson smugly. She now had him exactly where she wanted him and now was the time to deliver the knockout blow. She continued, “You are clearly totally ignorant of the law of this country that states that a man is not guilty unless proved so by solid evidence beyond all reasonable doubt. And there are more than plenty of reasonable doubts about these allegations. You have done your best to frame and destroy a decent man and his family. You have had it published that he is corrupt, and you know well the consequences of that for him. It is worse than an assault! A year or two back you would have been able to stick the boot in like a common little thug as well. You would have had him hauled before the court because of your influence with Sir Kenneth Rounce and his with the ex-Chief. Oh yes, you used to be able to bring a little bit of influence to bear for yourself, you and your Old Boy Network friends. They have dealt out some pretty rough justice on your behalf. Well, let me tell you now that it’s all changed. Detective Commander Smithells has had a very interesting time with Sir Kenneth Rounce and has opened up a real can of worms. All sorts of top people involved, not least you. This school has been kept going by Sir Kenneth Rounce, and he’s done some underhand dealings to keep things afloat. Detective Commander Smithells will sort out Sir Kenneth. Afterwards he will start dealing with his cronies. By the way, don’t count on the court believing you this time. You’ve got yourself quite a reputation as a thoroughly unreliable witness. You’re the toast of the police canteen.”

“What do you mean? I am the Headmaster of this school and I built it up. It is my work and I will not have it jeopardised by a little misfit with a chip on her shoulder. Get out of my office now!”

“I will repeat what I said. You, Mr Stoate, are a thoroughly unreliable witness. You made quite a name for yourself at the inquest into Gemma Proudlock. She would be alive today if you had done half your job half decently. I will leave now, for the time being. I will be back next week, and you will have found the statements made to you by the boys and I will interview them. And there better be some pretty damned convincing evidence. I don’t think these letters are that convincing. By the way, I’ll take the photocopy you have of the letter from the Northern Examinations Syndicate. I warn you now that there may well be some serious charges.”

Stoate poured himself a brandy to steady himself. The image of this aggressive little policewoman stuck in his mind. She was in casual dress: jeans, trainers, sweatshirt and anorak, a complete contrast to Constable Garvey in uniform. He disliked women intensely, especially when they stood up to him. And there was this one threatening to throw the book at him! How dare she? She was so young, couldn’t have been more than thirty.

Stoate’s jealousy made him more determined to persist with his allegation. Stoate brought to mind his fifteenth commandment of the Byland Foresters, “*Thou shalt never admit that thou art wrong*”, along with the sixteenth, “*Thou shalt never explain, nor shalt thou apologise*”. His goal was to get rid of the McEwan family as far away from him as possible, especially that girl along with her equally ridiculously tall and lanky sister. Perhaps Proudlock might start to think sensibly about good ripping yarns like James Bond. Stoate had another brandy to try to expunge the image of Proudlock and McEwan in Packham Gardens yesterday.

Chapter 12

Dunstan Stoate had given the Chaplain a rocket concerning the riot in church on the Friday before half term. Surprisingly for him, Stoate did not even threaten to sack d’Arcy-Fairfax. Stoate felt that in his time of need, he could not afford to lose his one ally on the staff. It would be hard to find a Chaplain who was so committed to the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible and determined to keep the preaching at the highest theological levels, so maintaining the Christian Faith as accessible only to the elite, white, aristocratic and English.

His ruse concerning Great Daxford School appeared to be bearing fruit. He had heard through the grapevine that an article that had appeared in the regional newspapers had undermined parental confidence and quite a few pupils were being withdrawn from the school. An emergency meeting with the governors and the bank was scheduled for later that week, and staff were being warned that the prospects were grim.

He had called in his three trusted boys, Michael Curwen, Anthony Turner and Luke Kernan. Although Stoate had told them to do it in their own words, they had written down their statements against Mr McEwan word for word, just as Stoate had told them. Stoate had also got them to promise that they were put up to it, not by him, but by a sixth-former, Richard Thorndale, who would blackmail them otherwise. Anthony Turner had helped the Headmaster by exporting the letters written by Stoate himself onto Richard Thorndale’s files on the computer. Stoate had told the police that he had found the statements and DI Mallinson could come in and inspect them.

The contractors were now on site and the old dining room and kitchen, which had been the cause of so much trouble, were now being demolished. The wooden structure was being burned bit-by-bit on a large bonfire while the concrete base was being broken up by a hydraulic hammer attached to an excavator. Because of the fine weather, the foundations would be ready by the end of the week, and the work was well ahead of schedule. A temporary dining facility in portable

cabins had been craned in onto the all-weather pitch behind the stables during half term. Contractors had worked hard to lay on all the services, and the caterers had got the new kitchen up and running.

Dunstan Stoate was willing to acknowledge that his new Bursar, sorry, Financial Director, had really got things moving apace, even though he had been down in London from Wednesday onwards. Lartington had now moved into his new office, and he had established a new network of computers for the financial arrangements of the school. Although Stoate could not stand Antony Scott, Lartington's assistant, he had worked long hours and shown that he could get things done. The fact that Scott was a coarse and foul-mouthed bully mattered not the least bit to Stoate. Stoate felt that things were coming back under his control again and that things would be alright in the end.

There was one cloud on this horizon. Stoate had a few minutes to browse through the *Daily Telegraph* in his study, before going to the Old Dining Room for luncheon. He had tut-tutted at, but enjoyed, page 3, the bit with the dirty court cases, until he saw a column which stated:

Mr Andrew Richard McEwan—an apology

Last week, we reported that Mr McEwan (47) of Tanswold School, Middle Riding of Yorkshire, had been dismissed for falsification of his qualifications, falsification and fabrication of coursework, gross professional misconduct involving boys at the school. Following approaches by his solicitor and several relevant organisations, we are satisfied that none of these allegations are true.

We printed this story on the basis of a press release given out by the Headmaster of Tanswold School, Mr J L Dunstan Stoate. This appears to be a total fabrication, and, in common with our colleagues on all the national dailies, we unreservedly apologise to Mr McEwan for the distress that has occurred to him and his family. We have not been able to contact Mr Stoate for more details.

A fax had arrived from the Northern Examinations Syndicate stating that the two moderators had checked every single bit of coursework and could see no evidence whatever for any malpractice. Instead, the marking was fair and strictly to the criteria set. The board would continue to cite Mr McEwan's work as an exemplar. The moderators who had undertaken the task were highly experienced in detecting malpractice, even that which was well hidden. If there was any malpractice, Mr Stoate was to furnish detailed evidence of it, stating precisely

how it had been done. Stoaate had some inkling that his own way of falsifying his coursework was so crude that even a half-wit would find him out. He was mightily relieved that no one had up to now.

The fax continued by stating that there was no evidence whatever to support the allegation of theft of examination papers. Mr Gonall had never issued the key to anyone, and all the papers were still in their sealed packets. Mr Stoaate was to provide more evidence.

This was going to make his vendetta to destroy McEwan rather more difficult. Damn it, these stupid men were sending a copy of their report to McEwan. No doubt the bloody man would bring it up in court, and he would have to tell a pretty damn convincing tale to get the jury to believe him. Good raconteur though he was, he began to think that this one would be beyond him. Still, perhaps the boys' story might just help him out. After all, if it could be made convincing enough, the jury might well discredit McEwan so much that his case would collapse and he would have to pay substantial legal fees that would otherwise ruin the school.

The kind of hill that Stoaate would have to climb was to be brought home to him during the remainder of the afternoon. DI Mallinson and Constable Garvey arrived shortly after and took away the statements. The boys were summoned one by one and very discretely. Their parents were somewhat taken aback when they had been told about the letters they had allegedly written. This served to confirm Constable Garvey's hunch that the whole thing was a forgery. The parents were present for the meeting with DI Mallinson. The boys' parents were horrified that their sons had been used in such a way and went down to the Headmaster to tell him so.

The cloud on Stoaate's horizon in the morning had turned into a thunderstorm of tropical intensity by the afternoon. It had now occurred to Stoaate that the hole that he had dug himself into was so deep that even he ought to stop digging. It took him all his skills in bluff and bluster to prevent the parents from withdrawing their boys and taking the school to court for a gross abuse of their role of being *in loco parentis*. How Stoaate managed to persuade the parents that these statements were a prank from a rogue sixth former that had got out of hand, nobody ever could understand, least of all Stoaate himself. He promised that a detailed investigation would be undertaken and the named culprit would be expelled. His success was partly due to the fact that he threatened to expel the

three boys concerned for making malicious allegations and that he would make a statement to the press to that effect.

Stoate set in train the next part of his strategy to dissociate himself from his allegations. He asked Eileen to ring Mrs Thorndale to come into school immediately and to type a letter to her explaining why her son had been expelled.

Harder to persuade were DI Mallinson and Constable Garvey. The sight of the two officers was no less stressful for Stoate than the angry parents he had just somehow pacified. The pacification of two annoyed police officers was to be a different matter, especially DI Mallinson who was making a name for herself as quite a good sleuth.

Mallinson started quite brusquely, “Mr Stoate, we have interviewed the boys and, quite frankly, their stories were a complete load of rubbish. I would like to use a more forceful word, but I work to high professional standards. The statements your boys have made simply do not add up and I have heard better from some of the half-wits we pick up in stolen cars. Firstly, the boys could not keep their stories credible. They embellished them with all sorts of things that just don’t add up.

“Secondly, the boys admitted that it was made up, and you told them what to say.

“Thirdly, it so happens that Mr McEwan was not only not in the office at the time these alleged offences took place, but he was also not even on the premises. No cash changed hands, and the parents certainly don’t have any record of writing a cheque to Mr McEwan. Mr McEwan was at home ringing the Bishop about a confirmation service. It’s there on his telephone bill. Would you like to make a statement, Mr Stoate?”

Stoate was staring at a likely trial for perjury and criminal libel. He had to think hard to get them off his back. He now played his trump card. He replied, “Detective Inspector Mallinson, there is a particularly regrettable aspect to this miserable affair that I have just found out, and I must report it to you. I have been given a name of a sixth form pupil of this school, who made these allegations as a result of his antipathy towards Mr McEwan. This boy’s name is Richard Thorndale. You may speak to him as soon as I have expelled him from this school.”

“Why did you not mention him before?” asked DI Mallinson.

“I hadn’t got down to the bottom of my investigation.”

“Why was the press release given out by the school?”

“It was done by Thorndale who had forged my signature.”

“What did you do to stop it?”

“There wasn’t a lot I could do. It had been published before I could do anything about it. Do you want to see the boy? You will find out more from him.”

“Yes, we will. That doesn’t exonerate you as Headmaster; you must also bear the responsibility. You are in *loco parentis*. But that will be a matter for Mr McEwan.”

“There is one thing that really doesn’t square up, Mr Stoate. Why are you so scathing about Mr McEwan and his family? You really have it in for them.”

“I cannot abide the man. Simple as that.”

Richard Thorndale was dispatched by Stoate with as much compunction as a pig by a slaughterhouse worker. DI Mallinson and Constable Garvey took the protesting boy to the computer room. The lad was determined to prove that he had never written such a thing, but the incriminating evidence was found in his computer files. As he saw Thorndale being taken down to Tanswold Police Station to be interviewed on suspicion of criminal libel, Stoate breathed a sigh of relief. A more sensitive man than he would have hung his head in shame to have lowered himself to the level of seeing a totally innocent boy carry the can for an act of total malice on the part of a man that should have known better. But it did not worry Stoate, for he had achieved his aim, to discredit McEwan and had got the servants of justice off his tail. He wrote another press release:

Mr Andrew Richard McEwan

It is with some shock that the school has found out about the malicious allegations concerning the above member of staff. While it is true that Mr McEwan’s contract has not been renewed under the recent restructuring, this is in no way associated with the allegations made public last week. The reason for Mr McEwan being released from his contractual obligations is because negotiations concerning his role in staff restructuring could not be made to the satisfaction of both parties.

These allegations were published by a sixth form pupil with a grudge against Mr McEwan. The pupil has been identified and has been expelled from the school. We are appalled that the headmaster’s signature was forged on the press release and the matter has been referred to the Middle Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary for further investigation.

We totally repudiate any suggestion of improper conduct and fraud on Mr McEwan's part, and we very much regret the distress brought on to him and his family.

Stoate had never been put off committing either breath-taking mendacity, or gross hypocrisy.

Two hours later, Richard Thorndale left Tanswold Police Station with his mother. Both were in a state of shock. DI Mallinson had interviewed Richard in depth, and it became clear to the officers that he could not possibly have done such a thing. Mallinson's copper's instinct was that Stoate was behind this, and she and Constable Garvey discussed it in detail in her office.

"What do you reckon?" Mallinson asked.

"I think the kid's telling the truth, Ma'am."

"I agree. It just doesn't seem to add up. The first press release goes out on Tuesday. He's at home. His mother confirmed that. He didn't go into school for the whole week. How did he manage to get the press release and everything else out?"

"I suppose he could have prepared it all beforehand."

"How did he know that Stoate was going to sack McEwan? Assuming he did prepare things before, it must surely be an utter fluke that the press release coincided with Stoate's meeting with McEwan on Monday last week? I don't buy that one. That said, how come all those documents are in his computer files? If he didn't put them there, and we saw them, who did?"

"The computers at the school are all on a network, Ma'am. In some systems there is a central brain, a server and it is quite easy to send a document out of one person's files and put it in another's. They do that all the time in offices. It might well be possible to show that Stoate did the typing and planted the files in Thorndale's space on the computer."

"I'm not totally convinced," replied Mallinson. "The old buffer knows next to nothing about computers. His terminal is on his desk for show. He said as much when we impounded it when we took the ex-Bursar in. Detective Commander Smithells' lads looked it over. There was next to nothing on it. A bit of bad word-processing and that was it."

"He could have got somebody else to do it."

"Who?"

“One of his favourites,” replied Garvey.

“What do you mean?” asked Mallinson.

“Stoate has a number of boys in the school up to the sixth form who share the same kind of things like him. They are in the rugby teams, like the CCF, like adventure, they bully others, their parents are rich, that kind of thing.”

“How do you know? Are there any girls?”

“I have a cousin who goes there. He’s not one of Stoate’s favourites. My uncle and aunt have scrimped and saved to send him there. They are not rich at all, and Stoate won’t have anything to do with them. He’s a real snob. My cousin tells me a lot about what goes on there. Stoate is a real bully and is a twister. By the way, there aren’t any girls as his favourites. He cannot stand girls or women for that matter. He is a complete sexist.”

“You don’t have to tell me. He’s as twisty as any of the villains I have met. Just he is slightly cleverer and has rich friends to protect him. Who do you think put these allegations about McEwan? What does your great copper’s instinct tell you?”

“It was Stoate, Ma’am. It must have been. I’ve just had the report from the graphologist. He concludes that the signatures of the parents are forgeries, whereas that from Stoate is entirely genuine. No wonder he didn’t want to give us a copy of his signature. The parents didn’t mind. It’s looking like Stoate all the time.”

“I think so too, but we have got to have hard evidence that will stand up in court. If we bring him in for perjury and base our case on our copper’s instinct, Carter-Barr, his lawyer, will wipe the floor with us. Even if we could get the computer to tell us when those files were passed to Thorndale’s folder, it is not hard evidence. Someone else could just have easily put them into the Headmaster’s folder and passed them on at a later date. Sorry, but I am only putting myself into defence lawyer mode. After all, if he were found guilty, he might be doing a two-year stretch for the first offence. Why do you reckon he picked on Thorndale?”

“From what I know, Ma’am, his dad died five years ago. Motorbike accident. He’s an only child, and mum and dad didn’t want him to go to the secondary modern in Alverston. He just failed to get into Alverston Grammar, but he passed into Tanswold. They both did lots of overtime to get him there. The lad is heart-broken about what’s happened. He feels he’s let his mum down badly.”

“He mustn’t. He’s been let down badly by that man Stoate. You don’t need reminding how much that man lies and cheats as naturally as he breathes. It’s hardly surprising that he picks on someone whose surviving parent hasn’t the means to hire a lawyer to give him the drubbing he deserves.”

“What’s more, Ma’am, if she appeals against the expulsion, she has to hire a lawyer to speak for her at the appeal. The Governors don’t allow the parents or child to speak for themselves. If they lose the appeal, they have to pay for the school’s solicitor as well. On top of that they have to pay a thousand-pound deposit which they forfeit if they lose, which they invariably do. It’s a rip-off. Stoate targeted Thorndale precisely because his mother could not raise an appeal.”

“I think we need to hasten slowly on this one. We’ll keep Stoate on the back burner. I am going to pass it on to Detective Commander Smithells and he can put it into the dossier that he’s building on the Tanswold School old boy network. It’s a spin off from what he’s got from Sir Kenneth Rounce who has been singing like a canary. Lots of top people have been involved in some pretty shady deals, rip-offs and rough justice. There are a lot of innocent people in various nicks doing time for things they haven’t done. Have you noticed how many top people have retired suddenly? Our ex-chief is one. Smithells has really opened up a can of worms. New chief has told him to get to the bottom of it. It will take him some time, but he will. You watch this space in a couple of years. It will be big and some top nobs will be going down for quite a long time. They reckon that if he cracks this, Smithells will be going up to ACC. I hear you’ll be joining us soon. Is that right?”

“Yes, Ma’am. In a couple of weeks.”

“You certainly have the nose for it, you and your copper’s instinct.”

Stoate and Lartington, who was not pleased to have lost another pupil, were considering the same subject. Lartington said, “We cannot afford to lose pupils like this. You are getting rid of our assets. Each six and a half k a year counts for us. We need every single rich bum on a seat.”

“This bum was never rich. His mother was having trouble paying the fees anyway,” Stoate replied.

“Well, that’s not so bad. We cannot have those who cannot pay their way. What had he done anyway?”

Stoate showed him the copies of the documents that the police had allowed him to keep. Lartington looked horrified and said, “Do you realise that McEwan is going to take us to the cleaners? That is libel! You said you wanted to get rid of the man, but not like that!”

Stoate was alarmed that Lartington was too damned close to the truth and hastily said, “These papers were put about by Thorndale, who had a grudge. I had to get rid of him. Besides we could always get McEwan’s lawyers onto the boy. Let them screw every penny out of him for the rest of his natural. The thought of McEwan getting nothing worth speaking of is quite amusing. Besides, McEwan can’t afford a libel lawyer.”

“Don’t you believe it, Headmaster. McEwan’s union will back him. I know we don’t recognise the NASUWT, but the court will. We will look like the IRA terrorists who refused to recognise the court they were in front of. It didn’t stop them from getting life sentences. It is also highly unlikely that they will go for the boy, as you are in *loco parentis* and the Tanswold School Trust is liable for everything that happens on this site. I will check our insurance position, but we may find ourselves not covered. I will look into it as a matter of urgency.”

