

The Blunderhouse Coup

VERY PUBLIC SCANDALS PART 2

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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.

The Blunderhouse Coup

Chapter 1

J L Dunstan Stoate, Headmaster of Tanswold School did not look the part as he lay naked on his bed. The dignity of that office had deserted him as he lay there snoring in the half-light of a Sunday morning. His mouth had dropped open, and he was dribbling. There was no matrimonial kick in the kidneys. Stoate, being single, had nobody to disturb and nobody would have roused him from his alcoholic stupor. And he continued to lie there deep in his stupor until late on in the morning, way beyond the time that he would have normally got back from Mattins.

When, eventually, he woke up, the alcohol still had him in its clutches. The first thing that came to his mind's eye was a glass of brandy, and it made him feel sick. Almost immediately came the mother and father of a hangover. The hangover that he had had after his twenty-fifth birthday in the officers' mess at RAF Finningley was nothing like this. As he lay on the bed, his bedroom seemed to be expanding and contracting like a bag, and he wondered if it would burst throwing him naked into the courtyard below. He would complain to the caretaker. It slowly started to dawn on him that it was he, and not his flat, that had taken leave of its senses. "It's that damned brandy," he muttered. "Another session like that and I'm going on the wagon."

He hauled himself up to attend to his needs and stumbled muttering to the bathroom. His flat seemed to be in chaos, and it had no right to be tossing up and down like a ship at sea. He saw himself in the mirror and wished he hadn't. He looked every bit as bad as he felt. In his delicate state, every noise seemed amplified. The bathroom cabinet door closing sounded like the slam of a door in hell. The paracetamol tablets popping from their foil pack resounded round his brain like landmines, and the flush of the lavatory was like the Niagara Falls.

The hangover was turning into a migraine, and Stoate staggered back to the bedroom. Lumps of pain travelled to the back of his eyeballs, and bounced back along his optic nerve, before rebounding off each corner of his skull. His mouth felt as if a jackdaw had nested there, while

at the same time there was a taste that reminded him of the outfall sewer of a major city.

A cup of strong black coffee might clear his hangover. The bubbling of the coffee percolator sounded like something that Stoate preferred not to think about. As he waited for the coffee to come down, he felt an increasing sense of grievance. His flat was a tip. Normally he was fastidiously tidy, but this morning it looked like the flat had been turned upside down. Maybe it was the result of the pitching and yawing that the apartment block had experienced the previous evening and that morning. He would complain to the management company. The flats at Hermitage Court were not yet ten years old. Stoate, a man of considerable personal wealth, had bought the most expensive apartment of this exclusive development. It had no right to heave up and down, knocking over his bookcases. He did not expect highly exclusive and expensive apartments to indulge in rock 'n roll, tipping his furniture over. As he drank his coffee, Stoate wondered whether he was being a little harsh; perhaps there had been an earthquake. His experience of earthquakes abroad led him to conclude that if his furniture in the living room was all over the place, there would be large cracks across the walls. The absence of these and the apparent normality of people having a Sunday stroll along the riverside walk made him reject this explanation.

Next, he began to remember, in reverse order, what had happened the previous evening. He vaguely recollected stumbling into his flat. He began to make the connection between the large and increasingly painful bruise on his left shin with the smashed coffee table. He vaguely remembered measuring his length on the Persian Rug, and muttering obscenities at the broken glass top of the coffee table and the twisted wrought iron stand. He dimly recollected how he had tried to get up by using the bookcase as a prop. Instead of pulling himself up to it, Stoate had succeeded in pulling it down to him. That it had not pinned him to the floor was due to the arm of the sofa, and now it remained at this drunken angle. The pun reminded Stoate of his state and another lump of pain bounced about the inside of his skull.

It took a policeman to get him to realise why his car was not parked in his reserved parking spot. "It's down at the Hermitage, sir," said the desk sergeant at Tanswold police station. "PC Goode suggested you shouldn't drive it, sir, else you would get done for drunken driving.

State you were in yesterday, you wouldn't have got it out of The Hermitage. We would have had to send the divers in to fish you out of the river.”

A loud belly-laugh in the background accompanied the sergeant's summary. Stoate did not share the mirth one little bit. He remembered his encounter with PC Goode. Goode had been to Tanswold School but had rather let the side down by choosing not to go to Oxford or Cambridge, but instead to leave at 16 to join the Middle Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary. Now, scarcely twenty, Goode had threatened his former headmaster with a charge of drunken driving. Stoate felt distinctly aggrieved at that. No twenty-year-old would tell him what to do. Goode was a good-for-nothing, but unfortunately Goode was the Law and would be backed up by the likes of the Honourable Mrs Druker.

As Stoate recollected the appalling events that led to his recent conviction for assault, a resentful anger built up in him. It was symptomatic of the decay in British society at the Millennium that a man of his status in the community, a pillar of the Church and, more importantly, the Byland Foresters, should be arrested for teaching two disrespectful youngsters a jolly good lesson. He resented Proudlock, in his view a rather effeminate youth with long hair, and the McEwan “girl” who looked more like a boy. That Donald Blance had made him apologise to them stuck in his throat. As for the sports gear that Proudlock and McEwan had been wearing which left nothing for the imagination... Another lump of pain bounced around Stoate's head, the flat started to roll again, and, feeling sick, Stoate staggered back to his bed.

As Stoate lay there, his hangover started to convert itself to depression. Stoate was used to getting his own way in life, which enabled him to avoid the knocks that he so freely served to others. Now, the silver platter had not just tarnished; it had almost corroded away. The summer term of 1998 had started on a note of unbridled optimism, but twelve weeks later, and five million pounds the poorer, the school had finished the term in terminal gloom. Stoate's total sway over Tanswold School had diminished to a fraction of its former self, having been summarily usurped by a city slicker who had taken over as Bursar – especially as the latter had given him the rounds of the cookhouse yesterday evening. (Stoate could still not get himself to use Lartington's

preferred description of his post as “Financial Director”.) And now that bloody man had told him that his job title was not Headmaster, but Director of Learning and Teaching. It was shortened to DOLT: was that intentional?

Damn Smith with his fingers in the till! Five years would not be enough, especially as he would get out after two years. For all his faults, Smith at least would be a model prisoner.

Speech Day had devastated the reputation of the school. Far from being the high point of the social calendar of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire, it had turned out to be a knock-about farce. The CCF had been centre stage of the pantomime, having taken the Micky out of the visiting General firstly with their antics with the radio transmissions, secondly with their drill that was more like the Teddy Bears’ Picnic, and finally with that bridge. All of this was in the limelight of that hideous amplification system. Stoate shuddered as he recollected the revolting theories about him being broadcast by the Signals Section.

There was Frankland’s vehicle that careered through the tea marquee, smashing up virtually everything before it leapt into the river next to the sad remains of the rout of the CCF. After that there was the dreadful *pas-de-deux* with a Land Rover and a Transit Van. As he lay on his bed, Stoate saw his suit thrown in an uncharacteristically untidy heap on the chair. Stoate had wondered why there was a smell of motor oil in his bedroom. He had put it down to fact that one of the wine bottles served at luncheon was “corked”, and he must have had some. But surely, he would have noticed if the stuff tasted like the contents of an engine sump. Now he could make the connection between the smell and the mess on his suit. That suit was expensive. It had been tailored at Cook and Timney’s of Craxton at a cost of almost a thousand pounds. He had only bought it a month before and had been most impressed by the exquisite craftsmanship put into it by Mr Timney. It had fitted perfectly and was the most comfortable suit he had ever had. Now it was wrecked, fit only for the dustbin.

Uninvited came the recollection of why it was in a mess. Stoate remembered measuring his length on a large puddle of oil. He remembered somebody commenting that the engine of the old Transit had put a leg out of bed, which explained the unwelcome presence of the oil. Now he remembered somebody pointing at him and saying

distinctly, “Where there’s brass, there’s muck.” If ever there was muck, it was the *nouveaux riches* of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. There was only one thing worse in Stoate’s opinion than the vulgar rich, and that was the vulgar poor. It was the unfortunate fact that it was the vulgar parvenus of Mid-Yorkshire and the County of Sowerland that paid most of the substantial fee income of Tanswold School.

The word “muck” stung Stoate’s memory into a rerun of what had come to be known as the Pet Food Scandal. Stoate felt quite ill as he remembered his long tryst with Detective Commander Smithells and Detective Inspector Mallinson. The latter, a catty creature, had certainly got her claws into him while the school was being investigated after the serious outbreak of food poisoning that had been the second dominant event in May...

But not as dominating as the scandal that had tipped his life’s work into what seemed a terminal spin: that damned man Smith with his fingers in the till. Five million reduced to one hundred thousand and most of that now gone in costs and fines...