Lartington was as good as his word and looked into the legal liability insurance as a matter of urgency. What he found was not pleasing. Not only was there none, but the whole site was uninsured for anything, nor had it been for the past eighteen months. This had been the result of a few economies made by his predecessor as he tried to recover his disaster with the Draycott Foundation. Lartington immediately set about arranging cover, but nobody was prepared to take on the risks posed by the high likelihood of massive damages claims by the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock for the loss of their daughter and Mr Andrew McEwan for unfair dismissal and gross libel.

When Lartington finally reported this to the Headmaster, the enormity of what he had done finally penetrated Stoate’s mind. He slowly began to realise that he had gone too far on this occasion and that the treatment he had meted out to Richard Thorndale had not been the right response. The school would be ruined by these claims for damages unless a fighting fund was established. The only slight comfort was that Mrs Thorndale would never be able to put up an appeal against her son’s expulsion, as she would not be able to afford the thousand-pound deposit, nor the solicitor required by the appeals procedure, let alone a libel lawyer. When push came to shove, Stoate’s loyalty lay towards the

Byland Foresters, not the school, and if the school had to carry the can for this whole sorry episode, so be it.

“Never explain, never apologise. The less said, the soonest mended,” was his final comment.

Chapter 13

A can of worms was an unseemly but totally appropriate metaphor for the general situation, but for the investigation into the food poisoning outbreak at Tanswold School, it may well have been literal. The Environmental Health Officer, Mr Turner, had made further inquiries into the source of the contaminated chicken responsible. What he had found was quite stomach turning. The chicken had been traced to an abattoir that officially produced meat for the pet food industry. A number of individuals were alleged to have diverted meat for the pet food into the human food chain, and were providing it, amongst others to a number of seedy fast-food outlets in Carlsborough, and via Cyril Jukes to the pupils and staff of Tanswold School. It was also said to be going to reputable food suppliers and finding its way onto the dinner plates of children in schools up and down the whole of the North of England. The matter was now the subject of a wider police investigation, and a major undercover operation was launched. Among those under suspicion of major involvement was Cyril Jukes, catering manager at Tanswold School. The investigation into the fraudulent dealings with the Draycott foundation had also revealed an apparent link.

The Canterill Farm estate in Carlsborough had the unenviable reputation of being the worst in Britain. Home to drug addicts, social misfits and gangs of feral children, it had about every deprivation and depravation that could be thought of. Just on the edge of the estate was an industrial estate, an optimistic description for the huddle of low-rise units of unspeakable modern dreariness, for most of them had never been occupied and several had been burned out. At the end of Denton Close was a unit that dealt with animal by products. Diseased animals were brought in dead or alive. When the latter happened, panicked bellows would be quickly cut short by the sharp crack of a shot from the knackerman's humane killer. Other unspeakable remains were brought in on articulated lorries with high aluminium trailers covered with tarpaulins. These would be ground up and converted into meat sold on to the pet food trade. A high corrugated iron

fence festooned with barbed wire surrounded the place. It might keep prying eyes out, but it certainly did not keep the appalling stench of the place in. The stench would pervade the Canterill Farm Estate at times and succeeded in masking the more normal sour reek that was the predominant smell on the estate. Often several minibuses of policemen would be stationed in the industrial estate in anticipation of trouble, which could flare up at any time.

It was therefore not unusual that there were several minibuses full of policemen waiting in the early hours of one Wednesday morning. Along with the minibuses were several rapid response units, for undercover surveillance had indicated that there were a number of nefarious activities going on in the unit, as well as the illegal dumping of food unfit for human consumption into the human food chain.

At seven thirty precisely, half an hour after the morning shift had clocked on, the police, led by Detective Chief Inspector Charles Thompson swooped on the place. Trouble had been anticipated and there was a short gun-battle in which a policeman was slightly injured and one of five gunmen was killed. The main police interest was the discovery of a large quantity of highly pure cocaine and heroin with a street value of twenty million pounds. Once the place had been secured, Mr Turner and his Environmental Health Team could come and pursue their primary interest in the place, namely, to investigate how what should have been pet food was appearing on menus in several Carlsborough restaurants and fast food outlets, as well as the erstwhile dining room of Tanswold School.

Detective Commander Smithells had found that Tanswold School had been rather more involved than just being a victim. He had been led to the meat scam by data that he had unearthed in forgotten corners of Graham Smith's hard drive. Although much of the data had been overwritten, there was sufficient to build up a picture of condemned meat being cleaned up and passed over for human consumption. The scam had been started, so it seemed, to help Graham Smith rebuild the wreckage of the Draycott Foundation. Mr Hackett of Staunton, Hardy and Company also seemed to be involved. The connection with the Canterill Meat Processing Company had been established when Mr Turner had been through Cyril Jukes' office. Smithells worked closely with his colleague Thompson who was interested because it seemed that the same company was also a cover for drug imports.

There seemed to be no link between Graham Smith, Cyril Jukes, or any drugs. Both Smithells' and Thompson's coppers' instinct told them that drugs

did not fit in this case. The two scams were entirely coincidental, so the two investigations could be kept separate. Therefore, Thompson dealt with the drug side and Smithells looked after the side in which Smith was involved.

As the raid on the Canterill Meat Processing Company took place, simultaneous raids took place in Leeds and York as well as the immediate vicinity of Carlsborough. The appalling Cyril Jukes had been traced to some seedy bedsits in Liverpool and he too was arrested. Detective Commander Smithells sent DI Mallinson to the factory yard. He was glad that he had the privilege of senior rank. Picking up and interviewing Cyril Jukes was infinitely preferable to his assistant's job of wading through nameless and smelly bits of decaying animals.

DI Mallinson would have agreed. As she worked through the factory with her subordinates and Mr Turner's Environmental Health Team, there were times that she felt decidedly green around the gills and had disappeared to the ladies on a couple of occasions. Several of her officers suffered in the same way. Even Mr Turner, who had an iron stomach, having waded through rats and cockroaches in some of Carlsborough's worst fast-food outlets, had to admit that what he saw was quite the worst he had come across. The whole mechanism of the operation was decidedly repulsive, with giant machines that stripped bones of meat and giant shredders that could snap a cow's thigh bones as if they were twigs. Mr Turner had little time for religion, but he concluded that this infernal place, equipped like a mediaeval torture chamber and stinking to high heaven, was the best intimation of Hell that he had ever experienced.

Dunstan Storate thought that he had been in Hell for several weeks. Every problem that was sorted, another ten seemed to crop up. And each step forward was dogged by several related steps backward. He had noted with satisfaction that Carlton Quinn Construction were making excellent progress with the new dining room. Nevertheless, the ghosts of the previous kitchen were about to return to haunt Storate, in the form of a return visit from Mr Turner, the Environmental Health Officer, who was accompanied by DI Mallinson. The last people that Storate wanted to meet were this petty official with his petty regulations on cleanliness along with this aggressive young bitch who had as much as told him that he was a liar. Even worse was that they were accompanied by Detective Commander Richard Smithells.

For that matter DI Lisa Mallinson did not particularly want to meet this pompous and sexist buffoon who told lies as naturally as he breathed and was in

part responsible for the fact that her duty had called her to one of the most disgusting places that she had ever been. Her stomach was still sore from her being violently sick on three occasions. She felt tired and weak and was in a thoroughly bad temper. She was glad that her boss was going to lead the interview.

Smithells started the conversation, “Mr Stoate, have you listened or watched the news recently?”

“Yes, I watch it regularly.”

“So, you will know that on Wednesday, there was a raid on an industrial estate in Carlsborough.”

“Yes, I saw it on the local news, but what relevance has that got to me? I don’t go anywhere near Carlsborough, let alone Canterill Farm.”

“You are very sensible. Not many of us like to go anywhere near Canterill Farm, nor for that matter do the folk who live there like us going there. They are none too sympathetic to the police.”

“Mr Smithells, are you telling me that I have been involved with drugs? Twenty million pounds worth of drugs were seized. I know we are going through a sticky patch financially, but our fund-raising has not stooped to selling drugs. I wouldn’t countenance drugs in any form. Any boy in this school caught with drugs is instantly expelled.”

“Quite so, Mr Stoate. No, we aren’t accusing you of having anything to do with drugs. In fact, there are two separate investigations. There are two separate scams that happen to be going on in the same place and being run by the same operators. Detective Commander Thompson is handling the drugs side. Mr Turner is handling the meat scam, but since what has happened in this scam is so serious, we have got involved and DI Mallinson is in charge of the criminal investigation. So where do I fit in? Well, we have a phrase in police slang, ‘singing like a canary’. Do you know what that means?”

“I don’t descend to the level of police slang,” Stoate said loftily, looking down his nose at Smithells, “I was not brought up in the gutter.”

“Mr Stoate,” replied Smithells icily, “I was educated at one of the top public schools in the country. I was there before this place was ever founded. Let me tell you what it means. It means that a criminal is pouring out a lot of useful information that enables us to solve at least the crime we are investigating and probably several others as well. I should tell you that your ex-Bursar’s computers have been doing just that.”

Detective Constable Garvey thought of the old Apple Macs caterwauling away in tinny voices with the server acting as choirmaster. As it was his first day in the CID and he didn't want it to be his last, he repressed the desire to laugh.

"Why should I be interested what some old computers have been telling you, Mr Smithells?" Stoate asked.

"Because they have linked Mr Smith, your ex-Bursar, the one with the fingers in the till, to some rotten meat."

"I could have told you that Mr Smith was rotten meat. You don't have to be a super sleuth to know that. He has caused me no end of trouble. Besides, why the devil should I be interested in meat?"

"For the simple reason that a person for whom you are responsible has been serving rotten meat."

"I couldn't give a damn what kind of meat Smith served. It wasn't his job. He was here to look after the money, a job in which he failed singularly badly."

"You really don't seem to have cottoned on to this, Mr Stoate. Your ex-Bursar, Mr Smith, has been involved in a scam to pass off condemned meat as fit for human consumption. What I would like to know is what involvement was there anywhere else in the school?"

"I am Headmaster here, not a damn kitchen boy!" Stoate shouted. "Why the devil should I be interested what meat got served in the kitchens?"

Smithells sighed. He could not decide whether Stoate had a diabolic intelligence that wanted to make a monkey of him, or whether he was a complete idiot. He said, "DI Mallinson, you tell Mr Stoate in words of one syllable, so that even he can understand. You have seen it, so give it to him straight from the horse's mouth."

It was an unseemly metaphor, but what came from Lisa Mallinson's mouth was preferable to what had come out of it a few hours before. "Mr Stoate," she started, "I would like to take you to Canterill Farm myself to show you what we were dealing with this morning. But, if you became ill as a result, you would probably have a case against me on public health grounds. I am not going to give you that pleasure. You seem to be pretty slow on the uptake as to what this is about, so I am going to explain it to you in idiot talk, which is about your level."

"Your ex-Bursar had become involved with your caterer in a little operation with some pretty unsavoury characters to serve some pretty unsavoury material in your school dining room. Not only did he serve it to your pupils but also was involved in laundering the proceeds from the sale to other outlets. There were

several schools that were supplied, several reputable food manufacturers as well as a number of restaurants and fast-food outlets in Carlsborough. He supplied your pupils through your caterer, Mr Jukes. You may well have eaten some of it yourself.”

“Certainly not. I don’t eat with the pupils and junior staff. We have our own dining room up here in the house. I have more important things to do than to worry about what the pupils and junior staff eat. That’s the caterer’s job and that’s what I pay him to do.”

“Yes, I know how you and those whom you think are important look after yourselves. You stuff your faces with the finest foods and wines, and you couldn’t care less. Mr Stoate, I am putting it to you that you have been grossly negligent in your duty of care to your pupils and staff.”

“Why should I be interested? That’s the Bursar’s job, not mine!”

“Don’t you realise that he has committed a serious criminal offence?”

“Bad food never did me any harm when I was young. How has Smith committed a serious criminal offence?”

Mallinson was getting thoroughly irritated by Stoate’s attempt to prevaricate. She snapped, “Smith was selling this stuff to prop up the Draycott Foundation, which you as a Trustee should have been supervising. He laundered the money through the Draycott Foundation, and most of what is left is the proceeds from his scam. Now I shall spell out the kind of meat that we saw this morning. There were stinking piles of...” And Mallinson continued to provide her own stomach-turning account of what she had come across at the Canterill Meat Processing Company’s premises. Mr Turner had added his contribution, embellishing his account with the kind of terms that were the everyday currency of those used to crawling about in rat droppings and cockroaches. Turner finally finished by saying, “The *Salmonella* and the *Escherichia coli* 157 that killed Gemma Proudlock are most likely to have come from that source. The meat in your old kitchen was alive with the bacteria. I am surprised the meat wasn’t running about the school. Not only that, but there were cancerous parts that were being cleaned up and put into the meat. These operators barely removed decaying tissue from open infections. Some of the animals died of very serious illnesses like TB and brucellosis. By allowing them to be fed to your pupils, you were allowing a game of Russian Roulette to be played with your pupils’ health. Gemma Proudlock lost.”

Stoate was now angry as the revolting revelations sank in. He shouted, “You come into my office to discuss rotting meat, and you are accusing me of passing it off as clean. I am a headmaster, not a butcher’s boy! Get out of my office now. I have a school to run and a reputation to maintain!”

“You certainly have, Mr Stoate,” replied Detective Commander Smithells coolly, “as a thoroughly unreliable witness. After all, we could throw the book at you on a number of scores. Firstly, we do not believe for one minute that Richard Thorndale released that statement about Mr McEwan. We have looked at all the documents and we are satisfied that, (a) parental signatures are forged and (b) your signatures are genuine. We are considering charges of perjury on these. Secondly your tissue of lies at the Proudlock inquest have not put you in good stead...”

“Are you telling me I am a liar?” shouted Stoate. “Damn it! I called you lot in to trace five million pounds of this school’s assets that have been stolen and you are asking me damn fool questions about rotting meat! Get out of my office now!”

“Not so hasty, Mr Stoate,” replied Smithells whose tone started to become menacing. “I am saying that you have not given yourself a reputation for being a reliable witness. You have not answered our questions at all about your involvement, if any, with the Canterill Meat Processing Company, which makes me suspect that you have something to hide. All you have tried to do is to avoid your responsibility for what goes on here. If you had supervised your employees more closely, not only would you have your missing five million pounds, but you would also not have had a fatal outbreak of food poisoning caused by criminal activity on the part of one of your key employees. Now, as well as the perjury, I have to decide whether I am going to charge you with being an accessory to the serious crime of passing unfit meat into the human food chain. Or whether I should charge you with criminal negligence. You might get two years for the first, or five years for the second.

“By the way, Mr Stoate, if you tell us once more to get out of your office, we will. Instead, we will continue this conversation in my office and that will be after a night in the cells. That wouldn’t do your reputation much good, would it? Now will you please be so kind as to answer our questions about what you know of the activities of your ex-Bursar concerning the Canterill Meat Processing Company?”

Stoate knew what was good for him. He could only explain that he had no idea of what Smith had been up to. He had not known of Smith's frittering away of five million pounds until it had come into the open in early May, let alone that Smith had tried to recover it by criminal activity. Naturally, he would never have sanctioned it, had he known. If he had known that one penny had been lost from the Draycott Foundation, he would have sacked Smith instantly. Yes, he was naïve to allow Smith such free reign and looking back on things there should have been closer inspection and supervision of Cyril Jukes.

"Did you not take up references?" asked DI Mallinson.

"Yes, of course we did. The references told us that he was a *Cordon Bleu* chef and had managed a successful catering company in Liverpool. He sounded just the splendid sort of chap with just the right credentials to provide our pupils and staff the highest quality of..."

"Dog meat," Mallinson interrupted acidly. "Do you actually know Jukes' background? Did you know that the nearest that he ever had to any catering experience was as a porter on the sandwich bar at Lewis'? He went on to run an old folks' home in a big house in North Wales with his partner and that had a dreadful reputation. His partner had tried to run it as a hotel, but she had a drink problem, and they split up in the end, but not before they took in a load of old folks with all sorts of problems. Several went missing and he went underground. He left his landlord with thousands of pounds of debts. He later resurfaced with several mobile fast-food caravans. Environmental Health did him several times after various food poisoning outbreaks. He got fined a pretty penny several times. His company would cease trading, and he would start up again to do the same thing from the same address, but with a different name. He has a list of creditors as long as your arm and he disappeared to surface here. We are throwing the book at him on several accounts of gaining money and services by deception, as well as false accounting, if you would pardon the pun."

"Very funny I'm sure," replied Stoate grumpily.

"And that's not all, Mr Stoate," Mallinson continued, "Environmental Health Officers all over the north of England including our Mr Turner here have a lot of unfinished business with your Mr Jukes. And we do as well. He is up to his eyeballs with the scam at the Canterill Meat Processing Company. We are also satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to charge Mr Jukes with the manslaughter of Gemma Ruth Chamberlain Proudlock. We are investigating whether your role in this miserable affair is sufficient to charge you with

negligence or being an accessory to a criminal offence. If Jukes is found guilty of any of the charges, he will be inside for a long time. If he is guilty of all of them, he will never come out. Would you like to spend a couple of years in the same cell with Jukes? I can arrange that for you if you like.”

Stoate went ashen at the thought. He had always considered Cyril one of the most repulsive people on his payroll and had always tried to have as little to do with him as possible. He had always been thankful that he had set up the privilege for himself of having luncheon in the civilised surroundings of the Old Dining Room. He had always considered the food served to the pupils and junior staff wholesome if rather unpleasant. Now he knew that it wasn't even wholesome. The whole thing was as foul as the apparition in front of him, this aggressive young bitch, who seemed to be out to give him a hard time. Stoate looked at Mallinson in a disdainful way. She wasn't his idea of what a police officer should be like, dressed as she was in tight fitting jeans, trainers and a sweatshirt. She was staring at him with her steel blue eyes; it certainly was not adoringly. Mallinson continued, “Now, Mr Stoate, will you tell us everything you know about Mr Jukes?”

“Where do you want me to start?”

“At the very beginning. It's a very good place to start.”

“Well, I'm not sure...”

“The lot, Mr Stoate,” Mallinson snapped, “the whole damned lot! You leave out one iota or tell one little porky and we will take you in and charge you with being an accessory to a serious criminal offence. I am still looking to throw the book at you in Mr McEwan's case.” Mallinson leant forward and hissed, “It won't do your reputation much good, especially if the pupils and parents see us bundling you into a squad car.”

At the end of the interview the police officers went away rather empty-handed. Although they would have dearly loved to have taken Stoate in to charge with being an accessory to manslaughter, they knew that the charge would not have stuck. It was clear that Stoate had been desperately negligent in his duties, but it was more due to slackness rather than criminal intent. True, he should have been sacked years ago, but it would be a hard act to convince a jury that his negligence towards Gemma Proudlock was so gross as to warrant a prison sentence. On the other hand, it was quite likely that there would be a civil case brought by the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock alleging a gross failure of Stoate's responsibility *in loco parentis* regarding the death of their daughter. Stoate would

also have to appear at the trial of his erstwhile caterer, Cyril Jukes and the various QCs would give him a very hard time.

While the police officers that had visited him that afternoon had left with a feeling of disappointment, Stoate left his office in a thoroughly bad temper. He was livid that he had been questioned like a common criminal and that man Smithells had threatened to take him down to the police station. Why the hell should he be interested in rotten meat? If that silly little Proudlock girl had not died of what really was just a dose of the squitters, there would not have been all that fuss. He was musing on dark thoughts about the Reverend Proudlock and his effeminate son as he walked through Packham Gardens. Just in front of him was a young couple in tight-fitting cycling clothes all over each other. The long thin legs entwined around each other were familiar. The sense of outrage that welled up within combined with the stress of the afternoon's conversations proved too much for Stoate. He went over and pulled the boy off the seat and threw him to the grass, shouting, "Why can't a decent man go for a walk nowadays without having to witness what appears to be sex. And you McEwan with your legs open like a whore!"

Samuel Proudlock was shocked and could not say anything as he picked himself up, but Jessica McEwan leapt up shouting in a manner that would have graced a Leith stair.¹

"How dare you do that, Mr Stoate! How dare you call me a little whore!" yelled Jess. "How dare you treat my family like you have done!"

"Out of my way, little girl!" hissed Stoate. It was not an appropriate phrase to use for Jessica McEwan was as tall as he was.

"You have treated my dad shamefully; you published lies about him in the news. He has worked really hard to get to where he is. Granddad didn't want him to go down the mines. Dad is far more intelligent than you are! And Sam is far more grown up than you will ever be!"

"Get out of my way, little girl!"

"And Dad got to university. My gran and granddad were really proud of what he has achieved and you go and tell everyone that he's bent! You are the one with..."

¹ A stair (pronounced 'steer') is a term given to the common staircase that leads to several apartments in a tenement house. These are common in Scottish cities, no more so than in Edinburgh.

Jessica did not finish her sentence for Stoate threw her headlong into the flowerbed. Samuel Proudlock had pulled himself together and tried to stop the angry old man. Although he was taller than Stoate, he was little more than half his weight and could do little. Even so he cried out, “You can’t do that, Mr Stoate!”

“Proudlock, get out of my fucking way!” roared Stoate and punched young Proudlock in the solar plexus. The youth went flailing into the flowerbed, falling onto his girlfriend. He lay there like a stranded fish. At that moment he thought he was going to die, as he could not breathe. Stoate came over and shouted at them, “That isn’t half what you will get if I catch either of you in Packham Gardens again.”

After a minute Samuel Proudlock caught his breath and managed to sit up. Jessica McEwan was shaking. Shocked at the suddenness and the intensity of the assault the two young people held each other close and burst into tears, just as Anji, Jessica’s sister, and Simon Latimer, who had witnessed the incident from a distance, came running up. A police siren could be heard as Anji had called the police on her mobile.

The assault had also been witnessed by the senior laboratory technician at Goyder’s School. She had once worked at Tanswold School and had had some family problems. When Stoate had heard of this, he ordered the Bursar to dismiss her instantly, as this kind of thing would not do the atmosphere of the school any good at all. She had been looking to pay Stoate out and this would prove an ideal opportunity.

Stoate had felt rather pleased with himself for putting that little girl and boy in their place. It was about time something got done about the lovers that seemed to litter Packham Gardens, and decent people should not have to witness the snogging that seemed so common there. If he had his way, Packham Gardens would only be open to the over forties who knew how to behave. It had never occurred to him that his behaviour would be considered by everyone else to be contemptible, assaulting a young girl and boy. Stoate was still smarting from the interview he had with Detective Commander Smithells and DI Mallinson, and the last thing he wanted to see was another policeman. This was unfortunate because the next caller was Detective Constable Peter Garvey, who showed his warrant card and said, “Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate, I have received a complaint from two young people, and I am therefore arresting you on suspicion of assault. You don’t have to say anything, but I have to tell you that anything

you do say will be recorded and may be used in evidence. I must also tell you that it may harm your defence if you do not reveal facts that you rely on in court for your defence. Come with me and get in the car.”

Chapter 14

Whereas the Summer Term 1998 had started off, like all the other terms had for Dunstan Stoate, on a note of unbridled opportunity and optimism, in the space of about six weeks or so, it had become utter purgatory. Stoate was starting to feel his age, or indeed rather more than his sixty-two years, but all outside observers, whatever their station, were agreed that Stoate was not acting it. They had noticed that the Headmaster had started to behave ever more erratically. Stoate put this down to the fact that he was making tough and dynamic decisions in the face of the acute financial crisis that had overtaken the school. Others said that he was becoming even more of a vindictive bully, unable to see that actions were either wrong, or if they were right, not the best solution, or if they were wholly right, done without an iota of kindness or compassion. Even those who were closest to him became unsettled at the unpleasant nature of his dealings with the world in general and members of the school community in particular.

Although it had not been his intention, Stoate had succeeded in garnering for his school a good deal of rather bad publicity. And no more so than when he appeared at Tanswold Magistrates' Court charged with common assault on Samuel Malcolm John Chamberlain Proudlock and Jessica Mary Ritchie McEwan. Unlike many that had passed through the court, Stoate had conducted his own defence, such that it was, with an arrogance that everybody, including his solicitor who cross-examined the prosecution witnesses, was appalled. He had not learned his lesson about contempt of court. Although Mr Carter-Barr had begged him to be temperate, much of Stoate's submission to the court was an emotive tirade on the state of the country that would have gone down well in a fringe meeting of the Far Right. The Magistrates were not impressed, and they made this clear in their closing statement. As the three magistrates came in after their deliberations, the court rose and sat back down. Her Honour Mrs Luker, the chairman of the bench cleared her throat to deliver the verdict. At first, she asked Stoate if he had anything to say.

A few weeks ago, Sir Kenneth would have been on the bench, and it would never have got this far. Indeed, he would have sent both Proudlock and McEwan down for a cowardly assault on him. Now he was “up before the beak” and the beak was a woman! Finally, he said, “Your honour, I have lived with this rule all my life, ‘Never explain, never apologise’.”

“I think, Mr Stoate, what you have said sums you up very adequately. You have committed a most unpleasant deed for which you cannot even bring yourself to say sorry. We are saddened by this, as we are by the whole miserable incident. I have to tell you now that we could have considered a custodial sentence. We have borne in mind that this is a first offence and in the light of your service to Tanswold as Headmaster of a school of high standing, we do not feel that that course of action would serve the pupils and staff of the school in this difficult time. And we have also considered the graciousness of your victims. Therefore, we are going to impose a fine of one thousand pounds as a penalty for each charge. We are also going to require that you pay both Jessica McEwan and Samuel Proudlock five hundred pounds compensation each. You will also pay one thousand pounds towards the expenses of the court, as well as the legal fees of the complainants. You may stand down.”

The court rose, the magistrates bowed and left, while everyone else filed out. Dunstan Stoate now had a criminal record. Detective Commander Smithells of the Yorkshire Fraud Squad was delighted. Stoate’s criminal record would help any charges in the future stick. Samuel Proudlock had summed up the present case succinctly, “I think Biggles has a problem”. He said no more on the matter.

Biggles, as Dunstan Stoate was known as to the boys (and not a few staff) at Tanswold School, did have a problem, or to be more precise, rather a lot of problems on his mind. He had walked back to The Hermitage after his court case feeling desolate. He had not felt like that ever since his dishonourable discharge after an RAF court martial. He noticed several boys staring at him; he could not bear to consider what they were thinking. The court case would be in the local paper that evening and in the regional dailies the next morning. Even in his study he didn’t feel immune, for a reporter rang through and demanded an interview with him concerning how he felt. “No comment!” was his answer to the questions before he slammed the telephone down. Stoate went over to the drinks cabinet and helped himself to a brandy to calm himself down.

His enjoyment of his fine *Courvoisier* was quickly interrupted by Eileen who came through in a bit of a flap. “Headmaster, I think you ought to see this,” she

said in a tone that suggested to Stoate that he really ought to see it. What he saw was not at all pleasing. It was an e-mail on Eileen's computer which had a bald and blunt message, which read, "*STOATE, YOU ARE A BLOODY LIAR. DON'T THINK THAT WE DON'T KNOW. I HOPE THAT MR MCEWAN SUES YOU TO KINGDOM COME! WHO ELSE ARE YOU GOING TO BEAT UP? COME ON, TRY US!*"

The e-mail appeared to have come from the local cybercafé and a phone call to its proprietor confirmed that there had been several Black 'n Tans in the shop. No, he didn't know who they were, or which machines they had used, nor did he care as long as they paid him, and it was not his responsibility that they were out of school. Stoate was livid and vowed to catch the culprits and expel them. He would have liked to do more, but after his meeting with Her Honour Mrs Luker, even he knew that that would not be a wise course of action. It was immaterial to him that he was worse off by about six thousand pounds. Stoate was a very wealthy man; he had assets running to at least a million and a half pounds. If that was the going rate, he could beat up the whole school and still have money to retire on. That said, he knew that next time, he could well end up in Canterill Prison, a prospect that made him shudder.

He was hamstrung, a feeling that was reinforced as he went for a walk about the school. It was now changeover before the last lesson of the day. As he walked about, there were several catcalls of "LIAR!" and Stoate turned around to confront the boys responsible. "Bell, Thompson, my office NOW!" he roared, but a good number of others joined in the chorus, "LIAR! LIAR!" and another voice from the back of the crowd called out, "Get stuffed, Biggles!"

As Stoate marched Bell and Thompson back to his office, he knew that there was virtually nothing he could do with them apart from ringing their parents. A few weeks before he would have expelled a pupil for such gross disrespect. Now that man Lartington had told him that he could not expel anyone for anything, short of murder. His telephone conversations with the parents were not constructive and Stoate felt more than ever before that his authority had all but collapsed. An hour's detention after school seemed to do little to chasten Masters Bell and Thompson.

The next morning did not bring any more cheer for Dunstan Stoate. He saw that both the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Northern Echo* had carried the story under the headline "*Top School's Headmaster on Assault Charge*". He put the papers down with a sigh and started to work through the correspondence. He was

pleasantly surprised to find that none contained expressions of parental concern that this highly expensive and prestigious school had a headmaster with a criminal record. More importantly there were a dozen applications for places from ex-pupils of Great Daxford School, as well as several more positive responses to his trawl for previously unsuccessful candidates at the entrance examination. Gradually they were reaching Lartington's target.

Stoate was pleased to see Donald Blance draw up in his car, but the pleasure was short-lived. Blance, unlike his predecessor as Chairman of Governors, was a natural gentleman and was slow to see the bad side of his friends. Today he looked angry as he strode into Stoate's office. Unlike Sir Kenneth Rounce, Blance did not raise his voice at all. Instead, he was icily cold and spurned Stoate's greeting, which unsettled Stoate, who sat down in his chair nervously.

"Donald, what can I do for you?" asked Stoate, trying to placate the situation. It was one thing to bluster at people who didn't matter, but Donald Blance certainly did. Stoate was thick-skinned, but at once knew that his hide was in danger.

"Nothing, thank you," Blance said in a low voice full of menace. "Dunstan, I have backed you to the hilt through thick and thin, but this is too much. I want to know from you right now what the devil you have been playing at!"

"What do you mean?" replied Stoate who was by now decidedly alarmed.

"You know full well! You now have a criminal record for what was a decidedly cowardly and disgraceful assault on those two kids. I am not suggesting that I have any time for either of them and I am not in the least bit interested in what they did or didn't do to provoke you. What I am concerned about is what this will do to the reputation of the school."

"People will have forgotten about it in a few weeks," replied Stoate defensively.

"Don't count on it, Dunstan. I have had several parents ringing up and I have been hard put to it to defend you. In the circumstances that we find ourselves, our reputation is our only asset. If that gets damaged, which I am sure it has been, well I needn't tell you. All our hard work to recover from the Draycott fiasco will have been for nothing. And my time is too valuable to waste like that."

"Well, I can..."

"And that is not all. I know you didn't like that man McEwan, but why the bloody hell did you have to put out a press statement saying he had been sacked for all sorts of gross misdemeanours?"

“Did you not know that the statements were maliciously put out by Richard Thorndale in the Lower Sixth?”

“Rubbish!” Blance snapped. “I still have golfing friends in the police, and they have asked me about this episode. You know damned well that you did it, I know damned well that you did it, and what’s more, they know damned well that you did it. I have had to pull all the strings I can to stop them hauling you in on charges of criminal libel and perjury. Let me tell you that none of my friends have any influence on Richard Smithells. They have put a block on it for the time being, but let me tell you, Smithells is not bought by anyone, and when he gets his teeth into something, he doesn’t let go until the culprit goes down at the end of the trial.

“McEwan won’t let go that easily either. You know as well as I do that he will take us to the cleaners at the Industrial Tribunal. If you had done what you did in my company, you would have been joining him pretty damned quick! Don’t look so surprised. You would have been sacked. And McEwan is taking us to the cleaners for libel. Didn’t you realise that to broadcast to the media that he had no qualifications, falsified coursework and had stolen examination papers would lay you open to libel on an unprecedented scale? The courts are not going to take kindly to that kind of allegation that has no foundation at all, are they? It is a mercy that everybody that matters has believed him and rallied around him. He could have quite easily been hounded out of the area. Some hoodlums tried to do just that. What would you have said if somebody had said that about you? McEwan will sue the Tanswold School Trust for every penny we have got. And don’t tell me that we are insured. I know full well that we are not. If he succeeds, we will be finished.

“By the way, my friends in the police tell me that Detective Inspector Lisa Mallinson is on the prowl for you. Catty creature they say. They tell me she can’t wait to get her claws into you, and she will give you a real mauling.”

Stoate shuddered at Blance’s feline metaphor and looked at his boss pathetically. He knew that unless he took a radical change in direction, he would lose not only Blance’s support, but also the friendship of a fellow Byland Forester, which would be tantamount to his being drummed out. He would be totally on his own, out of a job and probably out of the area. It was going to be hard for him to do, but he would have to swallow his pride and apologise. This he found almost impossible, so he prevaricated. “What do you want me to do?”

“The least you can do is to apologise to the two young people that you have assaulted.”

“No, no, no. That’s impossible. A man of my status apologise to Proudlock and his girlfriend?”

“Yes, and to Andrew McEwan.”

“What? I can’t possibly do that! The man has disrupted my management of the school for the last ten years!”

“Dunstan, I absolutely insist you do both. I should tell you that there are a good number of governors who feel that you are a liability and want rid of you straight away. And they have good grounds for doing so.”

“Like what?”

“I would suggest gross professional misconduct for a start.”

“Gross professional misconduct?”

“In my book, beating two young people up in a public garden would count as gross professional misconduct. Libelling a member of your staff is as well. I am going to lay this before you straight, Dunstan. If you apologise to these people in the way that I suggest, you can count on my backing at the governors’ meeting on Thursday. I will talk to my police friends who may be able to put Mallinson off from getting her claws into you. I will do what I can to stall McEwan’s libel case. It’s unlikely that I would be able to stop it, but at least I would be able to delay it until we had the funds to settle, preferably out of court.

“If you don’t, Dunstan, read my lips. I will have nothing more to do with you, and nobody else will either. You will be sacked on Thursday, and we will ensure that you will be personally liable for compensating Andrew McEwan for gross libel, which will amount to several hundred thousand pounds. I will also let Inspector Mallinson at you, and I suspect that with your record, you will be inside for a year or two. Do you get the picture?”

Stoate got the picture and some headed notepaper out from his drawer. He said, “I don’t want to admit liability; that won’t do anyone any good.”

“True,” replied Blance, “but you are good with words.”

Stoate felt like a naughty little boy with the Chairman of Governors supervising him as he wrote the notes to Samuel Proudlock and Jessica McEwan. Stoate found the whole thing rather distasteful and could not even bring himself to address him in any other way than by his surname. His note was brief and curt.

He wrote a similarly curt note to Jessica McEwan. As for her father, the note he wrote was a little longer, stating that the whole affair was most regrettable

from the point of view of both parties. When the letters arrived at their intended recipients, the contents were treated with the contempt that they deserved and were passed over to the two solicitors who were preparing cases against the Tanswold School Trust. The main effect was to get Blance back on Stoate's side, for Stoate now needed every friend he could get in the damage limitation exercise that was now required. Donald Blance's concluding comment was "I think you have rather shot yourself in the foot. You are going to have an uphill battle to regain your authority, Dunstan, which you will have to fight yourself."

The uphill battle that Stoate was going to have to fight to regain his authority as Headmaster became clear to him as he was walking to teach a lesson. He had often told his staff that they had to fight their own battles, but he did not relish having to do the same. For obvious reasons, he had not done much teaching, and he really had forgotten what he was doing with the Third Year and why. As he walked past a classroom with an open door, he heard, "What do you say to a tall, bald, fat man in a grey suit... 'The defendant will rise'."

Stoate stopped and went into the room demanding who it was had cracked that joke. After a tense stand-off, the boy owned up and was summoned for a lunchtime detention outside Stoate's office. The joke did not stop there. There were various versions, such as "What do you say to Biggles? 'The defendant will rise'." Stoate would hear these, but the harder he tried to stamp on it, the more the joke circulated among the boys, and even the staff. Several parents complained to him about the heavy-handed approach he had adopted towards their sons who had cracked an innocent schoolboy joke.

Stoate's maths lesson was appalling. He bumbled his way through what he thought the boys were meant to be doing, but they had done the material the previous term. He tried again, but they did not have a clue what he was on about. Several of the boys had turned up their arrogance and this led to yet another tense standoff with several boys ferociously summoned to a detention at the end of the day. All-out war was prevented by the bell, but Stoate ran the gauntlet of several shouts of "Liar!", "Breathe in to let Biggles pass!", and the joke about defendants rising. By the time he got back to his office, Stoate was yet again in his by now customary thoroughly self-righteous bad temper.