It was late afternoon when Stoate felt steady enough to get up. With a maelstrom of negativity raging through his mind, he was uncharacteristically non-deferent to the Chairman of Governors when the latter rang him up to give him a piece of his mind about the events of Speech Day. Two things had irked Donald Blance. The first was the sight of the drunken Headmaster charging out of The Hermitage like the alpha male baboon chasing off a rival but skidding on a patch of oil. The second was that his brand-new Lexus had been substantially restyled and the repairs would cost the best part of five thousand pounds.

“Never explain, never apologise!” was Stoate’s considered reply to his aggrieved boss. Stoate was still smarting about the emergency Governors’ meeting in which the bursar had been co-opted, and that his title was now DOLT.

An explanation or apology was the last thing on Dunstan Stoate’s mind as he went down to The Hermitage on the Monday after Speech Day. He was going to have a detailed post-mortem on the shambles that had occurred at the weekend. He was going to give Mr Hardcastle a hard

time over the military disaster that had been the CCF's parade. When he arrived at his office, Mr Hardcastle was not waiting for him. This annoyed Stoate, who liked those he was going to discipline to sweat a bit. Stoate rang the Hardcastle number. A sleepy voice said, "I'll just go and get Dad."

"Hardcastle," snapped Stoate when Mr Hardcastle picked up the telephone, "I told you I wanted you in my office at nine this morning. Why are you not here?"

"Stoate, I told you I was resigning. Do you want me to spell it out for you in words that even you will understand?"

"I cannot let this pass after the performance on Saturday."

"That's just tough. It's typical of your mentality that somebody has got to pay for it. Why the hell don't you grow up and learn to carry the can yourself? Goodbye!"

The phone went dead with Stoate spluttering in fury. Instead, he looked through his correspondence, not being amused by one letter that had thanked him for the best pantomime that the correspondent had seen in years. If he thought that looking at the papers would improve his mood, he would be disappointed. Several of them carried the headline *Blunderhouse Hall's Comedy of Errors*. By the time he had finished reading the articles, he was livid.

The staff mood was not much better. They had been called in for this emergency staff meeting during their holiday, and if the old fool were going to give them a dressing down, he had better watch out. Fifty pairs of eyes glared at him as he came in. Stoate started, "Good morning, colleagues. I am sure that you will understand why we are here. If you look out of the window, you will see the remains of the mockeries that were our Speech Day on Saturday. I can only say that the school has been thoroughly humiliated as a result of this fiasco, which is, I am bound to say, going to make our jobs a lot more difficult. It may even put our jobs on the line. Although the author of much of our misfortune, Robert Hardcastle, is not here, I have to tell you that he bears much of the blame for the atrocious performance of the CCF, an embarrassment before a prominent army officer. I have dismissed him from the service of the Tanswold School Trust. The timetable in the Geography

Department will have to be reorganised to cover his teaching commitments.

“I would normally thank the Speech Day working party, but not on this occasion. I will be having a meeting with them afterwards in my office, as I am determined to get down to the bottom of this miserable affair. If any individual is found to be at fault, I shall be instituting disciplinary proceedings. The burden of proof will be on them to show that they have not been negligent in any way.

“I was shocked at the quality of the display material that was put up in classrooms. It has become obvious that the same material is stored in drawers and is dusted off for each Speech Day. It shows to me, and no doubt the parents, that there is a lack of commitment from the staff. You know what I expect, and that is one hundred and twenty percent from all of you.”

“Excuse me, Headmaster,” interrupted Mr Brett. “Our budgets have been cut back so far that we have little spare for our teaching commitment, let alone to produce more display material from scratch. Besides there is a lot to be getting on with as well, preparing for the inspection and so on.”

“As far as budgets are concerned, Mr Brett,” replied Stoate icily, “if your management is that poor, you should be considering whether you should continue as head of department. If your budget doesn’t extend that far, you and your staff should be paying for it out of your own pockets. As for time, you will have to do more. You have the evenings and weekends, don’t you? I wonder if it’s about time we appraised you?”

A gasp rose from the staff. Stoate repeated, “It applies to you all. You have the evenings and weekends to do your work as well as school time. You are simply going to have to work harder. If you have to spend your own money in the presentation of the school, it’s what I expect committed staff to do.”

“Headmaster, that is rich coming from you,” said Mr Wilks, Head of Languages. “We have had to endure two months without pay and now a cut in salary. I know how filthy rich you are, and you haven’t taken a cut in salary yourself. And what about our very part time bursar who gets paid more than three of us put together?”

“What I get paid is none of your business, Mr Wilks. Perhaps we should start appraising you as well as Mr Brett. If you live beyond your means, that’s your problem.”

“We have mortgages to pay and families to look after! It is expensive around here!”

“I have said it before. If you choose to live beyond your means, that is your problem. As for families, my position is quite clear on this. This school comes first. If you have a conflict, you had better review your position here, and don’t expect me to give you a reference.”

The meeting grew more heated and unconstructive. In the end Stoate ordered that his staff should attend meetings every week during the summer to prepare their schemes of work for the inspection. As always, the gutless Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax, stalwart of the Church Irrelevant, listened out to the muttering of his colleagues, ready to curry more favour with the Headmaster by reporting who was saying what.

The meeting of the Speech Day working party with the Headmaster was equally as unconstructive. Stoate was determined to find ways in which the staff on the committee had been at fault. It was totally unfair, of course, but fairness was never one of Stoate’s priorities. The staff had moved mountains to ensure that there was a Speech Day at all, let alone one that had all the features that people had come to expect from Tanswold School. By contrast, Stoate had done nothing whatever, as usual; he would merely bask in all the compliments that would be paid. Stoate was not interested in protests that individuals had paid deposits out of their own pockets. “I would expect that of all my staff as a matter of course,” he replied arrogantly.

“Do you think we organised the shenanigans with Frankland’s vehicle?”

“I am not talking about that. I shall be investigating whether Frankland was being adequately supervised in its construction. What happened should never have happened. Frankland himself should be held to blame as well. If I had my way, he would be out of this school. I shall see to it that his parents are billed for some of the damage.”

“Frankland had nothing to do with that clown from the film company who commandeered the thing in the first place. He told the man that it should not be used at all and that it was not safe. He tried to

stop the vehicle. It wasn't his fault that he was on the lavatory at the time."

"If any person is not at his post, he is being negligent. I now want to know who it was who ordered the company, if that is what it can be called, which set up the public address system. It was an absolute disgrace. I won't discuss Hardcastle's incompetence with the CCF, but I have never felt so humiliated in front of important people."

"If you really want to know, it was Antony Scott, the Bursar's Assistant."

Stoate harangued the committee before ordering them out of his office. He could hear their comments as they left. "This is outrageous!"

"How dare he treat us like naughty third years?"

"He's going off his rocker!"

The internal phone rang. It was Lartington, "May we have a meeting now in my office, Headmaster?"

"What about?"

"The Speech Day on Saturday. It was certainly not very edifying, was it?"

Sir Kenneth Rounce would have agreed. He had not attended the Speech Day since he was coming to terms with being one of the *nouveaux pauvres* and mixing with the *nouveaux riches* did not appeal to him one little bit. Partly this was because of his loss of status, but more that he could not bear to drive up to The Hermitage in his ancient and dilapidated *Montego*, even if it managed to complete the twenty-minute journey between Gilham Park and Tanswold St Mary. He had been shocked to hear of the farce that had occurred, and he would have supported Stoate in investigating who was responsible. Indeed, he would have horse-whipped them if he could. Sir Kenneth did not like the way his status had been undermined, especially as Gilham Park was now open to the general public. He and Lady Monica now had a flat up in what were the servants' quarters. For them it was hardly big enough to swing a cat, although for most other people it would have provided comfortable and commodious accommodation.

Neither Sir Kenneth nor Lady Monica particularly liked having to cut their cloth according to their means. No longer could they afford lavishly to entertain as they had, nor could Lady Monica buy expensive items on her shopping trips to Harrogate or York. They certainly could no longer afford to fly down to London and stay at Sir Kenneth's club. In fact, they could no longer afford the subscription. The county set no longer had a use for the Rounces; they were sidelined. On the other hand, Severs Clarke, the accountants employed by the Inland Revenue to maximise a return on the Gilham Estate, certainly did. Sir Kenneth was going to have to sing for his supper, and this took the form of being a general dogsbody around the house. Sometimes he would be in the car park or taking the entrance fee. Other times he was the caretaker, finding himself having to unblock washbasins or mop up after a child had been sick on too much ice cream.