Thursday's emergency meeting of the Governors was also a bad-tempered affair. Dr Pennington led an outspoken attack on the Headmaster and his leadership of the school during the financial crisis. "Here we have," he concluded, "a man running amok, a law unto himself, beating up an ex-pupil and

his girlfriend for no apparent reason. The Tanswold School Trust, of which we are Directors, has a duty to protect the good name of this school. We cannot afford to carry on with a lame duck Headmaster whose management style is dictated by what appears to be his sense of grievance and jealousy. I have to question what it is that motivated this assault, and I would rather not think, but one does have to suspect it of a man who is still a bachelor at sixty-two.”

“What are you suggesting?” roared Stoate. “I have no desire whatever to see the boy that was Master Proudlock.”

“I am not going to get into what your feelings are towards Samuel Proudlock, but there has to be a motive for your assault on them last week.”

“This kind of scurrilous attack is hardly relevant, Dr Pennington,” Sir Ronald Wiseman interjected angrily.

“It is relevant. Mr Stoate has made a laughingstock of this school by his appearance at Tanswold Magistrates’ Court. I have obtained the transcript of Her Honour Mrs Luker’s final statement. It does not make uplifting reading and shows that we have a man in charge of this school who is not fit to be in charge of a squad of night-club bouncers! He regards the school as his own personal property in which he is running around like a loose cannon. He has lost the respect of the boys and staff alike. Have you heard some of the jokes that are made about him? The first one is...”

Stoate grew even hotter under the collar as Pennington paraded the jokes that had so irritated him. It was hard enough to bear this from the pupils, but from the governors, it was too much. Stoate shouted angrily, “Dr Pennington, why do you have to stoop so low? You are only a recent nominee to the Governors, so you will not realise that I have invested a considerable amount of my own personal wealth into this school, so I feel entitled to use it partly as my own property.”

“And you seem to regard your staff as your property to dispose of as you feel fit. What about Mr McEwan, a damned good teacher? Do you know where he is now?”

“I don’t know, and I care even less!” said Stoate petulantly.

“I think you should. You sacked him because you could not stand him, because he actually had the guts to question what you had ordered. You got rid of him in blatant disregard of all the employment law that exists in this country. Do you know what the relevant employment law is?”

“Of course, I do!” snapped Stoate who was getting thoroughly weary of this inquisition.

“So why was Mr McEwan not given an oral warning and a written warning? Why was he got rid of anyway? He hadn’t done anything wrong other than question your management decisions?”

“That’s enough for me. Nobody questions what I decide to do in this school. Whose side are you on? Are you a representative of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers? McEwan had to go.”

“By fair means or foul? So why did you libel him?”

“I did not. The source of that was a sixth-former who has been expelled.”

“You were the source of that, and you know that well. Even if you yourself were not the source, you realise that the Tanswold School Trust will get sued to Kingdom Come for libel. You know as well as I do that you will have wrecked the life of his family.”

The meeting carried on as several other governors joined in Dr Pennington’s onslaught. Stoate was snarling at them like a leopard surrounded by lions. There seemed no way out and a vote of censure was proposed that, if passed, would require that J L Dunstan Stoate be removed forthwith from the post of Headmaster. Stoate was asked to leave the room. He went out through the Old Dining Room and paced up and down in the hall. He could hear the raised voices that indicated that there were several angry exchanges going on. He waited and waited. The debate seemed to be getting ever more angry. From the tone of Lionel Hyland’s voice, Stoate thought that the old man was going to have a stroke. Although Hyland was getting frail, it was clear that there was still plenty of fight left in the old man. Even the mild-mannered Donald Blance could be heard raising his voice. Up to this week, Stoate had always considered Blance as very meek, but not now that Blance had shown him the rounds of the cookhouse.

The arguments raged on and on. Stoate had been waiting for nearly two hours when Blance came out. “You’ve got away with it on my casting vote, Dunstan. The Governors have agreed to keep you in post, but you will be issued with a final written warning. I suggest you keep a very low profile.”

Dunstan Stoate felt that if his profile were much lower, he would not be seen at all. Instead of walking into work from his riverside apartment in Hermitage Court, he started coming in by car. Although it was no more than ten minutes’ walk, it could take up to twenty minutes in the car, as there was always heavy traffic and a queue waiting to get out from the riverside development. One morning he was in the car and a bus pulled out from the bus stop in front of him. On its engine cover, a familiar looking logo caught his eye. There was a slogan

“Top of the class! Your son can be the tops at Tanswold School. Ring the Financial Director for details, Tanswold 3141.” The back of the bus was dirty, and this seemed to show clearly the depth to which things had plummeted. It seemed that he was not even being involved in the selection of parents; Lartington had taken that over as well.

Just when he felt that things could not plummet any deeper, they suddenly did. Stoate found the correspondence that morning particularly depressing. There was a summons from Carlsborough Magistrates Court to initiate the legal proceedings concerning the food poisoning that had happened earlier in the term. Additionally, there were other legal letters, the first reading:

Dear Mr Stoate

I write as solicitor to the Reverend and Mrs J R Proudlock of the Rectory, Alverston. I am sure that you share their sense of pain at the loss of their daughter, Gemma Ruth Chamberlain Proudlock.

It is clear from the inquest into her untimely death that the Tanswold School Trust of which you are the Chief Trustee was grossly negligent in its duty of care:

Firstly, in the maintenance of a hygienic kitchen.

Secondly, in its response to the clear distress that Gemma was in.

Therefore, as trustee of the Tanswold School Trust you will authorise the immediate payment of the sum of six hundred and seventy five thousand pounds, this sum being compensation due to the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock. Payment will be by bankers' draft and will be made at our offices in Alverston within fifteen days of receipt of this letter.

If payment is not received by the due date, we will initiate legal proceedings to secure the payment of this sum...

There was also a letter demanding representation of the Tanswold School Trust at the Industrial Tribunal's Offices in York concerning the alleged unfair dismissal of Andrew Richard McEwan. Stoate was soon on the telephone to Mr Carter-Barr who came around very quickly. He looked at the letters before saying to Stoate, “We can stall on the Proudlock case, but the other two will have to go ahead. We cannot hold them off, otherwise, to use a not very legal expression, they will have our guts for garters.”

Guts for garters is what Lartington wanted of his boss when he heard of the Proudlock compensation claim. Lartington went ballistic and his shouting could be heard throughout The Hermitage. If Smith had addressed him in such terms, Smith's feet would not have touched the ground until he was in the unemployment benefit office. Instead Stoaate had slunk out of Lartington's office back to his own, leaving Lartington to consider the financial implications, which while not entirely unexpected, were certainly not helpful.

To enable Lartington to attend, routine monthly meetings of the governors were moved to a Tuesday evening, rather than a Thursday. Purely by coincidence there was due to be a meeting in which the fees were to be reviewed. Lartington had been doing his projections, but these had been thrown awry by the Headmaster's erratic behaviour, the result of which were several claims that put together would amount to the same cost as the new dining room. It would now require not only the substantial increase in pupil numbers, which had almost been achieved, but also a considerable hike in the school fees. Even if the various court cases could be stalled for a couple of years, and that was not out of the question in such cases, the fees would have to be raised by at least a thousand pounds a year to provide a sufficient fighting fund.

With Stoaate in a foul temper, grieving for his lost authority and Lartington in a foul temper grieving for the millions that were not there, it was inevitable that the Governors' meeting was yet again to be a bad-tempered affair. There was a lot of recrimination at the expense of progress, and it was late in the evening by the time that the fees were reviewed. Dr Pennington poured water into the burning fat by saying, "I think we have a solution to the problem of building up the fighting fund. We can capture a slice of the market that is not really addressed at the moment. It will also enhance the quality of the life in the school. I propose that we admit girls into the school from the age of eleven."

Stoaate went scarlet before shouting, "Over my dead body!"

"The way you are taking us," snapped Pennington, "there will be only one dead body that will matter. That of the school. Just think of the Heads at Goyder's, Rockwood and Alverston Grammar picking over the remains of our proud school like a flock of vultures. We need radical action, action as a result of your ill-considered actions, Headmaster."

"I did not start this school to be a bordello for teenage tarts! They have the state schools for that," Stoaate snapped back. There followed a heated debate in

which Storate's contribution was a sexist and racist diatribe that persuaded several sceptical governors that the feminine touch would definitely be a good thing. Dr Pennington's motion was passed for further consideration, and it was agreed to put the fees up by five hundred pounds per annum. This was the largest rise they felt they could impose without there being a total rebellion.

Storate had taken little of this in. He had found the presence of girls in the sixth form threatening enough. Now that the school was about to be going totally co-educational, the atmosphere of muscular manliness that he had fostered for the last twenty years would be lost for good. He did not want to witness it. He sat in his study for the next couple of days in a state of depressed inaction, feeling that he was watching a close relative die of a terminal disease. Although he was due to retire at the end of the following year and the introduction of girls would not happen before his retirement, he felt that his school had changed for the worse already. He could not accept that he only had himself to blame.

Chapter 15

Since Stoate's authority as Headmaster had diminished to a shadow of its former self, the only thing in which he was allowed free rein was his management of the teaching staff. He concentrated in this area to show his version of a tough and manly management style. He targeted several young members of staff for special measures. These included uninvited observations of their lessons with sarcastic comments during the lessons, deeply critical debriefing sessions afterwards, making the staff write detailed plans and schemes of work including how the teaching fitted in with national curriculum criteria. Not that Stoate knew anything about these; but he managed to bluff and bluster his way through. Two staff, who could no longer stand his hectoring and bullying, packed up and left. They were not replaced and other colleagues had to do extra to cover their timetables.

In his actions, Stoate could count on a fund of unlimited ill will from the dingy room that was now the common room. Throughout this period his only ally was the Chaplain, the chinless wonder, Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax. The word "ally" was a poor choice, as it implies a steadfast support. Steadfastness was not a quality associated with Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax; a gutless and self-interested vacillation was. The Chaplain too had sent his popularity plummeting even further by reporting to the Headmaster that the common currency for Lartington in the staff room was "Skinflint" and for his assistant was "Mingy". Stoate issued a strongly worded memorandum to all staff threatening that such gross disrespect for senior members of the Trust's staff would lead to possible disciplinary action.

The rise in school fees went down like a lead balloon with the parents. It was only the stringent terms on which pupils could be withdrawn that stopped a good number withdrawing their sons. (The school had managed to bluster this one out so far, although it would not have stood up in a court of law.) The least hostile of a pile of critical correspondence read:

Dear Mr Stoate

I write with reference to the recent letter issued by the Finance Manager, Mr Scott. He tells us that the fees will rise by £500 per anum (sic). I must inform you now that I will continue to pay the way I have always paid, through the nose.

Yours truly

J B Bradshaw.

Stoate and the Governors had been waiting with some trepidation for the food poisoning outbreak to come under the scrutiny of the courts and in early July it was sent by Carlsborough Magistrates to the Crown Court, as it was so serious. There it was tried without prejudice to the impending case involving the charge of manslaughter against Cyril Jukes. Stoate was not allowed to appear as a witness as it was agreed between the Governors and Mr Carter-Barr, the school's solicitor, that Stoate's evidence and approach to jurisprudence was worth at least two Queen's Counsels for the prosecution. Although the school pleaded not guilty to the offences, the defence seemed very lame compared to the vigorous and scientific approach of the prosecution. It certainly did not convince the jury, which after less than half an hour found the Tanswold School Trust guilty as charged on all fifteen counts. Lartington had another financial headache as he had to find fifty thousand pounds in fines and twenty thousand pounds in costs. Mr Carter-Barr had prepared a statement for the press in an attempt to forestall the inevitable bad publicity that the case would bring. There were the inevitable headlines, *Judge blasts fat bosses in top school's pet food scandal*.

Stoate was also banned from attending the industrial tribunal that met to consider the unfair dismissal of Andrew McEwan. Mr Carter-Barr and Donald Blance went to represent the school, and they did their best to defend the indefensible. It was a vain and humiliating experience for both men, as the NASUWT had hired an exceptional legal team, including the solicitor Mr Wrightson and the barrister Sir Norman Pattenden. Both these men tore into the defence with a legal savagery that left many legal commentators reaching for their pens.

Although they were determined to be hanged as a wolf, the Trustees of the Tanswold School Trust had their worst nightmare realised; they were hanged as a lamb. One commentator wrote that their defence was as lame as that of the

monkey that had been hanged as a French spy in a town on the North East Coast some two hundred years before². The Trust was ordered to pay Mr McEwan two years' salary and twenty thousand pounds in compensation, without prejudice to any proceedings for the clear case of libel that was pending.

What was more immediately pending was that the remnants of the Draycott Foundation had been more than wiped out and Mr Lartington was forced into lengthy renegotiations with the bank to finance the building of the new dining hall. This was kept secret as it would not have done for the school to be seen as rocky itself, having persuaded so many parents of pupils to switch allegiance from rival institutions on the same basis.

For the rest of the term, Stoate hardly left his office at all, except to go to the bathroom at the end of the corridor upstairs and to have Luncheon in the Old Dining Room. He had given up teaching; staff had to cover his lessons and the work he set for his classes was always inadequate in content and explanation. If he did go for a walk around the beautiful grounds of The Hermitage, it was during lesson time, so that there would be no risk of his bumping into boys during changeover. That did not guarantee immunity from catcalling of "LIAR!" but certainly reduced the incidence. If there were catcalls, he would go to the classroom, call out the boy concerned and dress the teacher down in front of the class for poor classroom control. He would send out memoranda to the teachers warning them of dire consequences if there was a repeat. The only time he could guarantee total peace in The Hermitage garden was either before or after school. For the first time ever, the end of term could not come a minute too soon.

² In this bizarre incident during the Napoleonic War, a French ship was wrecked off the East Coast of County Durham. A monkey, the ship's mascot, was the only survivor. It was arrested, tried, and condemned to death as a French Spy. This tale is remembered in the lore of the County Durham town of Hartlepool, whose football team have a mascot, H 'Angus the Monkey. The mascot stood for mayor as a joke and, for a joke, he was elected. He did such a good job that he was re-elected four years later, this time as an independent. He gained a reputation as a first-rate public servant.

Chapter 16

The Summer Term at Tanswold School always ended in Speech Day. Preparations were always well in hand at the start of the summer term. Although the object of Speech Day was to convince the parents that the high fees demanded were worth it and well spent, it was also an occasion for the Headmaster and the Governors to congratulate themselves on the achievements of the school under their visionary leadership. Speeches were as boring as they were long and parents politely applauded at the end of each one. After that, there was a buffet luncheon in a marquee on the lawn in front of The Hermitage. The school band and orchestra would play, and the CCF would show off to the parents the achievements they had made on the battlefield before it was time to go home for tea. Other sports would play demonstration games, while on the river, the rowers and the canoeists took part in races.

It was also an open day for parents of prospective pupils, and all departments were expected to lay on demonstrations that would suggest that learning at Tanswold School was to be fun. The centrepiece of the day did not occur at The Hermitage at all, but at the school playing fields on Alverston Road. Here the First Fifteen and the Under Sixteen Colts would play each other in a jolly good hard and fast game of Rugby, much admired by enthusiastic parents. If a player had to be taken to hospital, so much the better.

This year, the financial crisis that had dogged Tanswold School in the middle of the summer term had made the arrangements for Speech Day a lot more difficult. Many of the contractors had pulled out. Either they could not reinstate their contracts as they had taken on jobs elsewhere, or they demanded payment up front. By sheer persistence, the committee of staff whose job it was to organise Speech Day, managed to get the event together. For many reasons there was a sour atmosphere within the school and Speech Day was anticipated with feelings of dire foreboding. These were not shared by Lartington and the Governors. Lartington had engaged a film company to make a promotional video in which

Speech Day would feature. The Governors simply liked a jolly good garden party in which they would be the centre of attention and have lots of people make a fuss of them.

The Saturday of Speech Day dawned bright and very warm. The Hermitage looked splendid in the morning sunshine. The drive in front of the house was cordoned off to allow only the most important people to park their cars there. Stoate was important so he parked up in his usual spot. He started to walk around the school to check that all the arrangements were in place. The marquee was in its usual place on the lawn. They had had to hire it from another company because the original company had cancelled the contract due to non-payment of bills. It looked steady enough, but Stoate had a feeling that things were not quite right, but he could not tell how and put it out of his mind. He walked through the classrooms and saw the various displays put on by the departments. Some of these seemed not up to their usual standard and looked as if they had been got out of drawers for the occasion. Stoate resolved to interview the Heads of Subject concerned and remind them of their contractual obligations to put the school in the best possible light, even at their own expense. In English, there was no display whatever. No head of department had been appointed after Stoate had got rid of Andrew McEwan and nobody had been prepared to take on the responsibility. He ordered the English Department to be locked.

Boys were coming into school in their uniforms or their CCF parade kit. The latter used army surplus clothing that had been obtained for a song from another more prominent and well-endowed corps that had bought more recent kit. The clothing had been made for the Second World War. It was made of a material that was so uncomfortable that it must have prolonged the war by about six to nine months. The trousers alone were worth a division to the Germans. Now, sixty years on, boys were sweltering in the morning sunshine.

Charlie Gallagher had been made redundant by Lartington, so Mr Hardcastle was left in sole charge of the CCF. Unlike Mr Gallagher, Mr Hardcastle had no army experience whatever, so squad drill was not so much square-bashing, but mincing in circles. Moreover, Mr Hardcastle was worn out by the extra work that had been imposed on him from the senior management and like most of his colleagues, his morale was rock bottom. He particularly resented giving up this Saturday, which he could have spent far more productively in the garden. He certainly could not have spent it less productively with the CCF. He shouted out the commands, "Squad! Attention! By the left quick march!" with less than bags

of swank and total commitment. The response left much to be desired, with the squad having little uniformity in their ideas about what a quick march consisted of. Despite having been told many a time by Charlie Gallagher that they had to “muive like greyst lightning!”, there was no resemblance to lightning, greased or otherwise. The whole performance was akin to a stage set of paraplegic marionettes.

Stoate’s eyes strayed to a large trailer parked on the riverbank. He remembered that the CCF was going to do a bridging exercise as their showpiece for the parents. He went to have a look at the trailer, which contained a hideously complex array of three massive pontoons, lots of decking and enough rope to get to Carlsborough and back. It would require an army to construct it and reminded him of a particularly gruesome initiative test he had had to do in his RAF days. It had been a long time ago, but the fiasco stuck in his mind. From what he remembered, there was a drill to construct the infernal thing.

His reminiscences were interrupted by a rather effeminate male voice calling, “Can we do that again, darling?” Stoate turned around to see what looked like an outside broadcast camera on a tripod, with a hideous bearded creature behind it and he stomped over to demand what this creature was here for and what business it had in calling out “darling” to him in such an unseemly way.

“We’re here to start the promotional video, darling,” was the creature’s reply. “Go and ask Mr Lartington, or the director.”

Stoate bridled at being called “darling” and decided not to pass any more time of his day with the cameraman. He watched the CCF mince back to where they had started. He dreaded what the Guest of Honour, Brigadier Sir Lionel Berkley Gunston–Bunn would have to say at a performance that had more of the theatre in it than the military. They would have to get their act together for the parade before luncheon. Stoate did not develop the theme any further, as his train of thought was interrupted by a booming “I know two things about a horse, one of which is rather coarse”, followed by an ear shattering screech from a loudspeaker next to him, followed by some crackling. A series of booming oaths carried across The Hermitage gardens followed by another ear-splitting screech, followed by “the f**king fuse has...” followed by a blessed silence. The company who normally did the PA system had backed out of the contract and found another job. Lartington had managed to find this outfit from Carlsborough at short notice. They were having a bad day; they had only just managed to limp

their ancient *Transit* van into The Hermitage grounds before it expired with steam pouring from the radiator.

Parents were starting to come down the drive in their four-by-fours, primarily bought for the show and to negotiate the speed bumps that had recently been installed. Most of the vehicles were highly polished for the occasion, for Tanswold School Speech Day was a high point in the social calendar. It was a chance to be seen and seen to be seen, but of course, not over seen. The latest acquisition of hats was paraded. The more minimalist the dress, the more expensive it was. Fashionable legs strutted uncomfortably in shoes, such as they were, with the most uncomfortable heels. *In extremis* the wearers tiptoed through the tulips (and the occasional dog dirt) with bunions hurting like hell. Confident and haughty well-heeled Yorkshire voices rasped the air with the pitch and quality resulting from training gained in the tea-rooms and golf clubs of Harrogate and the garden parties to raise funds for the Conservative Party. Picnic tables were being brought out for elevenses, in which Champagne was starting to flow. Stoate surveyed the scene approvingly and hoped that his feeling would be reciprocated. In the past, it always had been reciprocated but now in the back of his mind, there was an unease that this year it would not.

Stoate bumped into Lartington, who had brought up his family from London for the occasion. For people who considered the world stopped at Watford Gap, and that everything else was cloth caps and coal mines, Lartington's family was agreeably surprised at the decorum of the event. "Everything in place?" Stoate asked without conviction.

"One or two things to sort out, Headmaster," replied Lartington without conviction.

"What's this film crew doing here? I came across some bods filming the CCF. This bod behind a camera called me 'darling'."

"You know well, Headmaster, that we are having a promotional video made of the school. I want it released for next year. It is going to show the school throughout the year, and we need to get on with the filming to include Speech Day. As for 'darling', they all call each other that. You will get used to it."

"Quite, so," replied Stoate who wished he hadn't brought up the subject in the first place. He still regarded advertising and promotion as rather vulgar commercial activities that showed an innate inferiority of a product that needed such promotion. "Well as long as they don't do it in front of the parents," he concluded before dropping the matter.

“Well, if you will excuse me, I must go and see how they are getting on with the PA system,” said Lartington and disappeared through the hall and upstairs to where the public address system was receiving a lot of tender loving care. How much tender loving care was revealed to Lartington when he got upstairs. The first thing that hit him was an acrid smell and wisps of blue smoke that were still hanging languidly in the air. Wayne was peering at the innards of something that looked very important. Lartington peered at it and the mess he saw looked decidedly alarming. “Will it work?” he demanded.

“Dunno,” was Wayne’s helpful reply.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“We could go back and get another amp, but that will take us an hour. The van’s dodgy as well. We only just got here. I’ll see if I can fix it, but I don’t guarantee anything.”

“Where’s your boss?”

“Darren? He’s sorting out the van. I said it was dodgy. I said we can’t do much until the van’s fixed.”

“We need the PA system, and we need it now. Don’t you realise the speeches start in twenty minutes?”

“What speeches? Who said anything about speeches?”

“It’s Speech Day! What the devil did you think we do on a Speech Day?”

“Who makes the speech?”

“All sorts of people.”

“We’ve only got one mike. Nobody told me that there were all sorts of people.”

“Well, let me spell it out to you,” growled Lartington, who was on the verge of an apoplexy, “the Headmaster and all sorts of important people gather in the assembly hall and make speeches. They are relayed out here from the hall, so that everyone can hear.”

“Hall? What hall? Nobody told me about a hall.”

“Where the devil do you think that the Headmaster is going to make his speech?”

“Stood at the window here, like.”

“Like what?”

“You know, you see them on the telly, these little tin pot dictators, and the crowds shout ‘*siegheil*’. I did Hitler at school, you know,” Wayne added proudly.

Most people would have agreed with Wayne's historical assessment of Mr Stoate. Lartington was not in the mood to discuss historical niceties and exploded, "This PA system is meant to be connected to the PA system in the hall, so that it is relayed out to everyone. Why has it not been connected and why isn't the bloody thing working?"

"Oh, hoity toity! Ask nicely and I might be able to do it for you. It will cost you though. And I still don't guarantee it will work. Now if you get out of my road, I will see what I can do for you."

Lartington got out of Wayne's road, partly to enable him to get the job done, and partly to prevent himself committing assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. Meanwhile Wayne fiddled on with his ancient contraption and ten minutes later, some crackles and noises like electronic indigestion started to come from the loudspeakers. Wayne broadcast another test message, "Boro' for the Cup!" and satisfied that the thing was doing something vaguely resembling its job, trotted down to the van to get a two hundred metre roll of cable.

The audience of parents waiting in the assembly hall was bemused by the sight of a shaven-headed creature in a black tee-shirt and jeans climbing through a window with a wire. Without comment, or even so much as an "Excuse me", Wayne pulled the wire over to the hall's own PA system that was being controlled from a box in the middle of the audience, stumbling over the people who were sitting there. "'Ere, stick that in there," he told the boy who was operating the amplifier. The boy stuck that in there and immediately the amplifier started to broadcast its ancient sidekick's random avalanches of electrons. Darren could be heard amongst the crackles exhorting his ancient equipment to perform its best with language that he had learned at early secondary school.

Satisfied that the system was working, Wayne trotted back to The Hermitage. A couple of minutes later everyone assembled in the hall, including the Headmaster, the entire Governing Body and everyone else in The Hermitage Garden heard a conversation between Wayne and Darren that was not very complementary about the new Financial Director of the school. It was not until he had downed a can of fizzy pop and let out a rasping belch that Wayne realised that he had left his mike channel open. The resulting eruption made the windows rattle in the assembly hall and several elegant ladies dropped their coffee down their minimalist and expensive dresses.

The main problem with Wayne's power amplifier was that it would go unstable at the electronic equivalent of hitting ten bluebottles and the ancient

contraption had another electronic apoplexy letting out another ear-splitting screech. The two power amplifiers yoked together in such an unequal union both started to trade electronic insults at each other across the two hundred metres of cable that separated them. This was made clear to the audiences, both in the hall and in the gardens, by random loud booms.

It was ten minutes past ten and time for the speeches to commence. When Donald Blance called his guests into the hall, his highly distorted voice could be heard in the gardens, but as if it were on the other end of a very crackly transatlantic telephone line. The Headmaster and the Governors filed into the hall while the National Anthem was played. Wayne's old amplifier, clearly carrying the bitterness of the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, reacted to this insult by having a screeching apoplexy. It was pacified by the sheer coincidence that the cassette tape on which the tune was recorded snagged up and terminated not with the prolonged final G chord, but a *wow* and a *yoop* that were most un-regal.

The first part of the schedule was a performance of a slide show that showed a foreign trip that Stoate had led, with the Headmaster cast in the role of James Bond, Agent 007, an appropriate casting of a man sixty-two, going on fifteen and a half. (No mention was made about the fact that a boy had been lost on the trip, had got on the wrong train in Paris and ended up in Prague.) The drama master read the script. Apart from a few younger brothers in the audience, the only real appreciation of the talk was from the two amplifiers that had ceased their war of electronic attrition. It was the phony war between the two machines, as there was soon going to be an electronic fight to the death.

The cause of this was entirely innocent. In The Hermitage attic, three boys were struggling to get the main CCF radio set working. Finally, Warrant Officer Matthew Turner, a tall sixth former whose sense of humour had been surgically removed in a pioneering operation, managed to configure the ancient contraption so that it not only transmitted messages, but also received them. The CCF had set up four base stations in contact with the central control point. Nobody in the CCF had any idea of the effect that their apparatus would have on Wayne's. And Wayne did not realise that there was a powerful radio transmitter no more than ten metres away. When they turned the thing on, Wayne's machine had another fit of the screaming hab-dabs, drowning out the concluding comments on Dunstan Stoate, Secret Agent 5¼. It only settled down when Turner moved the

selector switch on his radio to *Transmit & Receive*. The PA system's problems did not finish there. Wayne and Darren, careless enough to leave their mike channel open while making disparaging comments about the people who were, after all, paying them, had compounded their comedy of errors by using two-core cable instead of coaxial between the assembly hall and The Hermitage. They did not know that the cable was acting as an aerial, about to receive the transmissions of the CCF with a clarity worthy of the most expensive high-fidelity equipment.

Apart from his ignorance of Queen's Regulations, Mr Hardcastle, the Master in charge of the CCF did not know the radio alphabet. He thought it most professional when one group had given itself the call sign *foxtrot uniform charlie kilo* while another had adopted *sierra hotel india tango*. He let the boys get on with it and did not give the matter any further thought. And that was the way it should have stayed, but nobody reckoned that everybody in The Hermitage gardens, the assembly hall and several young people gathered on a hillock that formed an attractive part of Packham Gardens across the road would soon be sharing their secret.

The Headmaster had started his speech, a prolonged and dreary sermon about his achievements over the past year and a sycophantic eulogy to the Governors. It had only been once disrupted by the battle between the amplifiers and that had been short lived. After that the two machines clearly seemed to sign a truce and stopped their electronic punch-up under the peacekeeping of the radio transmitter up in the attic. With a clarity that would have made the most ardent hi-fi enthusiast weep with envy, the first of the CCF messages rang around with military precision. "...and I now must comment on the *Control to foxtrot uniform charlie kilo. Come in foxtrot uniform charlie kilo. Over...*there have been significant... *Foxtrot uniform charlie kilo receiving you loud and clear. Over...*which enables the school to progress... *Control to foxtrot uniform charlie kilo, please send test message. Over...*under dynamic leadership... *foxtrot uniform charlie kilo to control. Test message reads How do you address Biggles in a suit? 'The defendant will rise'. Over...*At this point as always, I...*Message received and understood. Over and out...*under whose steady guidance the school will continue to prosper."

Appropriate to his station not only as Headmaster, but also as a former RAF officer, Stoate carried on doggedly. He noticed that his guest, Brigadier Lionel Berkley Gunston-Bunn had gone a burgundy colour. Even if Mr Hardcastle did

not know the radio alphabet, both the Headmaster and his guest, as befitted officers of their rank, knew exactly what was being spelled out.

“... Now what future is there for fine and upstanding institutions as ours? I am... *Control to sierra hotel india tango. Come in sierra hotel india tango. Over...deplere the passing of the last government... sierra hotel india tango receiving you loud and clear. Over...*”

The military precision of the messages was breaking down as the radio discipline of the Tanswold School CCF left much to be desired. Stoate was showing his mettle as a true British bulldog in the face of such determined opposition, especially as he was about to make a political analysis that was dear to his right-wing heart. He continued, “it is a matter of deep regret that now we are saddled with a prime minister... *sierra hotel india tango to control. Did you know that Sam Proudlock is shagging Macko’s daughter? Over...with left wing...What? Over...prejudices that allow the...Shagging. Sierra hotel alpha gulf india november gulf.*”

“Stoate! What the devil is going on?” Gunston-Bunn growled.

“Sounds like radio talk to me,” replied Stoate trying to pacify his irascible guest, “someone’s trying to spell something.”

“Of course, I know it’s radio talk and I know exactly what they are spelling.”

Without the knowledge of the cadets of patrol call sign *sierra hotel india tango*, nor the cadets manning the base station and without mercy to their unintended audience, the conversation about Proudlock shagging Macko’s daughter was now being broadcast at full volume around the Hermitage gardens and beyond.

The broadcast stopped and Stoate’s voice could be heard resuming his right-wing political diatribe against the working classes and how the future of quality education was only in the hands of the Independent Sector. What a contrast this was to the mediocrity of the louts and tarts in the schools up the road. None of them would be worthy of a place at his school and several had shown that they were not worthy to be members of the school. He went on to describe the contrast between his ideal of manly Christianity and described an incident involving an epicene boy claiming he was a Christian but had who had fled in the face of adversity.

As Stoate was developing his sermon on manly Christianity, patrol *tango whiskey alpha tango* interrupted. “...breeding and moral fibre... *tango whiskey alpha tango to control, over...Britain is a country that...Come in tango whiskey*

alpha tango, over...men of substance...Wasn't Proudlock that kid that Biggles bollocked in church after his sister died before half term? Biggles hated him. He was a really nice kid. Too good for this dump. Over...now we are becoming... Yeah, he was a nice kid. Some fourth and fifth years really took the piss out of him. You know he told d'Arsehole about it, and d'Arsehole told Biggles who gave him a bollocking for being bullied. Not being a bully; Proudlock was bullied and Biggles bollocked him for it! Over...coloured immigration...The kid didn't do anyone any harm at all. He didn't ask for Cyril to poison his sister and kill her. She was a lovely girl. My sister still hasn't got over what happened. Cyril poisoned me as well. I was on the bog solid for three days. I thought I was going to die. Over...and they are not suited to our tolerant...I was poisoned too. Cyril should be in for murder, and Biggles too. Biggles bullies all the nicest kids in this school. He probably fancies them but doesn't want to show it. Over...we are about producing the true-blue Briton, who stands up for tradition, discipline...Biggles is gay anyway. Sixty-two and he hasn't shagged anyone. The thought of him having a..."

Appalled at the revelations being broadcast, Stoaite brought his speech to a close, mercifully before a particularly xenophobic passage that may well have rendered him liable to prosecution for inciting racial hatred. "Will somebody do something about it!" he hissed going redder with rage and embarrassment as *tango whiskey alpha tango* expounded his revolting theory. This was definitely a case in which truth was best left at the bottom of the well. Stoaite's recent behaviour as regards truth had left several wells clogged.

Actually, somebody was doing something about it. It was not Wayne. He heard the broadcast but took no notice of it. It all sounded intelligible and more importantly the amplifier seemed to have settled down. He went over to the van and started to help Darren to fix it. Miles Stanton, the Deputy Headmaster, had after several minutes realised what was going on. He had run from the assembly hall and hurled himself into The Hermitage, lunging up the stairs to see if the PA system contractors were there. For several more minutes, he ran about like a headless chicken looking for them but had not noticed the van parked behind The Hermitage. He ran up to the attic and banged on the door to the CCF Signals Room. The door was locked to keep prying eyes out and the boys in the signals room were too busy to notice what was going on. Finally, someone opened the door and Stanton lunged in on the point of having a seizure. "Turn that bloody

thing off!” he yelled. “Don’t you realise the whole bloody neighbourhood can hear you?”

“What? I don’t understand sir. This transmitter has a dedicated frequency. You need a special receiver to pick it up.”

“Well, everyone has!”

“What do you mean, Mr Stanton?”

“Let me explain it to you in words of one syllable,” Stanton yelled. “You have broadcast to the entire neighbourhood and to everyone in the assembly hall that Samuel Proudlock is shagging Jessica McEwan and Mr Stoate is gay!”

“Bollocks!”

“How dare you talk to me like that!”

“I didn’t mean it like that, sir. This transmitter doesn’t broadcast to anyone except the boys who have got the receivers.”

“And the public address system. It has picked up all you have said and what everyone else has said to you.”

“Oh shit!”

“Turn the bloody thing off!”

Andrew Renton turned the bloody thing off, saving the unwitting and unwilling audience from any further eavesdropping on his exchange with Mr Stanton. Unfortunately, the pacifying effect of the transmitter wore off immediately and the two public address amplifiers re-engaged their action. With another ear-splitting screech the two machines started their electronic rutting. Age and experience won the day. The junior amplifier, mortified by its defeat, committed electronic *hara-kiri* with a deep bellow which again grew to a deafening crescendo, before a number of sparks shot out of the back of the amplifier and a ball of white-hot material rose from the machine, hung lazily in the air and dropped onto the table leaving a languid trail of smoke behind it. The senior amplifier trumpeted its victory with a series of low-pitched bellows designed electronically to attract any female public address amplifiers in the region. Wayne and Darren had noticed their system was making noises. They failed to make the connection with the fact that all the fire doors in the assembly hall were open and the last of the parents were being evacuated. They both made their way to the classroom where their machine was and found that it had widdled a small puddle of wax on the floor to proclaim its territory.

As it died, the junior amplifier sent a high voltage pulse down the two hundred metre cable, which struck the victor with the electronic equivalent of a

swarm of hornets. The victorious amplifier gave out another loud roar that boomed across The Hermitage before it too died in a shower of sparks. This time it sent out a high voltage pulse into the ring main, which wrecked the computers that formed the central part of the display for the Geography Department. The latter also tripped the circuit.

Wayne and Darren found themselves confronted by a livid Lartington who could scarcely get a coherent sentence beyond, “Get that thing repaired. We need the public address system for this afternoon!”

For Stoate, the high point in the school year was rapidly degenerating into its nadir. His guest of honour, Brigadier Sir Lionel Berkley Gunston-Bunn was absolutely livid at the farce that was being played out, not only in front of the parents, but also more importantly in front of him. A man used to clockwork military precision he could not tolerate sloppiness of any kind. He had not been amused by the pyrotechnics that had required the premature evacuation of the assembly hall. If something went wrong, somebody had to be punished. And Stoate was bearing the brunt of his fury.

“I am very sorry about this, Brigadier,” Stoate was fumbling for an excuse.

The Brigadier was having none of it. “Good God Stoate,” he snapped, “I have seen some slackness in my time, but nothing like this morning’s fiasco. You tell me that you run this school on military lines. You will have been drummed out years ago. It’s more like a teddy bears’ picnic!”

By this time the two men were mounting the rostrum that had been set up on one side of the drive. Parents stood with video cameras at the ready to take shots of their little Johnny playing soldiers. The parade started ten minutes late, which annoyed the Brigadier further. His teddy bears’ picnic jibe was now being solemnly acted out before his eyes, for the squad marched (if the performance could be described as such) like sixty animated teddy bears, stiff, uncoordinated and in neither time nor step. By the time they had done several right and left turns, during which many deliberately or otherwise got mixed up as to which was which, half the squad ended up facing completely the wrong way. When the parade resumed after a lot of shuffling about, the salute to the Queen’s Uniform was a fiasco unparalleled in Gunston-Bunn’s experience of being an officer. The whole spectacle was a parody of the normal Middle Riding Light Infantry drill that was worthy of a sketch on *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*.