Sir Kenneth used to like to be centre of attention, but now if he were centre of attention, it was because somebody did not like the way he had gone about this or that menial task. In the old days, he had servants to do that for him. Now he had to do everything himself. What was worst of all was that his estate manager, to whom he used to give a hard time, was now in charge. Now the boot was on the other foot and his manager was repaying the debt of ingratitude that no amount of suffering on Rounce's behalf would ever satisfy. Things came to a head one afternoon when Sir Kenneth saw a group of children of primary school age peeing into the Princess Charlotte fountain. He went up to remonstrate only to be told to "bog off, you old codger". This inflamed Sir Kenneth so much that he gave the adults in charge a piece of his mind, which involved pitching one of them into the water. This was objected to by the party concerned who went straight away to the manager. Within fifteen minutes, Sir Kenneth was waiting outside his erstwhile servant's office waiting to get another dressing down.

"Come in please, Sir Kenneth," ordered the manager. His approach was always formal, but still he was able to show his contempt for his erstwhile boss through his civility. He did not even invite him to sit down. "I want to know from you now what this incident is all about."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

Not impressed by his former boss's attempt to stall, the manager snapped, "The lot, Sir Kenneth, the lot. You leave out one jot and you are out on your ear!"

"These kids were having a, er, well it's disgusting!"

"A pee?"

"Yes, into the Princess Charlotte fountain. I am not having this on my property. I didn't want the great unwashed in here in the first place."

"Sir Kenneth, you forget that it is no longer your property. You are now an employee of the Gilham Park Estate Limited, and one that is employed on sufferance. The second thing you forget is that the 'great unwashed' as you call them, what I prefer to call 'the general public', are paying a considerable amount for the upkeep of the house and the estate, as well as paying off the taxman. They are providing funds to invest, enabling us to put money back into the estate. You used all the income from the estate to maintain your lavish lifestyle. Now you have had to cut back. You have something of a chip on your shoulder about it? Well, I'm not going to go into that. What I am going to go into is yet another explanation of your role here at Gilham Park. You are a junior employee of the estate, and you will follow instructions that I give you to the letter. I am now instructing you not to approach members of the paying public however offensive you deem their behaviour to be. If you see such, you are to radio the manager on duty. It will be up to them, not you, to decide whether the people should be asked to leave. Do I make myself quite clear?"

"Your record, Sir Kenneth, is not good to date. Unlike you when you were in charge, I follow the employment rules. Therefore, I am giving you now an oral warning. This will go on your record for a year. If there is a second misdemeanour, you will receive a written warning. If there is no improvement, you render yourself liable to dismissal. As your flat is tied to the job, you would obviously be required to leave. I will leave it to you to consider the consequences. That will be all."

Sir Kenneth spluttered, "What? I am..."

"Thank you, Sir Kenneth, that will be all," replied the manager dismissively. "Close the door when you go out."

Sir Kenneth closed the door with a slam as he left. Humiliated, he walked down from the manager's office in the stable block. He looked longingly to where his horses once were kept. They had now been auctioned off and to his relief had good homes. They were converting the stables into twee high-tech offices, and a gift shop. The kennels were silent; the hounds had been put down, as they would not have made good house pets. The motor house had cars in, not his, but ones loaned from a motor museum, the sort that Severs Clarke and Co thought would be fitting to such a fine country home. His own car was parked round the back. He had bought it from the local garage at a basement price, which was all he could afford. The ancient *Montego* was of extremely dubious reliability, and offered few advantages over the alternative, Shank's Pony. There was a bus into Alverstun that ran on a Wednesday and Saturday, but it was a long walk into the village. Also, it was still beneath him and Lady Monica to use public transport.

Sir Kenneth felt increasingly resentful. He had lived by the Byland Foresters' motto of "*To him that hath much, more shall be given. To him that hath little, even that little shall be taken away*". Why should he have to give what was by right his to provide hospitals for the feckless poor? Why did he have to pay more to the council than a man who lived in a two-up two-down? His property had been his by right to do what the hell he liked with. He missed the hunt ball, and all the other social occasions. Now here were the general public trampling all over his lawns and he could do nothing about it. Where were his friends? They were there when he had money. Now they were nowhere to be seen. The Conservative Association, for which he had been so active, were none too active to save him from Galliford's prying eyes. Several years ago, he would have had a quiet word with Frank Hasland, the Chief Constable, and Smithells would never have bothered him again.

Wearily he went into the house. A coach load of American pensioners were cooing at the cute nature of the house. All could trace their ancestry back to English aristocracy. Last year, as they drove round the Ring of Kerry in their air-conditioned tour bus, they were all descended from Irish emigrants. Next year, when they did Edinburgh and the Highlands, they would all be descended from the Highland clans. In reality they were descended from a hotchpotch of Cockneys, Geordies and middle Europeans who had emigrated to the USA in the middle of

the nineteenth century. One obese old woman waddled up to Sir Kenneth and said, “You must know my cousin; he’s descended from your family.”

“Who is your cousin?” asked Sir Kenneth icily.

“Elmer T Lammheimer III. He has his roots in English arist...”
The word was too much for her and she ground to a halt.

“Which side of my family?”

“Well, there was Hamish McLammheimer from Inverness. I think he was related to you.”

“Do you know what my family name is?”

“No, go on honey.”

“It’s Rounce. Besides Scotland is not England. Don’t let them hear you say that. I have no Scottish ancestry, let alone one with the ridiculous name you have just said. I don’t have any children, nor do I have any close relatives. If you would excuse me.”

“Hey, buddy that hurt!” An equally obese old man who was clearly the woman’s husband was waddling his way through the crowd, pushing people out of his way. “I shall be consulting my lawyer when I get home and I shall be suing you for every dime you’ve got for saying my name is ridiculous!”

Sir Kenneth suppressed a desire to plant one on the American. He did not want his written warning from the manager. Instead, he turned heel to see a child carving its name into a Sheraton bookcase, and heard the woman say, “Oh don’t bother, Wilbur. He’s probably just the porter.”

In a state bordering on lunacy Rounce lunged up the front stairs, which were for the paying public only, through the link corridor to the back stairs, finally up to the flat, where he sank in a heap on the settee and poured a large whiskey. The radio cackled in the deadpan voice of Tracey in the office, “Control to Kenneth. There’s a blockage in the Gents in the Stable block. Could you go down and sort it out?”

Sir Kenneth wanted to ring the vet to come and put him out of his misery.

Like Sir Kenneth, Dunstan Stoate was no longer master of all that he surveyed. His role was no longer Headmaster; it was now the Director of Learning and Teaching. With his own eyes he had seen it shortened to DOLT. His authority had been all but emasculated by his Financial Director, and he now was little more than a figurehead. Now Lartington had expressed his concern about the wastage of teaching staff. It had occurred even to the money conscious Lartington that this could jeopardise the core activity of the business, that of teaching pupils to get high grades in their examinations. The financial implications of the material damage done during Speech Day were more pressing. Lartington was musing about this when the Headmaster came into his office.

“Come in, Headmaster,” said Lartington without looking up from his computer monitor, “Do sit down. We’ve discussed the farce we saw on Saturday.”

Stoate was relieved that Lartington had still referred to him as Headmaster. Director of Learning and Teaching was more of a mouthful.

“It certainly has not done our reputation any good at all” Stoate answered. “I am going to get down to the bottom of things and if any member of my staff is at fault, he will pay for it with his job.”

“There are more immediate things pressing that concern me,” Lartington replied. “The army is not very pleased about the fiasco with the pontoon bridge. They want the sunken pontoon fished out of the river, and that’s going to cost us a fortune. We are going to have to pay for divers and a crane.”

“And there is the marquee I suppose. I want you to bill Mr and Mrs Frankland for that, as well as all the damaged tables and broken crockery.”

“No, Headmaster, that is not possible. Young Frankland told the idiot from the film company not to use the vehicle. In effect it was stolen while he was in the lavatory.”

“We can threaten legal action to recover the money.”

“No, Headmaster, that is not a course of action open to us. I am sure I don’t need to spell it out to you that if it ever got that far, it would be thrown out of court in five minutes. The court will agree with the

Franklands that Thomas did everything reasonable to prevent the vehicle's theft. He did not anticipate that a responsible adult would use the machine without his authority."

"Well, he should have. When I was in the RAF, non-anticipation was no excuse. If you were caught out by the unexpected, you were still liable for negligence. He needs to be taught that very firmly."

"You can talk to him, of course, Headmaster, but there is little else you can do. Oversight there may have been, but hardly of a reckless nature. It won't stand up in court, I can tell you that. Believe me; if I thought we had any chance of success, I would be saying that we should go for it."

"Well, I'll get rid of him."

"Certainly not. We need his fee income. You know as well as I do that we need every penny we can get. Again, if his parents go to court, we will find ourselves a laughingstock."

"We can argue that they have not followed the appeals procedure."

"Legally, Headmaster, we are on very thin ice. Firstly, the appeals procedure has not been tested in court, but I don't think it would stand up. It is not exactly fair. I am not objecting on moral grounds, of course, but I am being realistic. Secondly, they could argue that the school is in *loco parentis* and that it has failed in its duty as such."

"How?"

"Frankland was not adequately supervised in the construction of the vehicle. The reason behind the miserable episode was that the clutch had been connected to the clutch pedal inadequately, and the connection failed. You need to speak to the Technology Department about that."

"I will, and I will dismiss his technology master for incompetence and failure in his duty."

"Headmaster, I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not? Any negligence has to be dealt with severely and must be seen to be dealt with severely," Stoate snapped. "This has cost the school dearly financially and has made monkeys out of us. Somebody has got to pay for this."

“We have lost too many staff. The McEwan case got a very high profile in the media, and we looked like monkeys after that case. I know we don’t recognise the teaching unions, but they still will take up their members’ cases, and could take us to the cleaners again. One might be unfortunate, two is careless, but five or six, we will be getting a reputation. I haven’t been in the education line that long, but I do know that at this stage we will get very few decent applicants for the jobs that are vacant.”

“What is the damage?”

Lartington got out a piece of paper, and read out, “Twelve thousand for the marquee, which is a write-off, three thousand for tables and chairs, and one thousand five hundred for broken crockery: sixteen thousand, five hundred pounds in all.”

“Take it out of his salary.”

“No Headmaster, the unions will be in. It will get to court, and we will be a laughingstock. We have to work within the legislation, you know. We could, though, terminate his contract at the end of next year.”

The meeting dragged on and Stoate felt even more depressed. He had been used to having his own way and very seldom had had to worry about the legal implications of his actions. His influence through the Byland Foresters had ensured that. Now there was a damned socialist government in power, and there would be lots of bleating about workers’ rights and bully bosses. He had worked hard to get to where he was, and he expected total obedience from all his subordinates. If somebody’s face did not fit, that somebody had to go. Now he could not even do that without fear from further bad publicity from the courts.

Tanswold School was never far from the courts that summer. The trial of Graham Smith, the ex-Bursar, took place in late August. He pleaded guilty to five counts of theft and false accounting amounting to five million pounds as a result of his handling of the Draycott Foundation. He pleaded not guilty to the theft of pension contributions belonging to twenty junior members of staff at Tanswold School. The case dragged on for three weeks, and Detective Commander Richard Smithells was the key witness. Appropriate to a policeman of his rank, his evidence was flawless, and attempts by the defence to pick holes in it

were lame to say the least. It certainly convinced the jury, who took less than an hour to convict Smith unanimously. Smith's co-defendant, Mr Hackett, who was finishing a stretch for inability to distinguish clients' money from his own, was also convicted. Smith got five years for the theft from the Draycott Foundation and three years to run concurrently for the theft of the pensions. Hackett got three years. In sentencing, the judge made clear his astonishment at the slack supervision that there had been in the running of the Tanswold School Trust, which in his opinion bordered on the negligent.

Not long after, Graham Smith found himself in court again, this time charged jointly and severally with five others, including the caterer, Cyril Jukes, with conspiracy to supply meat unfit for human consumption, and the fraudulent supply of the same. He was also charged with receiving proceeds from the scam. Over several days, the court listened to the stomach-turning details as to what had been found. It also heard of the resulting outbreaks of illness, including the major outbreak of food poisoning at Tanswold School, in which Gemma Proudlock had died. Many hundreds of people elsewhere had become seriously ill, and for some, recovery had been a slow and painful business. There had been several other fatalities after people had consumed the stuff in Carlsborough General Hospital. The defendants had pleaded not guilty, but the weight of evidence was overwhelming. The originator of the scam was sent down for ten years, with the prospect of another trial for importation of illegal drugs. Smith was given an additional five years for processing money to support the failure of the Draycott Foundation. Cyril Jukes was remanded in custody to face sentence at the conclusion of his forthcoming trial for the manslaughter of Gemma Ruth Chamberlain Proudlock.

The only bright spot amongst these legal hurricanes for Dunstan Stoate and the Tanswold School Trust was that the new dining room was proceeding apace and would be ready for the start of the Autumn Term at the beginning of September. The Governors agreed that there should be a formal opening ceremony towards the end of September, and that it should be called *Stoate Hall*. There would be an open day for the parents with luncheon and tea on the lawns at The Hermitage. As with Speech Day, there would be demonstration sports events, with the showpiece being a major rugby match between the Tanswold School First Fifteen

and King's School, Oldhampton. No expense would be spared to ensure that this would be a society event, a day to remember for the county set of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire.

Chapter 2

The new term started in early September, a week or so after the local schools had resumed. Tanswold School had somehow survived, more due to good luck than good judgment, the storms that had beset it after the scandals of the previous term, the farce that had been Speech Day, and the bad publicity in the courts.

The first staff meeting of the new academic year seemed to set the tone for the year that was to come. The A-level results and the GCSE results had come on two consecutive Thursdays in August. Neither was in the least bit satisfactory, being considerably down on the previous year. Indeed, Goyder's School up the road scored a higher headline pass rate than Tanswold, something that Mr Langstaff, the Headmaster there, was at pains to trumpet in the press and on the radio. At Rockwood School, the Headmistress, Mrs Dalton, was also delighted that her headline rate was better than that of Tanswold School. Alverston Grammar School's headline pass rate was always higher than any of them.

Stoate was livid at this and berated the staff during the first staff meeting, "This kind of performance is simply not adequate. It matters little to me that you claim that you don't have the resources to work effectively. You are meant to be professionals and it is up to you to be inspirational teachers. A 45 percent pass rate is not what parents are paying for when they send their sons here. They expect better, and I am bound to say, many would be forgiven for thinking that they would get better if they sent their children to either of the local comprehensives or Alverston Grammar. I don't believe that, nor should you.

"I am expecting a much-improved performance this year. I shall be talking to departments and individual staff whose pass rates appear to be below standard and I will be instituting regular appraisals to ensure that members of staff are performing effectively. Some of you may say that pupils are limited in what they can achieve. I will not accept that as an excuse. It is up to you to make them jolly well pass at grades considerably above what has been the case this year. Parents are not going to be satisfied with their children coming out from our expensive school with Grades D and E. They could have got those in Carlsborough.

I am appalled to hear that some departments have entered pupils at Foundation Level. That will cease forthwith. All pupils will enter at Higher Level, and you will ensure that they can work to that standard. If you can't, you have no place in this school."

The mood of the meeting was sullen. The staff had not had a decent holiday, having had compulsory weekly meetings to prepare for inspection. They longed for Biggles to retire, or, better still, to drop dead. Unfortunately, Stoate's retirement was all the more distant in prospect, and he showed no signs of doing the latter. The meeting in the stuffy little room that was the staff room seemed to be interminable with Stoate droning on about the forthcoming inspection. They were not pleased when he announced that there would be a special day to open the new dining room formally, and it would be all day on the last Saturday in September. Stoate concluded, "I expect all staff to give one hundred and twenty percent to ensure that the school comes out in the best light. It will be a society event, and there will be no repeat of what happened at the end of last term. Be warned."

There were so many new pupils that a whole day was given over to their induction. From the beginning, it was clear that many of the boys from Great Daxford School were not pleased to be at Tanswold School at all. Partly this was due to the great sense of loyalty that had been instilled into them at Great Daxford, and Tanswold was its rival. Partly it was because there were rumours that the Headmaster at Tanswold had precipitated the demise of their school by spreading malicious gossip about it.

The boys expressed their resentment initially in a very silent but powerfully eloquent way. They wore the Great Daxford uniform. This did not please Dunstan Stoate who caused further resentment by announcing that any boy found wearing Great Daxford uniform in the future would be suspended until he wore the correct outfit.

Other boys were new to the school despite the fact they had failed the entrance examination in the previous years. Many of these had been quite happy at their local schools but had not convinced their well-to-do parents that being in the middle set would prepare them adequately for a career in medicine or the law. Sullenly these sat in their "black 'n tan"

uniforms as Mr Stanton, the Deputy Headmaster, droned on through the new routines that they were expected to follow.

The only person who seemed to be happy to be there was Robert Cooke. He had been looking forward to working in an independent grammar school, where the pupils would at least follow his reasonable instructions without argument. They would do the work he set and do it to a high standard. He looked forward to thriving as a teacher, wondering where this wonderful school in its beautiful setting would take him. It could not have been worse than Druker Grove, where the Headmistress, Ms Heathcote, was always preaching understanding towards pupils when they breached discipline. Such breaches were entirely due to bad teaching, a thesis trotted out when a member of staff had his car set on fire by disaffected pupils. On that occasion, she gave the member of staff a hard time because he had involved the police and that would have given the school a bad reputation, which simply would not do.