Brigadier Gunston-Bunn was not in the least bit amused. Even so, with the self-discipline that befitted an officer of his rank, he did not desert his post. Like a true British bulldog, he stood his ground in the face of adversity, his face suffused with anger. “Just don’t say anything, Stoate,” he snarled at his host. Stoate was turning over in his mind who was going to pay for this. The way he felt, it would be the entire staff who would lose their jobs, and the entire pupil body would be expelled. The last shred of a military atmosphere was finally popped by the director of the film company that was shooting the promotional video who called out through a loud hailer, “Cut! Can we do that again, darling?”

In the meantime, Wayne had been upstairs attempting to perform a miracle of resurrection on his late public address amplifier. Initially he had been hampered by the lack of electricity for his soldering iron, but he had doggedly persisted and by cannibalising another dead piece of equipment he had managed to get the PA system working. Lartington told him to give the microphone to the Guest and Wayne strutted over to the Brigadier and said to him, “You’ll need this, mate” in a way that was most un-military and un-deferential to an officer of high rank. Gunston-Bunn stared lividly at the shaven headed creature below and would have dearly loved to have had a sergeant major whom he could order to put the man on a charge. Instead, he released a torrent of military venom at the parade that had crawled to attention in front of him. Clearly the public address system knew more about deference to senior officers than its owner. It only screeched once during the Brigadier’s tirade. As the Brigadier’s blood pressure started to fall from its stratospheric value, Miles Stanton took the initiative. He picked up the microphone and said soothingly, “Ladies and Gentlemen, shall we adjourn to the front lawn for luncheon? The demonstration rugby match between the First Fifteen and the Colts Fifteen will be in one hour’s time on the playing field up Alverston Road. Meanwhile, also on the lawn, the Brass Band will entertain us.”

For some, the Brass Band’s efforts were an entertainment. For the refined musical ear, the noise they produced was torture. They were neither together nor in tune with each other. Violently and tunelessly the band bludgeoned their way through *Barwick Green*, the well-loved theme tune to *The Archers*. Basil Harwood’s famous hymn tunes *Luckington* and *Thornbury* as well as other well-loved brass band pieces were massacred with a brutality that was merciless. Mr Walker, the Head of Music gallantly tried to lead them and set the pace with his

baton. His conducting was merely a side-show, a distraction and had little relevance to the notes that each player was playing. What neighbouring players were playing bore little resemblance to each other. It was hardly surprising that at one point the French Horns were playing entirely the wrong piece, but such was the din that Mr Walker did not notice for several bars. When he did, he soldiered on regardless in the hope that nobody else on the lawn would notice. With commendable initiative, the cameraman who was recording the scene for the promotional video had turned down the sound input; they would dub in some professionally recorded music later.

Many of the parents partook of their own luncheon and the grassy area between The Hermitage and the main road, which had been taken over as a car park, became a veritable Who's Who of the *nouveaux riches* of Mid Yorkshire. For the first time in their brief lives, many of the four-by-fours had their wheels on grass, rather than tarmac. The vast majority of them were spotless and their polish gleamed in the bright sunlight. Classical music wafted gently from a number of car stereos only to mix with the cacophony of the band on the lawn and be blotted out completely. Strident voices from elegant and minimally dressed females struggled to outdo each other in the ever-competitive race of well-heeled and conspicuous consumerism. Fine bubbly flowed freely and many a quiche was eaten. The conversations flowed as freely, from the state of the stock market to who was having an affair with whom. It was all very genteel and civilised, as it should have been, a contrast indeed from the comedy of errors that had occurred during the morning.

In the Old Dining Room, the Headmaster had pacified his guest somewhat with some of the finest claret from The Hermitage cellars. After a good aperitif and three good glasses, Gunston-Bunn was decidedly more laid back. "Stoate," he said expansively, "what you could do with, old man, is somebody who can run the CCF better than the clown who runs it now."

Stoate could not help but agree. He was going to summon Hardcastle in on Monday and give him a pretty rough time about the morning's work. Gunston-Bunn carried on, "Whatever came of Charlie Gallagher? He was a damned good man. Whipped the blighters into shape, what?"

"We had to let him go. We've had to let an awful lot go here, I am afraid," replied Stoate wearily.

"You must be joking."

“I wish I were. We have had something of a financial crisis this term.”

“What? You lot? I thought you were awash with money.”

“We thought we were until a couple of months ago. Our ex-bursar had his fingers in the till and lost it.”

“Lost it? That seems rather careless. Back the wrong horse?”

“In a way. He might as well have put it on a horse for all the good it did. He’s lost not far short of five million pounds. Now we’ve got a bod running our finances who has negotiated a bailout package with the banks, and we are up to our eyeballs in debt. We are having to get a lot more bums on seats, otherwise we’ve had it. It’s all a long story.”

“Well, I’m afraid my mission is none too helpful. The Ministry are looking for cutbacks as well. All these skinflints behind their desks and computers! I have got to review your CCF to see if we can continue to support it. Not very promising after this morning’s performance, I am bound to say. We’ll have to see how they get on this afternoon.”

Chapter 17

All too soon lunch was over and the demonstration match between the First Fifteen and the Colts Fifteen was being announced. This was by tradition of twenty years a good hard fast game of rugby, but with thirty minutes each way instead of forty-five. Many parents filed up to the school playing field on Alverston Road, ensuring that they had new batteries for their camcorders. Others stayed back and used the time to enjoy a longer luncheon, or wander about the school and look at the displays. A camera crew joined the crowds going to see the game.

The Colts and First Fifteen Squads had an intense rivalry stemming back over many years. Partly this was due to the competitiveness of the physical education department itself, and partly due to the wholesome and manly desire to be top dog. The Headmaster encouraged both. It fitted in with the ethos that he had tried to nurture. This year the rivalry had gone beyond what was healthy and had become at times barely concealed tribal warfare. In a new departure for the school, each team had attracted its own set of fans from the not so salubrious elements of the school.

It was a bad-tempered game. Within minutes the Colts had scored a controversial try and some of the First Fifteen were arguing with the referee, surrounding him in a hostile crowd. The try was not converted and the First Fifteen charged on the Colts to try to take revenge. Although the Colts were younger, they were not much smaller than the First Fifteen and were a pretty even match. The younger team held on doggedly as the First Fifteen tried to break through. That would have been fine if the normal standards of play had been maintained, but both sides began to play a much dirtier game, which at times resembled more of a bar brawl. It was becoming a far cry from the spirit that William Webb Ellis had intended on that long distant afternoon on the playing fields at Rugby School.

During one particularly vicious maul in the second half, which was an appropriate term for the kicking pile of young men on top of the ball, James Boyle, a beefy Colt prop forward paid a debt of ingratitude to Carl Spencer. Spencer was taken off the pitch with a streaming cut just below the eye while Boyle was given a severe reprimand from the referee. It seemed the gloves were off. The next set-piece scrum came together with a clash of flesh similar to two rutting bison. The First Fifteen were pushing the Colts back towards their line but had not managed to get the ball out. The Colts hooker caught one of the First Fifteen prop forwards with a left upper cut, causing the scrum to collapse. The set scrum turned rapidly into a maul, with fists flying everywhere. Shirts were ripped and James Boyle found his shorts were revealing a closely guarded secret, that he was wearing no G-string. This was the cue for the fans to join in.

Within minutes, there were several mauls around the pitch, most of which had nothing to do with the game. Presently the sound of police sirens could be heard. Two arrests were made, and the match abandoned. The reaction of the rest of the crowd was mixed, from the “I don’t pay £6000 a year for my son to be involved in this!” to “I always said things need livening up around here. At last, they seem to have done it”. The most bizarre sight was of a large Colts winger having his ear bent by his diminutive mother who had forgotten her airs and graces and was screeching in her loudest Mid Yorkshire, “Just wait till I get you home, my lad!”

With a heavy heart, Miles Stanton went to tell the Headmaster about the debacle. Stoate looked weary and sighed, wondering what else was going to go wrong and what further bad publicity it would bring. There was still plenty of time for it to do so. Brigadier Sir Lionel Berkley Gunston-Bunn was not in the least put out by the appalling revelation. “Certainly, it seems your rucker players have got a bit more spunk than your CCF, eh Stoate? If we could have it in the CCF we could make some fighting men out of them, what?”

Just what went wrong for the rest of that afternoon involved the CCF. They had unloaded the trailer at the back of the science block to reveal a pontoon bridge that they were going to set up that afternoon as an exercise. There were three steel pontoons that could be used as flat-bottomed boats if necessary. There were some thirty metres of decking that would be quite sufficient to bridge the River Sower. There were also coils of rope (guys, retaining caissons), sundry

pulleys and so on. Each component was made twice as heavy as necessary, typical military specification, able to take a direct hit.

Much to Mr Hardcastle's relief, there were instructions on how to put it together. Many a sergeant major would have done the exercise as a drill, but for Mr Hardcastle, a drill was what he used at home while putting up shelves. Mr Hardcastle did not really understand how to do it, nor did anybody else once he had told them. The CCF got to work, under the eagle eye of parents, a multitude of camcorders and the cameras from the film company. At the same time the River Master, Mr Cannell, was supervising his two crews to do their demonstration row past and race.

The Signals Section had their radio working again. This time their chatter was strictly confidential, as Wayne's public address system was no longer picking up the signals. The effect of the transmitter was not as desirable as it was in the morning. It was sending swarms of electronic bluebottles down the mains to upset the machine two floors below.

There had been an unofficial swap around of the patrols. Call sign *foxtrot uniform charlie kilo* had swapped places with *sierra hotel india tango*. It was the former patrol's job to tell Mr Cannell that the river was clear to row, while the latter had to say that the river was clear to bridge. Unfortunately, they had not told anyone, nor did it occur to them to do so. As well as that, they had got their call signs mixed up. Mr Cannell's crews did their row past and went down to do their race. Both crews straightened up, while Mr Cannell briefed them, "The first crew to get to the narrows has priority. Make sure you keep a sharp look out for the CCF who are doing a bridging exercise. We have to get the all-clear. Signals, are we clear?"

"All clear, sir."

"Forward to row, both crews. Attention, set, GO!"

The crews got a good start and the First Four were just up ahead of the Colts Four after two hundred metres. The narrows were approaching and the Colts Four hung back just as it was told. Control had just informed the wrong patrol that the river was clear and the CCF started to push their pontoon out into the river. A good hard push, with a good tug on the rope from the other bank would get it out and across. Nobody thought to look out for the race coming down, but instead on the command "three" everybody pushed and pulled as appropriate. The pontoon shot out across the water, straight into the path of the oncoming four-oared racing shell. There was little the cox could do about it. The racing

shell hit the pontoon at an angle, its bow splitting open like the petals of a flower. There was a loud crack as the outriggers on the left-hand side caught on the heavy pontoon and tore away from the bolts that held them to the side of the boat. The two strokeside oars split like matches. At the same time, the Colts Four piled into the wreckage and a hole nearly a metre long was torn through its thin plywood hull.

The scene was like one from a disaster movie. Boys in wet Lycra were wading to the bank. Shreds of wood were floating on the surface. The broken oars were floating free with the bent outriggers still hanging off them. The air was rich with oaths and soon several of the CCF were wading ashore with wet dress, battle. Mr Hardcastle was tongue-tied; Mr Cannell was not and gave Mr Hardcastle a tongue-lashing that was even worse than the Brigadier's after the parade. The Brigadier was looking down from a rostrum. Like Mr Cannell he did not see the funny side of it and was fuming at the delay.

Mr Hardcastle, embarrassed by the day's work in front of the Brigadier, wanted the bridge completed in double quick time. Cadets crossed the river to and fro in canoes commandeered from the canoeing club. Ropes and pulleys dragged the other pontoons into position, and they were tied to stakes in both banks. Next the decking was laid and about three-quarters of an hour behind schedule, the bridge was completed. The bridging party stood down. It looked quite impressive as it floated there on the river, but attention had not been paid to little details like knots. All of this was accompanied by a witty commentary from the drama master. On the far bank, a body of forty cadets assembled into four close columns. They marched towards the bridge with a rather more military demeanour than they had during the morning parade.

Unfortunately, Mr Hardcastle did not know about that bit in the Queen's Regulations that enjoins detachments of marching troops to break step when crossing bridges. With a unison that would have delighted a hardened drill sergeant, the squad marched onto the bridge. Without warning the stakes, which were tent pegs used to save time, started flying through the air, each landing with a splash in the river. The decking began to buckle, and the centre pontoon started taking in water. The first cadets were three quarters of the way across when the whole structure gave up its unequal struggle and tipped the entire squad into the water. The two outer pontoons, relieved of the decking, started to float away downstream. What had started as a military exercise was now a water frolic. Bubbles rose lazily from where the centre pontoon had sunk. Several cadets had

climbed aboard the still floating pontoons and were paddling them towards each other. Others were splashing each other.

With a look of total incredulity and disgust, Brigadier Sir Lionel Berkley Gunston-Bunn turned heel, hissing at Stoate, "If you want a penny for this bunch of fairies, you can bloody well whistle for it." As Gunston-Bunn walked from the riverbank, he saw Mr Hardcastle and turned his fury on him, "You want horse whipping for this day's work, Hardcastle. I have never seen such a performance in the entire forty years that I have been an army officer! Good Lord, man..."

"Bog off!" was Hardcastle's reply to the tirade. He had had enough for today.

In the entire forty years that he had been an army officer, Gunston-Bunn had never come across a reaction like this. It had always been "yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir". He had got used to the immediate obedience to his orders without question, even though on at least one occasion, it led to three men meeting with their deaths in a hail of gunfire, because it had slipped his mind that intelligence had reported a planned ambush by the IRA. The army had provided a life in which he had got his own way all the time. If anybody had dared rattle him in any way, there was always a sergeant handy to put the man on a charge.

Gunston-Bunn was also used to everything being in its exact place and running with military precision. He ran on army time and could not cope with schedules slipping for whatever reason. If a patrol was late back, he wanted to know why, even if they had had minor difficulties such as a contact with the enemy.

Now he had spent a day in which there had been no precision whatsoever. He had been forced to listen to unparalleled sloppiness of radio discipline, including language of the lowest ranks. The parade was indescribable. On top of that, there was the bridging exercise that clinched for him that the sooner the Tanswold School CCF was disbanded and consigned to the dustbin of dishonourable military history, the better. And now the man in charge claiming no officer rank was telling him to bog off.

"I beg your pardon?" Gunston-Bunn roared.

"I told you to bog off," Hardcastle returned.

"How dare you talk to me like that. Don't you know that you should use 'sir' when you address a senior officer? Perhaps not when you seem to have so little idea of the basic radio alphabet and no idea at all of Queen's Regulations!"

"I'll tell you in even more basic terms, Colonel Blimp, what you should do. BOG OFF!" shouted Hardcastle. "I don't give a shit who you are, nor do I give

a shit about the army with officers who are a bunch of upper-class twits like you.”

Gunston-Bunn could not bear any more of this gross insubordination and grabbed hold of Hardcastle with the intention of throwing him in the river. But Hardcastle lashed out with a punch that simultaneously made the Brigadier’s nose bleed and blacked his eye. In the entire forty years that he had been an army officer, this was the closest that Gunston-Bunn had ever been to military action. He had always been well insulated from the enemy in concrete bunkers. Nursing what was the closest thing he had ever had to a war wound, Gunston-Bunn staggered back to the car and ordered the corporal to drive him back to the barracks.

Dunstan Stoate had witnessed the altercation and was ready to remonstrate severely with Mr Hardcastle for such gross disrespect for such an eminent guest. He decided to change his strategy when he saw Hardcastle plant one on the Brigadier. He went up to Hardcastle, just out of fist range and hissed, “My office, nine o’clock on Monday. We’ll discuss today’s appalling performance then.”

“Bog off, Biggles!” Hardcastle shouted. He did not need a PA system to be heard. “I am resigning now. You can keep the CCF and stuff it up your arse!”

Like Gunston-Bunn, Stoate was not used to this level of insubordination. He had to resist the temptation to plant one on Hardcastle for two reasons. Firstly, there seemed an immediate likelihood that Hardcastle would plant one back. Secondly there was the longer-term prospect that he would end up meeting Her Honour Mrs Luker again. Instead, he shouted, “How dare you talk to me like that? I shall be dismissing you for gross insubordination and gross incompetence. How could you let boys use call signs like foxtrot uniform charlie kilo? Before you go, I want those imbeciles in the water up here now!”

“Get them yourself! I have resigned; you now cannot give me any orders. Good afternoon!”

Stoate was beside himself with rage and went to the riverbank to order the cadets from their water frolic. He had to restrain himself from hitting each boy as he came up slopping and squelching up from the river. Ten years ago, he would have caned them one by one as they came out. The forty boys stood there in front of their furious headmaster and bemused crowd of parents waiting for the inevitable tirade. Stoate started shouting, “What a sight! I have never seen such a bunch of fairies before in my life! You’re the biggest shower I have ever seen! A crowd of imbeciles! You have done more to damage the fair name and

pride of this school than anything else in its entire history. I will not have the fair name and pride of my school dragged through the mud by an ill-conditioned bunch of cabbage heads and diarrhoea brains! The CCF is now disbanded. Get that stuff out of the river and packed up on the trailer NOW!”

The public address system interrupted Stoate’s speech, “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Headmaster and Governors cordially invite you to tea on the Lawn in front of The Hermitage.”

The cordial invitation did not apply to the bedraggled boys who were left to heave the pontoons up the bank.

Chapter 18

The pantomime in The Hermitage gardens had still to play out its final act. As parents and pupils gathered on the lawn, a queue built up outside the marquee. Tired legs and weary bottoms sat gratefully down on the neatly set tables. The string orchestra started to play, scraping their way through string favourites. As with the wind band, they were out of time and out of tune with each other. Although the sound had a screeching quality to it, peculiar to badly played string instruments, the volume was not so loud. It was a more genteel listening experience. As the orchestra scratched and scraped away, refined fingers grasped fine bone-china tea-ware and refined conversations rippled languidly on the warm afternoon air. The Reverend Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax minced about, making polite and genteel conversation with people he considered worthy of his time.

Meanwhile, Thomas Frankland had been showing interested parents his six-wheel drive all-terrain vehicle. He had still not managed to get the engine to work properly, so it was on static display behind the Technology Workshops, part of a wider exhibition to celebrate the depth of the school's creativity and skill in engineering. When one of the cameramen from the film company saw it, he thought it would be a splendid platform to take some moving shots of The Hermitage and its grounds. Duly, this was arranged with the Technology Department that the vehicle should be borrowed the following week.