Ms Heathcote had not been pleased when Cooke had told her of his successful interview at Tanswold. She was pleased to be getting rid of Cooke, certainly; his face did not fit her ideal at all. She could not abide the independent system; it was elitist and that was for her an anathema. She had let the pupils know that Cooke was leaving, and none too subtly suggested that it was a good thing. Therefore, the summer term had been purgatory. Cooke's classes had been more resentful than before, and Ms Heathcote delighted in cutting out articles concerning the beleaguered Tanswold School and leaving them in Cooke's pigeonhole.

Although nobody else would have agreed with him, Cooke found that first day rather pleasant. He had just a few pupils in his form that day. They seemed quiet and reserved. Cooke was too pleased to be where he was to notice that their reserve was entirely due to their sullen resentment.

That evening there was a buffet supper with wine in the new dining room for parents and staff. Cooke did not notice how few of his colleagues were there. Instead, he and his wife chatted easily with parents and introduced themselves to the governors. Cooke found Donald Blance a gentleman, Lionel Hyland a bit of an old crackpot, and did not know what to make of Sir Ronald Wiseman. Blance thought he had come across Cooke's father in his business dealings. Next, Cooke

met the Chaplain, Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax, who invited him to approach him at any time if he needed help. That seemed very kind and generous. Cooke thanked the Chaplain before the latter minced across the room to regale some parents with some little theological anecdote. Everyone agreed how splendid the new dining room looked, a facility that the school would be proud of for many years. Cooke was served a liberal amount of wine and it went to his head a little. As his wife guided him home, he was singing,

“Donald knew my father,

Father knew Donald.”

The next day saw the start of the Autumn Term for everybody. In most schools the start of the new academic year would have a sense of purpose to it. The staff would be refreshed after their long summer break, and there would be a general eager anticipation of what the new academic year would bring. Pupils would be issued with new exercise books and would start them off neatly. Most pupils had good intent and would sign up to all sorts of different activities that would be laid on. In short, the many minds that made up most schools had one heart. Of course, these good resolutions would be put aside after the first couple of weeks or so; the phony war would end, and battle would commence in earnest. Generally, everyone would enjoy that easy honeymoon period at the start of the Autumn Term, especially as the weather in the late summer was usually good.

And that was the norm for Tanswold School, but not this year. The staff were not refreshed; the Headmaster’s management seemed to be even more erratic and unfocused. There seemed to be little sense of teamwork. Every member of staff was looking over his or her shoulder all the time, covering his back in case of trouble from the Head of Department or Stoate himself. Because of late resignations, several departments had to cover for vacant spaces in the timetable, all of which added extra pressure. In addition to the pressure from above, there was increasing pressure from below. The current Fourth Form had a number of pupils who had had a certain amount of trouble conforming to the school rules, or indeed any norms of reasonable and civilised behaviour. The problem had been festering for some time but had come to a head during the riot in church just before half-term in May. After that there had been the brawl during the rugby match on Speech Day. Stoate had

spoken to the school quite severely about it during the first school assembly. They had seemed chastened, but not for long.

The main problem was now the greatly expanded pupil body. In many classrooms, the extra bottoms on seats led to large group sizes, every bit as large as a large group in a comprehensive school. In several rooms there were simply not enough chairs to seat everyone, and a common sight was that of pupils wandering the corridors looking for something they could park their bum on. Lartington did not take this seriously at first. It was only when one member of the History Department threatened to bring his class and teach them in Lartington's office that the Financial Director agreed to do something about it. The search for seating was a golden opportunity for some of the less conscientious boys to wander from classroom to classroom to talk to their mates, and on one occasion for a boy to repay a debt of ingratitude by planting one on another boy's hooter.

The Great Daxford boys were soon initiated into the ways of things by various nefarious elements that played on the sense of tribalism that ran very strongly with that group. The effect was that there soon broke out an undeclared war of attrition between the pupils from Great Daxford and those who had been at Tanswold all along. Nevertheless, there were two common enemies, firstly the teaching staff, and secondly those boys who had come into the school despite having failed previous entrance examinations. This latter group was, in reality, of very low ability, as the entrance examination was very easy. Despite all of its trumpeting of high academic standards, the pupil body at Tanswold, with only a few exceptions, were very ordinary boys, who were poorly motivated and of limited academic ability. The school was not serving its most able pupils well, academically, socially, or in sports. Several had left as a result of the unfortunate occurrences of the Summer Term. Among these was Samuel Proudlock, who was now thriving academically back at his old school at Alverston Grammar, and socially with his teenage romance with Jessica McEwan, and on the badminton court. The most able pupils left were feeling more isolated, as they were finding little of academic challenge in their lessons and were ostracised by the others.

On the other hand, the level of lessons was way beyond the group of boys who had previously failed to get in, some of whom were on the border of having some kind of special educational need. The existence of

the Education Act 1981 in which there had to be statutory provision to help children with such needs was totally ignored by Storate. Any suggestion that such help should be provided was flatly turned down on the grounds that it would do the academic reputation of the school no good at all.

In short, academic standards were declining with the morale of the staff. Standards of behaviour, which for some time had been poor, were now giving cause for serious concern throughout the staff room. Robert Cooke was feeling disappointed. In his innocence, he had supposed that he would be turning his back on that kind of thing when he left the bedlam that was Druker Grove School. Ms Heathcote had succeeded in turning Druker Grove School around from a popular oversubscribed school into one that now had a dreadful reputation. She had achieved that single-handedly by a combination of liberal educational theory and a bullying approach to her staff. Now Cooke found himself working for a Headmaster with a bullying management style, underpinned by no educational philosophy at all.

After one particularly unpleasant lesson with the Fourth Form, Cooke went to see Peter Brett, his Head of Department. He started, "How do people think I'm getting on?"

"So-so, it's early days yet. The sixth form think that you are a bit starchy."

"What do they mean by that?"

"You are rather formal, and dry with them."

"The topic I am teaching is dry. There is a lot of fairly heavy theory in it. Have you any suggestions as to what I can do to lighten it up?"

Brett sat back in his swivel chair. He looked up at the ceiling before replying, "Robert, it's up to you to make sure that it is lively. You have the experience to decide what activities you are going to do. My job is to ensure that there is effective teaching and learning going on in all lessons. Remember that parents are paying six and a half thousand pounds a year to send their kids here. They will expect more than what they will get at the comprehensive. You probably don't know it yet, but we have two very good comprehensives in the area, Goyder's just down the road, and Rockwood up the hill on the other side of the river. Ten

minutes' drive away is Alverston Grammar, a school with an exceptional reputation. We have lost one or two of our best kids there. So, you will understand that we are up against it."

Cooke decided not to mention the lesson involving the Fourth Form and was just about to get up when Brett said, "There's just one other thing, Robert. It has been noticed that you are having one or two things going on with your Fourth Form groups. They don't seem to be that attentive, do they?"

"No. They can be hard work."

"You have certainly got some characters in there. You have got to get their respect and you will be in with a chance."

"What's the best way?"

"That again is entirely up to you. You have to fight your own battles here. What you have got to do is to gain their respect by effective teaching. They will return that by effective learning."

"A lot of what we are doing is not appropriate."

"It is for this school. It's your teaching that is not appropriate. You are too confrontational, for a start. You are too formal. You are the one that needs to change, Robert. You will need to do that fairly quickly and show that you are fully effective."

Cooke left Brett's office feeling rather depressed. He had heard that claptrap before and was about to uproot his family in order that he could escape. Now here it was again, albeit in more salubrious surroundings, but it was the same. He now had a lesson with the third year and went back to his room.

In that particular group was Christopher Dickens, son of Paul Dickens, Senior Partner of Dickens Bradshaw (Accountants) and prospective Chairman of Governors. Dickens was a spoilt boy, who loved to be at the centre of attention. In the eyes of his parents, he could do no wrong, and all problems that involved their son stemmed from mismanagement of his creative forces. Dickens' creative forces that lesson led to a flame shooting out of a gas-tap, another pupil's shirt splattered in ink, and an electrical component going up in smoke. When Cooke remonstrated with Dickens, the latter started off with a bellow of offended innocence, "I didn't do owt!"

“I have seen you! I already have seen you playing with the gas tap, and you flicked the ink at Gardner. Now you have burned out that resistor. I want you here at lunchtime.”

“I’m not coming.”

“You are, else you will be explaining it to your housemaster.”

“I am not. I’ll get my mum to write to the Headmaster. She has influence you know.”

“I don’t care who she is. Just because your dad is a governor, that doesn’t entitle you to disrupt my lesson and the learning of others.”

“It wasn’t me, anyway. It was Greg, sir.”

“I saw you do it!”

“It’s not fair! I am not coming, and I shall be getting my Dad in!”