Nobody thought that it would be courteous to ask its owner for his permission. The cameraman wanted to have a go that afternoon. He knew that Thomas Frankland was reluctant to get it going, so he would look for an opportune moment to try it out himself. This arose at tea-time when young Frankland had a pressing need to attend to and was not in attendance of his machine for a good ten minutes.

The cameraman slipped onto the vehicle, turned the key and with a fusillade of loud bangs the engine started. He put it in gear and let out the clutch. Like a startled horse it jerked forward and he nearly fell off. He knocked it out of gear

and the engine roared with a fusillade of several more loud backfires. As he re-engaged the machine into gear, he inadvertently slipped it into third and let up the clutch. With a screech of tyres and smell of burning rubber, the machine careered forward.

An unfortunate combination of circumstances arose. Shortly before Richard Thorndale had been falsely accused and expelled by the Headmaster for the libel against Andrew McEwan, he had helped Thomas Frankland sort the transmission out on his vehicle. It had a hydraulically operated clutch and the clutch pedal and the slave cylinder had been temporarily connected with a piece of soft PVC tubing, to be replaced by proper hydraulic hose later. Frankland had been busy with his exams recently and had not worked on his project since half term. The result of this was that the PVC tube burst as the cameraman trod on the clutch pedal, showering the exhaust manifold, which was getting hot, with hydraulic oil. Alarming clouds of smoke began to billow from below the engine cover. Try as he might, the cameraman could not get the infernal vehicle out of gear.

Now, the second unfortunate coincidence happened. The vibration from the roaring engine made the accelerator return spring shake loose and it hung uselessly from the carburettor. In his panic to stop the thing, the cameraman trod on the accelerator instead of the brake and the engine revved harder.

The gearing was such that the machine was travelling at little more than a fast jog, but in the confines of the courtyard, that seemed a breakneck speed. As Frankland had not fitted the silencer on yet, the machine roared like an aeroplane. Try as hard as he might, the cameraman found that he could not stop the machine on brakes alone. He wrestled with the infernal machine, knocking over two litterbins and smashing a garden bench to pieces. His intention was to get the machine out onto the drive where at least he could try to stall it going uphill. He shot through the archway, skidding the machine into a ninety-degree left turn.

In the confines of his cubicle, Frankland could hear the commotion. He lunged out of the small room by the front door of the Science and Technology Block and hurled himself at the machine as it went past. Unfortunately, he had not done his trousers up properly and they fell around his ankles and tripped him so that he fell flat on his face on the roadway.

On the lawn, the gentility of the clink of china, the murmur of refined conversation and the caterwauling of the string orchestra were interrupted by what sounded like a shoot out on the High Corral, combined with a bomber

taxiing to take off. “Good God,” the refined voice of an old man could be heard, “the Corps is conducting a coup!”

The machine roared on towards The Hermitage. To his horror the cameraman saw that his way was blocked by a brand-new Jaguar on the left and a Range Rover on the right. There was no alternative. Choosing the narrow gap between a flowerbed and the marquee, the cameraman hurled his vehicle to the right. This would have been all right if the guys to the marquee had not made the way narrower than the machine. With a sound like pistol shots, the twenty ropes along the back of the marquee either snapped or tore the canvass. The machine ran over a loudspeaker tower. The cabinet was crushed and Wayne’s amplifier let out its final death roar before falling silent forever. Now he was heading towards the English Block. He saw his mate on the rostrum filming.

He yelled out, “Darling, do something!” before knocking the rostrum over and tipping his mate into the roses. Another hard right turn saw him career across the lawn back towards the Science and Technology Block. People scattered before him. There was a hideous cracking as the machine drove over tables and chairs, smashing them to pieces. The front of the machine was covered in bits of wood, broken porcelain, sandwiches, cakes and dripping with tea.

The cameraman saw that he was heading straight for the machine’s owner who was still lying prostrate on the drive. He had been winded by his fall and people were coming to help him. It would not have done to have run over the owner, without whose permission he had taken the machine, so another hard right turn was needed. This time the vehicle carried on its crazy journey through the entrance of the marquee. Fortunately, the tent had been evacuated and the roaring and backfiring of the machine was accompanied by further crashing of tables and china. Now there was the loud, distinctive and prolonged tearing of canvas accompanied by a loud splitting sound as the wayward vehicle failed to go out through the authorised exit and went through the end instead. It was too much and the marquee swayed momentarily before ending its useful life by collapsing in a heap of broken poles and torn canvas.

The cameraman who had wrestled so bravely to bring his wayward steed under control now decided to abandon ship, jumping off and rolling into several plates of cream buns. The machine, now driverless, headed straight to the spot where the CCF had suffered such a humiliating military defeat and leapt off the bank, before coming to rest in the river with clouds of steam rising from under

its engine cover. Families of ducks and geese were quacking and honking angrily at its intrusion.

The setbacks of the day had conspired and coincided to turn the day into a rout. One thing going wrong could be considered unfortunate, two careless, but everything, words failed him. Stoate went into his office, helped himself to a brandy and considered his next move. The way he felt, he wanted to walk away from The Hermitage, get into his Volvo and drive and drive until he fell off the end of the island. He would go anywhere that was sufficiently far away that it had never heard of Alverston, let alone Tanswold.

That was not the Stoate way of doing things. Somebody was to blame and that somebody would damn well pay and pay heavily. That somebody would not be J L D Stoate. Slowly, like a giant sloth, his plan evolved. It would be to summon an emergency staff meeting on Monday, regardless of whether the staff were meant to be on holiday and to hold a full investigation into the miserable affair. He would make an example of somebody. He gazed through his study window, looking at the stream of cars blocking up the drive, waiting to get out at the top, one by one, as the traffic jam on the main road let them. The problem was being made worse by Wayne and Darren's van which had struggled up the drive, expiring between the gates with oil gushing from its sump. He looked at the wreckage on the lawn, wondering who was going to pay for all the damage. And the damage was not just material; it would also generate even more bad publicity that the school needed like a bullet in the head.

Stoate turned back from the window and decided that a brandy would calm his shattered nerves. The medicinal action of the brandy would normally quickly dispel the tension, but on this occasion it did not. It seemed to exacerbate his misery. Stoate was feeling literally drunk with anger, a feeling not helped by the extra brandies he had helped himself to. It was only when in desperation he reached for the best Glenfiddich, that he felt the tension diminish.

In his state, he did not notice the blaring of car horns as Wayne and Darren freewheeled their defunct vehicle the wrong way down the drive. In the resulting melee several expensive bumpers got bent, little piles of shattered headlight glass littered the drive and several metres of expensive bodywork got scratched and dented. The rich Yorkshire oaths only just penetrated the windows to Stoate's office and did not have sufficient energy to find their way to register in Stoate's brain. Dunstan Stoate was by now blind drunk. Slumped in his chair, he did not notice the comings and goings outside his office.

There were many comings and goings. After several expensive bumps, Wayne and Darren had succeeded in manoeuvring their broken-down vehicle to the front of The Hermitage. They had rung their friend Craig, who was now fighting his way through the scrum of expensive pressed steel. Craig could see the dead van right outside The Hermitage, but it took twenty minutes for him to push his way through to reach his mission objective. Angry owners of dented vehicles were banging on the old van, while Wayne and Darren were sitting smugly inside. “What are you going to do about it?” roared one voice. “Don’t you realise that you have put a scratch down the left side of my Bentley?”

“You can touch it up,” said Darren. “Get a bit of gloss paint and go over with some T-cut.”

“Don’t you realise how much it’s going to cost? You’ve done five thousand pounds worth of damage. Who’s going to pay for it?”

“Dunno,” was Wayne’s helpful answer. Between them, Wayne and Darren would have been hard put to find five thousand pence.

“Have you got insurance?”

“Of course. We’re not a cowboy outfit, you know,” replied Darren, whose demeanour and decrepit van suggested otherwise. “We’re high-class and fully covered.”

“Well show me your insurance documents,” shouted the angry parent.

“Oh, hoity toity! Ask me nicely and I might look for them,” said Wayne who started to rummage through the glove compartment of the old van. It was an archive of the detritus of an operation in which a shoestring was a definite extravagance. “It’s not here,” he eventually announced.

“I am calling the Police!” shouted the parent.

Wayne dredged up from the depth of his superficiality his trump card, a little bit of legal knowledge that was sufficient to be deadly dangerous. “Don’t you worry,” he said smugly. “We are legal. Besides, it happened on private land. Insurance doesn’t apply to accidents on private land.”

Wayne was right. His insurance did not cover accidents on private land. Nor did it cover much else. As both he and Darren had several motoring convictions including drunk driving, the insurance was the barest minimum required by the Road Traffic Act. Since nobody had been hurt, there was no basis for a claim. The angry parent stood spluttering with helpless rage until he saw the Financial Director and buttonholed him.

As Craig was fighting his way through to the old van in his even more dilapidated Land Rover, Lartington was livid at having had his ear bent by one of the richest benefactors of the school. There would be no more financial leg-ups from that quarter; with no more money coming from Sir Kenneth Rounce and this source of good will drying up, things would be even tighter, if that were possible. Lartington strode to the van ready to do murder. “Get this bloody thing off the premises!” he yelled.

“No can do,” replied Wayne insolently in a parody of Lartington’s yuppie style. “Besides, you owe us.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t paid us. You owe us eight hundred quid.”

“You said you could do it for one hundred and fifty,” Lartington protested.

“It’s gone up. We had extra work to do. We had to connect our system to the one in the hall.”

“You should have done that anyway.”

“That wasn’t part of the job,” replied Darren. “You wrecked our amp. You also broke one of our speakers.”

“What do you mean?” Lartington snarled.

“You told us to do it,” Wayne interjected.

Lartington was joining the parent in having an apoplexy. “It was part of the job I asked you to do!” Lartington yelled. A small audience was gathering to enjoy the impromptu last act of the day’s farce. “Besides, you have wrecked a perfectly good amplifier in the assembly hall. That will need replacing! It’s one hundred and fifty pounds or nothing!”

“Seven hundred and fifty. Cash!” shouted Wayne.

“You will be paid one hundred and fifty pounds by cheque,” snapped Lartington. If ever there were a time that his prejudices against the North were being bolstered, this was it.

“Seven hundred and fifty. Cash!” shouted Wayne and Darren in unison. Neither had a bank account, nor did they bother with trifles such as payment of VAT. “Otherwise, we will sue!”

“You will get a cheque for one hundred and fifty pounds, which you don’t deserve after today’s work!” shouted Lartington. In his view, a good proportion of the day’s farce had centred on a *pas-de-deux* from this appalling duet and their abysmal apparatus. Now there was this ghastly scene with the backdrop of a rusty van that should have gone to a scrap heap years ago.

“We’ll get our mates on to you,” shouted Wayne. “We’ve got rights. We don’t want a cheque from you. We want cash. Your cheques are made of rubber.”

“What do you mean?”

“They bounce all the time,” said Wayne cockily before singing:

“Rubber cheque,

You come bouncing back to me.

Rubber cheque,

You come bouncing back to me...”

Lartington stomped back into The Hermitage. Wayne’s rubber cheque jibe was rather too close to the truth.

In his office, J L Dunstan Stoate’s brain felt like rubber. As he sat in his chair, the noises were penetrating his head and mixing with the explosive mixture of whisky, brandy, claret and hock. They were folded in with the ghastly images of the day and the previous term. Cavorting like elves across his swimming mind were images as opposite as Brigadier Lionel Berkley Gunston-Bunn and Jessica Mary Ritchie McEwan. When Andrew McEwan, Samuel Proudlock and Richard Smithells joined them, Stoate struggled to get out of the nightmare. His efforts were in vain until the ghastly Cyril came dancing hand-in-hand with the ex-Bursar, Graham Smith. Stoate woke up with a start. His heart was threatening to jump out of his chest.

Although he recognised the room as his office, it was doing things that were very strange. The room was swaying as if he was high up in the rigging of a ship in a storm. The thought made him feel decidedly off colour. He tried to get up, but almost immediately flopped down, muttering, “Somebody has spiked my bloody brandy. It’s never done this to me before.” Even in his chair, he felt as if he was flying through severe turbulence, being caught by up and down draughts of a thunderstorm. He cursed as a need became ever more urgent and, muttering drunken oaths, he staggered out of the office heading towards the little room at the end of the corridor.

Wayne’s and Darren’s oaths were as basic as those being uttered by Stoate as he staggered along the corridor, but they were louder. Craig had poured almost five litres of cheap engine oil into the engine of the old van and now they were trying to start it. Since the battery was almost as shot as the rest of the abominable vehicle in which it resided, the starter was turning the engine with great reluctance. The engine bay stank of petrol. As Darren got more cross at the

uncooperative stance his vehicle was taking, the end of his cigarette glowed brighter. It had not occurred to any of the friends that the finale of the show might well be a violent display of pyrotechnics.

Those who liked fireworks were to be disappointed. In a fit of petulance Darren kicked the van and some rust fell out of the wheel arch. Craig took control of the situation, “We’ll push it back and I’ll give you a tow, and you bump start it.” The three men tried to push the van back, but it was too much. It was too much for Wayne who shouted at his audience, “Don’t just fucking sit there, give us some fucking help!”

If Wayne had wanted some accursed help, the audience gave it to him in the form of belly laughs, jeers and whistles. Again, Craig took control of the situation by backing his elderly Land Rover against the old Transit van and pushing it backwards to the far end of the parking area outside The Hermitage. As they approached the end, Craig put his brakes on. This resulted in two problems. Firstly, Darren was rather preoccupied in looking behind him. Secondly the brakes, being power assisted by the non-functional engine, were even less effective than they normally were. There was a loud crunch from the rear of the van and a loud tinkling of very expensive sounding glass. They had just stoved in the front of Donald Blance’s brand-new Lexus.

Darren surveyed the expensive looking damage. “He will be insured,” he muttered. More concerned about his own heap, he could hardly tell the difference from before. A small pile of rust was the only evidence of the skirmish with the Lexus. Craig was busying himself tying a towrope to the back of the Land Rover. At the same time Wayne was tying the other end to the front bumper. Darren got back into the van.

The Land Rover bellowed as it prepared to take the strain and a blue cloud of dirty diesel fumes drifted languidly in the late afternoon sunshine. Craig let the clutch up and the vehicle started to move forward to take the strain and heave. There was no strain, nor was there a heave. Instead, there was a tearing of metal followed by a clatter as the bumper from the Transit rattled along the drive.

“Hey! You could put ‘Just Married’ on it,” shouted one member of the audience.

“Fuck off!” was Wayne’s appreciative comment. Darren had just given him a large dose of verbal. Craig backed up again. “Put it on the tow hook, you dickhead!” he shouted back to Wayne. The old Land Rover took up the strain and this time it heaved. There were scribed into the gravel long tyre marks as

Darren tried to bump start the recalcitrant van. It was not interested. They backed up again for a third attempt. This time the Lexus managed to get away with a minor dent in its nearside front wing.

It was third time lucky. The engine on the Transit spluttered into life, but immediately all could tell that not all was well. Immediately oil was widdling out from the front and back of the engine. Blue smoke was pouring out of the exhaust. Loud clonking sounds came from underneath. Darren gave the engine some revs, but it did not want any, vociferously informing him of the fact by several loud backfires. He let up the clutch and the van jerked forward into the Land Rover and stalled. It was time for the encore. The Lexus now had its offside wing restyled.

When the engine fired up again, it did so literally. A particularly bad backfire blew the air cleaner off the carburettor. Darren ignored the clattering and clonking, giving his steed more revs. The clonking and clattering rose in intensity, while the backfires sounded like a gun battery. Just as he was about to raise the clutch, there was a loud thud from the engine bay followed by a metallic tinkling and silence. Wayne, Darren and Craig peered inside as even to their mechanically tone-deaf ears, this sounded terminal.

“It’s put a leg out of bed,” muttered Craig pointing out to the connecting rod that was lying at a jaunty angle through the crankcase. Oil was gushing through the sump where part of the crankshaft had gone through. It was lying on the drive next to the piston head that had smashed through the crankcase. A deep indentation in the inner wing showed where the piston had struck it with considerable force. Another pile of rust lay under the wheel arch.

Dunstan Stoate was staggering back down the corridor. As he had left the little room, he noticed the legend on the door and even in his inebriated state went red with embarrassment. He should have gone upstairs. He had noticed the commotion outside and decided that it was not fitting to the atmosphere of Tanswold School. He needed to assert his authority as Headmaster on the situation. As he opened the front door of The Hermitage, what he saw certainly did not fit into the image that he had spent so much of his life trying to create, even though it was distorted and swimming about in front of his eyes. He tried to say something, but nothing comprehensible came out of his mouth.

Nobody took any notice of the drunken old man who was still wearing his academic gown. Craig was now attaching a chain to his friends’ defunct van. It

was beginning to penetrate the alcoholic haze in Stoate's brain that the disorder he saw was not just unbecoming to Tanswold School, but also was the last straw. He had just managed to focus on the sad remains of the tea marquee so effectively demolished by Frankland's wayward contraption. With the bellow and poise of the Alpha male baboon getting ready to see off his arch-rival, Stoate lunged forward to give Wayne and Darren a piece of his mind, backed up by a taste of his fist.

Stoate never reached his target. Simultaneously, he slipped on the oil that had gushed out of the engine a few minutes before and tripped over the chain that was hanging between the Land Rover and the Transit. As Stoate lay flat on his face in a puddle of oil, a torrent of oaths flowed freely from his mouth. Most of them he had picked up while in the RAF. Some of them he thought he had totally forgotten.

If the policeman, summoned by the angry parent to complain about the damaged Bentley, had arrived later, he would have been initiating a murder inquiry instead of accidental damage to a valuable motorcar. Stoate got up, after two or three attempts. He stared lividly at his wrecked suit that seemed to have cleaned up much of the mess on the drive. He turned around to confront Wayne but saw the policeman instead. "I suggest you get yourself home sir," said the policeman.

"What are you going to do about these shitheads?" shouted Stoate. "Arrest them! Charge them! Throw away the key! They don't belong in a civilised place!"

"Nor do you in the state you are in, Mr Stoate," replied the policeman. "I suggest you get home before I charge you."

"With what?"

"Being drunk and disorderly, for a start. Using foul, threatening and abusive language liable to cause a breach of the peace. Want any more?"

Stoate turned muttering and got his car key out. The policeman trotted up behind him. "I wouldn't try that, sir," he said. "You are well over the limit. I would advise you to walk home or, better still, get a taxi."

Stoate did not notice that his part in the final act was being watched not just by the audience of parents, boys, friends and any old Fred Bloggs and his whippet, but also by his immediate superiors, Crispin Lartington and Donald Blance. Stoate was completely blotto.

Like all the top people at Tanswold School, Blance had not been at all amused at any of the day's events. He was speechless at the damage done to his new car. He rapidly overcame his speechlessness telling Lartington forcefully his opinions. Although the damage to the car could be fixed relatively quickly, that done to the school would be rather harder to unpick. Especially as the Headmaster had rather let the side down by being seen to be blind drunk at the helm. Somebody would have to pay for it.

A sentiment shared by Stoate, for a comment from a parent had penetrated his addled mind, "Where there's brass, there's muck."

Not only was there metaphorically egg on his face, but there was literal muck aplenty on his suit that he had only bought the previous month. The suit had mopped up the oils as effectively as any sand, and grit from the drive stuck to the oil. It had the texture of the coarsest sandpaper. For once Stoate took PC Good's advice and staggered back into The Hermitage still muttering blue murder. It slowly crossed the haze that clogged up his brain that if he were to stagger home, his dreadful appearance would be eloquent testimony to his undignified state. He got a sufficient grip of himself to stop muttering obscenities and rang the taxi company. When the receptionist picked up the phone, Stoate put his request as clearly as he could.

"Sorry, sir," replied the controller, "what have you caught at the Hermitage? Are you sure you don't want the Police?"

Stoate tried again what he imagined was his clearest diction, "Tackshee to Hermichage Court, now!"

"Where are you now?"

"The Hermitage!"

"Why do you want a taxi to go to the Hermitage?" The controller at Station Taxis in Alverston was not familiar with The Hermitage, let alone Hermitage Court, the mansion block of very expensive apartments at the other end of Tanswold. "Where is it anyway?"

Stoate heard the receiver being cupped and the controller calling out to his mate, "Stan, what's the Hermitage? I've got an old buffer here who sounds like he's had several too many saying he's caught something at the Hermitage. Sounds like he needs a doctor."

"A tackshee from The Hermichaje to Hermichaje Court. I wanch it now!" yelled Stoate.

The operator did not hear Stoate's explosion, as he got into conversation with Stan. Stoate could hear Stan's reply to his colleague, "It's that posh school in Tanswold. They call it Blunderhouse Hall. Headmaster there is a right one, a pig in every sense—and an idiot to boot. Hermitage Court is that big block of expensive flats. He could walk it in ten minutes. Who's the old fart you've got on the line?"

"The Headmashter!" yelled Stoate.

The controller and Stan both heard Stoate's interjection.

"And I am the Prince of Wales," replied the controller, who carried on his chat with Stan. In the background, Stoate could hear another contribution, "He sounds posh enough to be the old fart that is Headmaster there. They had a right knees-up there this afternoon. My daughter videoed some of it. There was a real punch-up on the sports field. It sounds hilarious. We closed our account with them the other week. They owe us six hundred quid. Their cheques have a lot of rubber in them. Anyway, a mate of mine said he was completely legless at the end. I wouldn't send anyone to pick him up. You never know what might happen. The walk will do him good."

Stoate slammed down the phone. He did not like being called an old fart; plenty had called him that recently. Despite his befuddled state, it disturbed him that the news of the afternoon's fiasco had already got out into the community and how low the Tanswold School Trust share value had dropped.

Stoate tried a couple more firms. No, they did not have any taxis; all taxis were out on jobs. No, they did not know when one would be available, but he could ring back in an hour. It was Saturday evening and they were really busy. There were no spare drivers. It would also help if Tanswold School would pay its bills. In desperation Stoate called an outfit in Carlsborough. Yes, they could send a car, but it would be a twenty-pound surcharge, before they started the charge for the journey. Why? This was because of the distance between Carlsborough and Tanswold; it was out of county for them. They would be there in about forty minutes. Before then? No can do.

Stoate flopped into the big armchair in his study. The Hermitage was doing things that it had no right to do and had never done in all the years he had been there. It was swaying from side to side. Stoate remembered his flying. The Hermitage was yawing and he needed to apply a little rudder to stop it. But it was also rolling; a little aileron would help that. It was pitching, but he could not get the old house into trim. He closed his eyes. Back in his RAF days he had

flown a *Vickers Varsity* aircraft through a thunderstorm that had no bloody right to be there. Later the Squadron Leader had told him quite sternly that he had no bloody right to be in a thunderstorm. It was compounded by the fact the pilot (Pilot Officer J L D Stoate) had set his compass incorrectly and the navigator had lost track of where they were on the map.

And it felt like that now. After forty minutes, the Varsity was still making heavy weather through the thunderstorm. And after ninety minutes. Stoate noticed an extremely battered Toyota pull up the drive. It sounded its horn. With some difficulty Stoate got up. The old house was still yawing, pitching and rolling in a way that it had never done before. Stoate managed to stagger out to the car. And Mr Kahn looked in horror at what was approaching.

Alcohol had no place whatever in Mr Kahn's culture, although it was part of his job to pick up those for whom it played a central part in their leisure pursuits along with other more or less revolting materials. Large fat bald men swaying about, looking as if they had thrown up all over their expensive suits, were not the kind of cargo he wished to have in his vehicle.

"Hermichage Court," said Stoate in what he thought was his best diction, but to Mr Kahn was a mumbled slur.

"Sorry?"

"I shed 'Hermichage Court'. Don't chew undershtand Englishh?" snapped Stoate before he added an afterthought that was nothing other than a racial slur.

"You can walk. I am not taking you in that state. I will send a second account to the school for my wasted journey," replied Mr Kahn before driving off. As he did so, Stoate let out a stream of invective, which included every foul, threatening, abusive and racist term that he ever had learned, and one or two he had not. It was just as well that nobody witnessed it, or he would, no doubt, have been appearing before Tanswold Magistrates on Monday morning.

Stoate was wrong about the absence of witnesses. As he pitched, rolled and yawed back to The Hermitage, he was met by the Financial Director who had just picked up the first call-out bill. "Headmaster, my office please," said Lartington icily. Stoate had that feeling that he had when he was about to be summoned to the Tower to be dressed down for some lapse in airmanship. This meeting was to be on a par with that with the Squadron Leader following his flight through a thunderstorm in the *Vickers Varsity*...

"What is your game Headmaster?" Lartington demanded.

“And what’s your game, Bursar?” was Stoate’s spar. It was a clumsy attempt at a jibe, but Lartington was not going to fall for it. Although Lartington was not a big man, he could more than hold his own with the drunken oaf who was meant to supervise the teaching and learning.

“Jesus Christ, Headmaster! Look at the state of you!”

“Damned fine shuit. It’s ruined!”

“I am not worried about the suit, Headmaster!” Lartington’s voice rose to an uncharacteristic yell. “I’m worried about you!”

“How kind and considerate of you,” replied Stoate, who was trying to bluster his way out of the meeting but was capable of little more than the crudest sarcasm. He would have liked to terminate the meeting with a well-aimed shot with his fist, but what little sense he had left just dissuaded him from that course of action.

“No, Headmaster, it’s not you personally that worries me. It’s what you have done. Now you sit down and listen to me and listen to me good and proper.” Lartington had not intended to pick up the local idiom, but his normal airs and graces would be wasted. To his surprise, Stoate had sat down. Lartington paced about the room and made it clear that, “Today was a total bloody shambles... I have never seen such a complete bloody farce... You couldn’t have made it up... The CCF parade; the speeches; the rugby game; you name it! It was farcical.”

“You found that sound system company, Bursar. Why didn’t you get our normal people? Why did you have to go to Carlsborough of all places?”

“Because they have black-listed the Tanswold School Trust, you idiot!” Lartington yelled. “The Tanswold School Trust that you were meant to supervise and that little cretin Smith went and emptied in front of your nose and Sir Kenneth Rounce!”

Lartington was now behind his desk. Stoate was now leaning over the desk and eye-balling the Financial Director. He was beside himself, almost drunk with rage. “How dare you call me an idiot? I set this fucking school up while you were in shorts and don’t you fucking forget it!”

Lartington was now showing all the mettle he had gained from his dealings with the Conservative Party. He had survived several attempts at his career and had deflected the knives very deftly; most of his enemies had stabbed each other fully and had retreated to the Back Benches to nurse their wounds and sense of grievance. Although Stoate was almost twice Lartington’s age, the Financial

Director despised him as a simpleton with an easily offended ego. His bluster was just that.

“Language, Headmaster,” said Lartington reprovingly. “A man of your status should not be effing and blinding every other word. Your language has not just descended into the gutter; it’s well down the sewer. And lots of people have heard it as well. You are getting a reputation. And not just for your language either. I am now going to tell you a few home truths about you.

“You are a liability, Headmaster, not just to yourself, but to everyone working around you. Your staff don’t like you, and I have heard it more than several times that the right people are not applying for the many jobs that you are making vacant. I don’t give a damn whether they like you or not. Indeed, I don’t give a damn about staff welfare, but when the Tanswold School Trust is constantly having to recruit new staff because you have sacked this one or that one, it starts to become more difficult. And don’t rely on trying to screw the staff in the courts. There are a lot of coppers who want to get their teeth into the old boys’ network. Sir Kenneth’s well-placed and influential friends are on the run. They have a lot to hide, and...”

“Good God! You aren’t one of those coppers in disguise?” said Stoate with some alarm in his voice. The effect of his indulgence was wearing off, to be replaced by a hangover. “Smithells didn’t put you up to this?”

“No, not at all. But I have been doing my sleuthing about the Tanswold School Trust and some of the arrangements that have come to light. You know that the Governors are having to use what influence they have left to put Smithells off the scent. Blance has had to make a lot of arrangements to get that Mallinson woman off your back. He is livid about today, and as for your contributions...”

“What do you mean by arrangements?”

“You know damned well. Or you should do. And what you should know is that the Tanswold School Trust is being kept afloat by my efforts and mine alone. The amount of extra work that is needed to make the arrangements appear above board is phenomenal. I have had to bring in several of my best collaborators in to make it all ship-shape and Bristol fashion. I had better spell it out to you. Mallinson is back on the leash, but she is tugging and growling. Smithells has his teeth in Sir Kenneth. So have the tax people. All those bequests from the Rounce Family were not bequests at all. They were loans. No interest, no pay-back date. But they are his assets that the tax people could call in. They amount

to four million pounds. My people are doing their best to lay a new scent trail for Smithells, so he will be off our backs. Nothing is guaranteed, of course.”

“What has this got to do with today’s abysmal fiasco?” Stoaate was rapidly falling behind, as the hangover increased its grip.

Lartington sighed. This confirmed in his mind that Stoaate was an imbecile. “Plenty. We need all the bums on seats that we can get. Can’t you see the newspaper headlines: *Comedy of errors at Blunderhouse Hall?*”

“What do you mean by ‘Blunderhouse Hall?’”

“What I mean, Headmaster, is the large amount of bad publicity that we seem to have collected, most of which has been by you.” Lartington was starting to rev up for murder. “You need your wings clipping.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“There are a number of things that you have overseen, or, more likely, failed to have foreseen, that have and continue to put the existence of the Tanswold School Trust into jeopardy. Let me spell them out for you. Firstly, there’s the Reverend Proudlock. It was before my time, but lax supervision led to his daughter dying of Salmonella...”

“I am a headmaster, not a kitchen supervisor!” Stoaate interrupted.

“Yes, I am aware of that,” sighed Lartington, “you keep on telling me that. You clearly like the status, but you find it hard to take the responsibility. You need to realise that the buck stops with you. Proudlock is going to take us to the cleaners.”

“He’s a vicar. He doesn’t have the money. Anyway, if he were a proper Christian, he would forgive us and forget it ever happened. I always knew he was the wrong person for Alverston. He must be stopped.”

“I don’t think so. Now, as you know, I have no time for religion at all, but if you had killed my daughter, the last thing I would be thinking about is forgiveness. I would want to take you to the cleaners. And don’t rely on your old-boy chums. The judiciary are changing. I can tell you that your share-price is not high in the Proudlock household with what you did with the boy. Nor is it high with the Simpsons either. Her assessment of you was totally correct.”

“Are you calling me a callous bastard, Bursar?”

“Yes, Headmaster, I am. Your behaviour to Proudlock’s friends was callous to the point of cruelty.”

“What bloody business is that of yours?” snapped Stoaate. “I run this school with strict discipline, and my word is what goes. Don’t forget it!”

“How can I? You keep reminding me. And each bum you kick out needs another bum to put in its place.”

“But we get another year’s fees at least. If not, we take them to court.”

“It doesn’t work like that. How many times do I have to tell you that your chums on the local judiciary are rapidly heading for the exit? If you think you can continue to screw ex-pupils for fees, you had better think again. The important thing is that the Tanswold School Trust has got to make provision for all of these own goals. Not a very good defender, are we, Dunstan?”

“May I remind you of your position here, Lartington?”

“You don’t need to, Stoate. I do need to remind you of my position here, namely that I am trying to rescue the Tanswold School Trust from the mess that you north-country buffoons left it in. You are one of the worst managers I have ever come across. I wouldn’t trust you in a chicken abattoir. You are hopeless with people. You are hopeless with money. You strut about as if you are Lord of the Manor. You like to take the credit for when it all goes right, but when it goes wrong, somebody else has to carry the can. You’ve done it before, and you do it again and again. And if someone stands up to you, you throw your toys out of the pram.”

This stung Stoate like several hornets. “Evidence? Where’s the evidence, Lartington?”

“Plenty, Stoate. Your RAF mates did the minimum required just in order to stop you wrecking expensive aeroplanes. They knew you were an idiot...”

“WHAT?” yelled Stoate. “What you do you mean by that? How do you know about the relationship between me and my ground crew? How dare you? Who are your sources?”

“I do my homework, Headmaster,” Lartington replied smoothly, “like I always have.”

Lartington was not going to share his uncle’s RAF memoirs about Flight Lieutenant J L D Stoate and his antics with his *de Havilland Vampire*. Instead, he resumed giving Stoate the rounds of the cookhouse with particular reference to his character defects and failures. Lartington continued, “If you want evidence, you only have to look at the way you carried on with McEwan. You framed him.”

“Absolute poppycock!” shouted Stoate.

“You framed him and you know it. I know that you couldn’t stand him because he stood up to you. You have said as much. Next, you framed Thorndale.

You tried to get the Trust to screw Thorndale's mother who has barely two pennies to rub together. It's criminal!"

"Are you calling me a criminal, Lartington?"

"Yes, Stoate, I am. Mallinson is on the leash. She wants to get you for that. It's called perjury with malice and attempting to pervert the course of justice. She knows you tried to frame McEwan, and you succeeded in framing Thorndale. Your little sidekicks have spilled the beans and Mallinson is ready to tear you limb from limb. If she got her claws into you, you would be doing five years for McEwan and another six years for Thorndale. Frankly the way I feel about you, that's the way you should go. Besides, you have form as well for doing over the Proudlock boy and the McEwan girl.

"Mr Blance and the Trust have made a lot of arrangements to keep Mallinson at heel. She isn't best pleased either. Nor is Blance. McEwan is going to take us to the cleaners as well. Let me spell it out to you, Headmaster. This is going to cost the Tanswold School Trust another load of money. I reckon we will need about a million and a half for this. And don't tell me that the insurance will pay out. We weren't covered when much of this happened. These are excluded."

Stoate had fallen so far behind that he had lost the plot completely. He shouted, "I am the Headmaster here! What I say goes! And you are telling me what decisions I should make with disruptive staff? You really have done it this time, Lartington..."

"Yes, I have, Stoate, with the blessing of the Governors. Mr Blance and some of the other Governors had an emergency meeting just as everyone was leaving this afternoon."

"Why wasn't I told? You will pay for this!"

"Because, to use a crude expression, you were lying totally shit-faced in your study. Some decisions were made."

"WHAT? Without me? What do you mean?"

"You do seem clueless this evening. The Governors want to rein you in. You are a liability and the Trust cannot afford any more of your blunders. They have given me the responsibility of supervising you rather more closely. The day-to-day teaching will remain your responsibility, but the strategic decision making has passed to me."

"You have made all this up, you mutinous little turd!"

"No, Headmaster, I don't have the imagination to do that. You have often said how we financial types have no imagination. Here, look at these minutes."

Lartington passed a piece of paper across his desk. For several minutes Stoate looked at it, changing colour like some grotesque chameleon. Finally, he demanded, “Who came up with this? What does it mean?”

“In answer to your first question, Mr Blance, Sir Ronald Wiseman, Mr Hyland, Dr Pennington and I wrote this together.”

“Since when you were you a governor, Lartington? The Bursar has never been a governor and never will be.”

“You are quite right, Headmaster. A mere bursar cannot be on the Governing Body, but I am the Financial Director. You should be aware that the Governing Body of this school is its board of directors, so it’s natural that I am on the board. And the other governors agreed. In fact, they have asked me to take responsibility for the strategic direction of the Tanswold School Trust.”

“WHAT?” yelled Stoate. “I founded this school and I decide the strategic direction, not some part-time banking reject from London. Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I know who I am,” replied Lartington smugly. He had played Stoate effectively and the old buffoon was unable to present a coherent argument. “And, more importantly, I know what your role is in all of this. Your title is no longer Headmaster. The post has been abolished in the new structure here. Your title is Director of Learning and Teaching. On the hierarchy tree it is marked as DOLT and you can see that you are answerable to me. I will talk you through it on Monday. Now I need to get back to my wife and family. Ciao.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Lartington. I am the Headmaster,” snapped Stoate, emphasising the word *headmaster* as if it meant everything to him. “I founded this school twenty-five years ago, when you were running about in shorts. I have never heard such drivel: strategic director, director of learning and teaching. I am having nothing of it, and I will see to it that not only does your hare-brained scheme come to nothing, but you will be going back to London and never coming back!”

“But Headmaster,” replied Lartington, “we don’t mind you using the term Headmaster, if you really think it’s important. As for my going back to London, I would love to take you up on your suggestion. And this time next week, you will be out of business. Get it?”

Stoate got it with great reluctance.

“I know you don’t like it,” continued Lartington, “but tough. Just think of it this way. It’s a taste of what you have done to others. The Tanswold School Trust

is more important than your rather inflated ego. The security guys are coming to lock up. Ciao.”

Drunk with rage, Stoate hurled himself out of Lartington’s office, but being simultaneously drunk with alcohol, he blundered into the wall. Cursing, he picked his way towards the front door and slammed it behind him.

His world was still pitching, yawing and rolling like his Varsity in the thunderstorm. The latter part was more literal. It had been a hot day and although it was mid-evening, it was more like dusk. Soon, large drops of rain were falling on his bald head and, by the time he had staggered down Tanswold High Street to Hermitage Court, Stoate was drenched.