Cooke was annoyed, but not surprised, at this infantile and unconstructive interaction. Needless to say, Master Dickens did not turn up to his lunchtime detention, and Cooke went to see Mr Patterson, Dickens’ housemaster.

Next morning, Cooke arrived to find Mrs Dickens waiting for him in the Science Department Staff Room. She was a large middle-aged woman who had run somewhat to fat. Cooke was not used to ample women meeting him at this time of the morning, but he could tell that Mrs Dickens was not very pleased.

“Can I help you?” Cooke started uneasily.

“Yes, you can. I am Margaret Dickens, Christopher’s mother, and I am not at all pleased at the way you have been dealing with him during your Physics lessons.”

“I am sorry, Mrs Dickens, but Christopher has been causing a few problems. Only yesterday did I have to tell him off for lighting a gas tap in my laboratory. After that he flicked ink at another boy. Finally, he burned out a resistor by applying too big a voltage across it.”

“No, Mr Cooke. Christopher does not do that kind of thing. He was all upset when he got home from school. He told me that you had blamed him for all three of those incidents which he said other pupils had done.”

“Did he say who?”

“No, he didn’t want to say in case he was thought of as a ‘grass’. It certainly was not him and I am very angry that he was picked on in front of the class.”

“Mrs Dickens, Christopher did all these things. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“And I am telling you, Mr Cooke, that Christopher does not do this kind of thing. He works very hard at school and is always at his books in the evenings. Besides, you should have ensured that the gas was turned off, and that the voltage was low enough not to burn out the resist- whatever-you-call-it.”

“I expect a responsible attitude from all my pupils. They have to take responsibility in all they do, including Christopher.”

“Christopher is responsible. That brings me onto another bone to pick. You have not yet marked his book. Why not? We keep a check on his work regularly.”

“He hasn’t handed any in yet,” replied Cooke, reaching for his mark book. “If homework is handed in late, it doesn’t get marked. That is school policy. He is already on academic detention for failure to do homework.”

“I will not allow that,” snapped Mrs Dickens. “Christopher always does his work, and it is very poor that you could not be bothered to mark it. You are the one with the problem, Mr Cooke. You are not treating Christopher in the way he likes to be treated, as a grown-up.”

“Mrs Dickens, when Christopher behaves like an adult, he will be treated like an adult. That is a promise.”

“You have got to earn Christopher’s respect, and I totally support him in that. At the moment, you are not. Christopher is not learning anything from you because you can’t control your classes. If you had even the smallest idea of what was going on in your classroom, you would know it was not Christopher, and you would be stopping the other pupils from disturbing him. I am not discussing the matter any further with you. I have told you what I expect to be done, and you will do it. I’ll see myself out.”

Cooke flopped back into the easy chair. He was beginning to feel that everything was about to go horribly pear-shaped. He now started to wish that the Boar, who had expended so much hot air in saying so little, had got the job. He wondered if he was still at that school with the lemon of a headmaster who was not interested in two thirds of his job. Cooke was feeling rather down. His house had been slow to sell, and his wife and young daughter were still up north. Although it was not geographically very far, Cooke was having to work away from home, leaving the house at six o'clock on a Monday morning to catch an early train, and not getting home until after seven on a Friday evening. The strain was starting to tell on him and his wife. The daughter, who was going through "the terrible twos", was awful at weekends. Cooke and his wife ended up bickering over lots of very silly things. He longed for his wife and daughter to be able to move down, so that they could resume normal family life.

Ian Denham, Head of Chemistry, came in and said breezily, "Good morning, Robert, was that the redoubtable Mrs Dickens I saw just now?"

"Yes, it was. The old bag was bending my ear," Cooke replied grumpily.

"I would watch what you say, Robert, if I were you. She's a very formidable lady is our Mrs Dickens. What was she bending your ear about anyway?"

"I had a run in with her precious little Christopher. He's been a pain in the arse all term. He's a spoiled and attention-seeking brat."

"You didn't tell her that did you?"

"No, but I did tell her that he was causing me problems, and not doing his homework," Cooke sighed.

"I know what Dickens is like. In his parent's eyes the sun shines from his arse. I am glad I don't have him anymore; he's getting worse. You have to be very careful with Margaret. She rules the roost in the Dickens household and her husband Paul is a governor. They reckon next year that he will be Chairman of Governors as soon as Donald Blance stands down. If you cross Margaret, she'll be bending Paul's ear about it, and he will soon be bending Stoate's ear. The problem with our

Biggles is that he doesn't like having his ear bent, and he will go and kick someone's backside."

"I thought he seemed quite supportive."

"What planet have you come from? Stoate supportive? Get away! The last thing that Stoate supports is his staff. Number one is J L Dunstan Stoate, number two is the reputation of the school, number three is his stomach, number four is his aeroplane, which is why he's called 'Biggles'. On his list of priorities, we come somewhere below the wheelie-bins. Stoate will listen to the parents sooner than us. He's got worse with us since Skinflint and Mingy came."

"Who are they?"

"Crispin Lartington and Antony Scott, the Financial Director and the Financial Manager. We still call them the Bursar and the Assistant Bursar. The previous Bursar had his fingers in the till and wiped out about five million pounds of the school's assets. Anyway, there was a great hoo-ha about it, not surprisingly, and an awful lot of backsides got kicked, including Dunstan Stoate's. The trouble with Dunstan is that the buck does not stop with him; it goes to the lowest possible level. He loves all the trappings of being Headmaster, but he cannot accept the responsibility when something goes wrong. He runs this place really as if he were Lord of the Manor, a kind of entertainment for him and his friends."

Cooke thought of Mrs Dickens in Stoate's office bending his ear and expected the summons to explain himself. By the end of the day it had not come, so perhaps it was all bluster.

The next day, Cooke was still feeling rather miserable so he thought he would take Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax up on his kind offer for a chat. The Chaplain seemed pleased that Cooke had come and invited him into his office. Cooke started, "Piers, I've been having a spot of bother with some of my classes. I am told that I don't have the respect of my classes. What do you think makes the boys here tick?"

"We all have problems with that at times. What sort of things have happened?"

“Well, I have had a bad run in with Christopher Dickens and his mother came in to see me yesterday. She was not very pleasant about it.”

“I can well imagine; you don’t want to cross her.”

“Everyone tells me that; I wish they had before I had met her.”

“What else?”

Cooke shared how difficult he was finding things, having to work away from home. He also recounted some appalling behaviour from the Fourth Form, and his discussion with Peter Brett. “I just don’t think that he understands,” Cooke continued. “He told me that I had to fight my own battles and that I had to earn the respect of the boys.”

“Well, that is the way we do it here. You will have to find your own way. If you can, it’s very rewarding. If you can’t, you aren’t here for long.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If you can’t pull your weight, Mr Stoate will get rid of you. He reviews all his new staff at the end of their first term. If they’re OK, he gives a second review at the end of the year, after which he will take you on permanently.”

“I thought that this was a Christian school. It all seems very ruthless.”

“Oh, it is very much a Christian school. We run it along the Anglican lines of tradition, discipline, responsibility and standing on your own two feet. You’re not one of these ‘happy clappy’ types, are you?”

“I go to a lively evangelical church at home. I was hoping you would pray with me.”

“No, we don’t want that kind of thing here” replied d’Arcy-Fairfax loftily. “Religion is very much a personal thing, and it is unseemly to make a big display of it in public. I have no truck with all this dancing in the aisles. We are strictly Authorised Version and Book of Common Prayer here, as you will have noticed in our Friday services. The role of religion is to get the boys to contemplate on their mortality before the Supreme Deity, and to come to an advanced understanding of profound theological mysteries. I care passionately about the beautiful poetry of the Authorised Version and Hymns Ancient and Modern. No, religion is

strictly for the elite. You can't possibly have socialists getting into heaven, can you?"

Cooke's mouth dropped open in horror at this travesty of what he understood the basics of the Christian Faith to be. He paused before he replied, "I am a Christian and I voted Labour at the last election. I am a socialist. What about Jesus?"

"I don't know how any socialist can claim to be a Christian. It is every true Christian's duty to vote Conservative and stem the evil tide of communism that is about to engulf our land from the East."

"I would hardly describe Tony Blair as a raving communist. What about the cultural pollution from the West?"

"The Americans are a profoundly religious race."

"So are the Russians, Poles, Czechs and so on. In Russia they have converted railway carriages into mobile churches which go to the isolated communities of the Trans Siberian Railway."

"I cannot do with these Jesus freaks."

"Jesus was a real person. Surely you know that? He means a lot to a lot of people."

"Ah, the poor simple-hearted who do not know the profound mysteries of the incarnation," said the Chaplain loftily before launching into a long discourse on academic theology. It contained lots of long words, many of which were unintelligible and ended with "-ition" and "-ation". His doctrine was that only the intellectual elite could possibly understand the mysteries of God. To get into Heaven required expertise in theology, which of course Piers d'Arcy Fairfax possessed, but very few others would, and rightly so. Cooke wanted to explode at this travesty of his faith, which had nurtured him through some pretty hard times. His mouth opened and shut but the only word that came out was an explosive "WHAT?"

"I must get on," said d'Arcy-Fairfax dismissively. "It has been most interesting talking to you. We must do this again sometime."

Cooke left the Chaplain's office feeling rather outraged. He had come to this school precisely because it was a Christian school, or so it said. Instead, the chaplain promoted a kind of Anglicanism that was irrelevant to the modern day. Under no circumstances did Cooke feel

that he could ever again approach d’Arcy-Fairfax for any spiritual guidance, an opinion he expressed to Andrew Morton in Biology.

“I wouldn’t express anything to Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax.”

“Why not? I told him that I am finding it hard having to work away from home all week. I have to catch the first train on a Monday, and I don’t get home to seven on a Friday.”

“You shouldn’t have told him that.”

“It was in confidence.”

“His view of confidence is to confidentially share it with the Headmaster. He is the Headmaster’s eyes and ears in the staff room. Lots of quiet conversations have got back to Biggles through him. Nobody trusts him, not even the boys. Several boys have gone to him to discuss teenage problems only to find themselves being bollocked by the Headmaster for precisely that. The Headmaster cannot stand boys who are gay. In the old days, he caned several lads who had shared things in confidence with the Chaplain. I know it’s not very professional, but we use the name the boys use, ‘d’Arsehole’. It sums him up very well.”

“I was looking for some Christian support. This is meant to be a Christian school, isn’t it?”

“In name only. If this is what Christianity was all about, I would have nothing to do with it, nor would you. That man, d’Arsehole, is no more Christian than my wife is a hat. That applies to Dunstan Stoate as well. It’s all for show and to be respectable. I hope you haven’t shared too much with d’Arsehole.”

Cooke sighed as he noticed the Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax mincing towards the front door of The Hermitage and wished that he had kept his big trap shut.

In a pub way up in the hills going west of Alverston, some big traps were being opened, and not just for the beer. Peter Bromley, whom Stoate had sacked in circumstances that were decidedly unfair, had a brother who knew a TV producer. The three of them were sitting in the bar, supping pints while Peter Bromley was outlining his sense of

grievance at the way he had been treated. As the producer plied Peter with more drink, Peter sang more like a canary, telling his audience volubly about the bullying management style of the Headmaster at Tanswold School. The producer was impressed. He was making a series, *Bully Busters* on the abuse of power in which victims of workplace bullying would be able to speak out against their bully bosses. The latter would find themselves confronted, hopefully to be shamed into changing their ways.

The set up at Tanswold School seemed ideal for a programme, or two, or three. Several ex-members of staff were suggested. The producer got out his mobile and rang Andrew McEwan who was only too willing to provide a large amount of background information. The producer was delighted to get a few more leads, which in turn proved most fruitful. Mr Simpson, whose daughter Lucy was so unceremoniously expelled after visiting her dying friend in hospital, was willing to go on air. The Reverend and Mrs Proudlock were also happy to make a contribution about the way their daughter died and the callous indifference of the Headmaster.

Much to his surprise, the producer was able to get ready permission to do some filming on the premises. This was entirely due to Lartington, who had assumed it was to do with the company producing the promotional video. It had not occurred to him that it would be for any other purpose. All those participating in the film would be required to keep their big traps shut in order to maximise the impact. So, when two film crews descended on Tanswold School in mid September, nobody gave it a thought.

One afternoon, both film crews were relaxing together and chatting about their assignments; the *Bully Busters* crew had been given a false brief to distract attention from the true purpose of their work. One of the cameramen said, "You lot should have been here in July. They had their Speech Day. It was a real posh do, all the top nobs from the area, all frightfully lah-di-dah. They had a PA system that picked up interference from the CCF radio, and they were using all sorts of funny call signs. The CCF was also doing a parade in front of one of the army top brass. They looked like the *Tellytubbies* doing a dance. The army bloke was furious. We've got a video. Do you want to see it?"

The *Bully Busters* film crew agreed, and had a good belly laugh, especially at the collapse of the pontoon bridge and the all-terrain vehicle running amok. The close up of the Chaplain mincing away with his teacup, his little finger in the air, seemed to catch the moment excellently. A copy was made on the spot. Initially the producer was cross that the crew had spent time off task, but when he saw the video obtained, he agreed that it had been time well spent. The film crew had caught several gems.

A secret microphone had been placed near Stoate's office window, and the crew filmed Stoate haranguing a member of staff through a long lens. They also posed as parents and secretly filmed an interview with Stoate, who was arrogantly ebullient about his school, boasting about how when he told his staff to jump, they jumped high. Scenes were also caught of the boys outside lessons, including an initiation that involved an unwilling small boy being tipped into a lavatory basin and the cistern being flushed. A chance encounter in Tanswold St Mary led to a number of boys being filmed smoking and two others filmed urinating under Tanswold Viaduct.

The real coup was for the producer to persuade a sixth former who was being bullied to film secretly an interview with the Chaplain and the consequences when the latter reported all of this to Stoate. As with all secret filming, the quality of the pictures was not good, and the soundtrack necessitated the addition of sub-titles, but it illustrated the problem only too eloquently. It was all rather underhand, but the object was to show the extent of suffering that bullies could bring to people who were simply doing their best. If the bullies were made to re-appraise their management style, as happened on some occasions when they genuinely did not realise how bad they were, the whole project was worth it.

Cooke had noticed the film crews around the school but paid little attention. He did not notice that they were paying attention to his fourth form lesson which degenerated to bedlam. He had attempted to do a practical exercise, but three boys had reduced it to a shambles by using physics trolleys as skateboards. Cooke stopped the practical, shouting at the group, "I cannot trust you to do a practical properly. I am banning you from practical work until further notice."

“We won’t do so well if you do that,” replied Anderson.

“Precisely. It is up to you to behave yourselves so that I will be able to trust you to do the practical work properly.”

“I’ll sue you,” said Anderson.

Cooke could no longer bear this arrogance and sent a boy to fetch Mr Brett, the departmental head. It had been his experience that children whose arrogance or insolence was that intolerable would be dealt with severely and might even think twice about a repeat performance. At the end of the lesson, Brett asked Cooke into his office, and said, “I really wouldn’t have done that, Robert.”

“Why not? Anderson had taken his arrogance to the limit.”

“It undermines you. It spells out the message loud and clear that you cannot handle your classes without recourse to the head of department. This will not help you to gain the respect that you need to teach in this place successfully. And that is something that Mr Stoate is watching out for.”

Cooke did not want Stoate to be watching out for him, so he pursued the matter no further. He felt very isolated, as nobody seemed to understand his problems. Being away from his wife, he felt lonely, and depression was not far away. He had a lesson with the fifth form. James Boyle, the large prop forward from the Colts Fifteen, and his best friend, Gareth Shotton, a keen footballer just chatted all the way through the lesson on any topic other than physics. It was irritating to Cooke, and the boys went on chattering and giggling. If he moved one of them, the other would follow. Eventually he decided he should do something about it and ordered the two to see him at lunch.

“No way,” said Boyle.

“What?” yelled Cooke.

“We don’t want to come. You can’t force us,” Shotton chipped in. “I’ve got football practice.”

“Well, you can forget about football practice.”

“I don’t think so. You’re just a teacher. We pay you to teach us and you don’t do it at all well. We’re bored.”

“You’re meant to make it fun for us,” Boyle joined in. “Mr Stoate tells us that our lessons should be fun, and we will learn well. I haven’t learned anything from you, Mr Cooke. My dad’s going to write to Mr Stoate, and he will believe us, not you.”

“How dare you?” Cooke growled. “You are here to learn, not to be entertained. You are coming at lunchtime; otherwise, you will be explaining it to your housemasters.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Boyle concluded. “If you want us here at lunchtime, you can whistle for it. I’ve got far better things to do than waste my lunchtime with you. You have got to gain our respect, Mr Cooke. You haven’t yet and I don’t think you ever will. Bye-bye.”

Cooke stood there spluttering with rage. There was nothing he could do. Brett would not help him, and everyone told him that he had to fight his own battle and he was losing it rapidly. He went down to the staff room to write a report to the two boys’ housemasters but did not think that much would be done.

He was right. Although their respective housemasters interviewed the boys, all that happened was that they were told not to repeat their defiance of Mr Cooke. It was all “yes, sir, very sorry sir, it won’t happen again sir”. The only thing that did happen was that word of it got back to the Headmaster through several channels. Stoate had many professional weak spots, one of which was a tendency to talk about staff with the boys, from which he would make a variety of judgements. It was a habit that stemmed from Stoate’s stunted social development. In other words, Stoate was an overgrown teenager.

Immature though Stoate was, and despite his demotion to DOLT, he still wielded a lot of power over his staff, as Cooke found out on a Thursday towards the end of September. He had been having a cup of coffee in the science department staffroom when the internal phone rang. He picked it up. It was Eileen, the Headmaster’s secretary, “The Headmaster would like you to make an appointment to see him.”

“When does he want to see me?”

“He’s got a slot at the end of school. Can you see him then?”

Cooke spent the rest of the school day worrying about what was coming up. He had had interviews with Heads before. Ms Heathcote

liked to ask members of her staff on a Friday to make an appointment with her last thing on Monday so that they could sweat it out over the weekend. Cooke had tried his best, but the arrogance and insolence of the pupils was preventing him from enjoying his job. Now he had the headmaster breathing down his neck. After his last lesson, he went over to The Hermitage and reported to Eileen. Outside Stoate's office, Cooke sat for twenty minutes while Stoate fiddled about. Stoate always did this for two reasons, firstly to make those waiting to see him feel that they were being given time from a hectic schedule of a very important person, and secondly, to make staff sweat a bit more. Finally, Stoate came out of his office, and said affably, "Robert, thank you for coming. I am so sorry I have kept you, but I have had to attend to one or two urgent matters. I'm just going upstairs; I'll be with you in a couple of minutes."

A couple of minutes later, Cooke was going into the office, and Stoate sat behind his desk, while Cooke settled into one of the comfortable armchairs. Cooke felt anything but comfortable. Stoate continued affably, "Robert, how do you feel you have settled in?"

"It's been hard work, but I think I am making some progress now," replied Cooke, hoping that that was the answer Stoate was after. It was not and Stoate continued to circle his prey before going in for the kill.

"Think back to your school days. How would you describe your best teacher?"

"He was well organised, very knowledgeable on his subject."

"Anything else that sticks in your memory?"

"He planned very carefully."

Stoate started to go in for the kill. "You see Robert," Stoate mused airily, "I have been getting it from second and third hand sources that not everything is well with the new Physics bod, if you see what I mean. I have been hearing reports that there are weaknesses in your classroom control, and that is not good."

"There are some very difficult boys in my fourth-year groups."

"That may be so, but I would like you to think about this," said Stoate as he prepared another metaphor. "Leaky ships are no longer seaworthy, however good the engines and navigation systems are. I am sure

that you know what I mean. We cannot have someone around here that appears to be weak.”

“I have had some problems, but I didn’t think I was that bad.”

“Yes, I know, but I would tell you now that in this school, family life comes second. If you cannot sell your house and you’re working away from home, that is your problem which you have to solve yourself. It cannot be allowed to reduce your effectiveness in school. You know that I expect all my staff to give one hundred and twenty percent. You see, the parents at this school pay us a considerable amount of money for something extra beyond the comprehensive. We don’t want staff that are just doing a job that would be good enough for the local comprehensive; they have got to be excellent all the time.”

Cooke thought about who had told Stoate about his domestic situation. He had said nothing about it to anyone, other than the Chaplain. His conversation was meant to be confidential. Stoate seemed to know more and continued, “This school is run on a Christian basis, the principal pillars of which are tradition, discipline, responsibility, and standing on your own two feet. They are also the traditions of the Conservative Party, and I am disturbed that you as a Christian voted socialist.”

“I don’t see how that affects my performance in my job,” replied Cooke.

“I am even more disturbed that you were willing to argue with the views of Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax. You certainly should be careful when you take on an established intellectual like him. He has forgotten more about the profound theological mysteries than you will ever learn in a lifetime. You seem to view religion as a shallow happy-clappy experience. It influences the way you approach things. You have to fight to make your own way here and you clearly are not doing so. In this school, we have little truck with those who need others to prop them up, which is what your wishy-washy religious and political views are clearly about. We cannot have passengers here. When I was in the RAF, we had to fight our own battles, otherwise we were shot down. I have seen lots of good Johnnies shot down because they needed someone else with them and that someone else wasn’t there. I imagine you are getting the point?”

The bit about fighter pilots being shot down was a complete fabrication, of course. The only fighter pilot that Stoate had seen go down in flames was the chap that Stoate had knocked out of the sky with his ill-timed Dunstan Roll. It was unfortunate that Cooke did not know about that yet, but he seemed to be finding out about all sorts of things when it was too late. Stoate continued, “So, Robert, I am sure that you will agree that it seems that you are under-performing. It seems unfair that I should make this judgement based on second and third hand sources, so I really need to see for myself. So, I will, if you don’t mind, be popping over to see you from time to time. I must make myself clear to you, that if there isn’t an improvement, I will have to consider whether I made a mistake when I appointed you last term. You see, my interest is with the boys. This school cannot be considered as a refuge for those lame duck teachers whose classroom control is ineffective. I am sure you appreciate my point of view?”

Cooke appreciated Stoate’s point of view and left the office with a deep sense of despair. He had been in this situation before, being accused of being ineffective, and the humiliation of being observed and having his work criticised. Of course, it was meant to be constructive and supportive, but the undercurrent was suspicion and mistrust. He thought that he had escaped it when he left Druker Grove, but now it was there again, larger than life and twice as ugly. He wanted to go straight to Tanswold Station and catch the next train home.

Meanwhile Stoate felt a sense of satisfaction. Cooke was not in a state to fight back. Therefore, Stoate had an excellent person to target in order to make an example of in front of the staff, *pour encourager les aûtres*, of course.

The following morning, there was a nasty little spat in the dingy hole that passed for a common room. Robert Cooke and Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax, by an unfortunate chance, got into school at the same time. Cooke was still feeling decidedly aggrieved, a sense that was aggravated by the fact that his wife had gone ballistic at him when he had broken the bad news. The sight of the Chaplain mincing in with his nose in the air was too much to bear for Cooke. He pushed his colleague into the staff room and snarled, “What the bloody hell do you mean by telling the Headmaster about what we discussed the other day?”

D’Arcy-Fairfax looked alarmed and was caught off guard. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said defensively.

“You know full well. You told the Headmaster that my religion was suspect. He said to me that you had forgotten more profound theological mystery than I will ever learn in a lifetime. You came out with some of the most pitiful claptrap that I have heard in years! Don’t you dare come and tell me that my Faith is shallow religion.”

“Well, it is. True Christians stand on their own two feet and make their own way in the world. You seem to need a shallow happiness to keep you going. This school needs real men who will show a real male role model to the boys here.”

“Well count yourself out. I have met more manliness in our church Brownie pack than in you! All your airs and graces, you drip with snobbery, tripping around like a fairy to oil up to the high and mighty!”

“I am of noble breeding, far from the gutter that you played in, Cooke!” yelled the Chaplain and gave Cooke a slap on the face before beating the retreat to the Headmaster’s office. Other staff had been watching the altercation with a lurid interest. In some ways they had enjoyed watching Cooke making a meal of d’Arsehole, but they also knew that Cooke was having problems. If they were seen to be too supportive of a weak colleague, they might well be tarred with the same brush. It was unfair, but fairness was a quality in short supply at Tanswold School.

The Headmaster put his head round the door, and ordered, “Mr Cooke, my office now, if you please.”

The Headmaster was less circumspect than he had been the day before. “I want an explanation from you now, Cooke, about the miserable incident just now,” he snapped.

“Headmaster, I am not having the Chaplain trying to undermine my Christian Faith in the way that he was. I am not going to put up with a confidential conversation being passed on so that he can curry favour.”

“Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax has every right to share anything that he is told. He is duty bound to me as Headmaster, not to you, a junior member of staff here on sufferance. I told you yesterday that he is an expert in theology. What he doesn’t know is not worth knowing. In this school,

we are about bringing up young men in tradition, discipline, responsibility, standing on their own two feet, and making their own way in the world. These are the values that made the empire. It was your type that made us lose it.”

“I have heard that before,” interrupted Cooke.

“I am glad you have. Now you should take that away and think about it. You have spent the first three weeks depending on others. This will change now; otherwise, you will no further place in my school. You will apologise to the Chaplain in public before the whole school. If there is a similar incident, you shall be dismissed instantly for gross professional misconduct. You have been warned. Now go to your form and get them registered.”

In the Financial Director’s office, the Financial Manager, Antony Scott was doing his best to cover up his tracks. Something had happened that, should he be found out, would render him liable for the high jump. A few weeks before, a letter had arrived from some solicitors in Alverston, representing a local farmer, Mr Travers, from whom the school rented the main playing field. It had been a source of irritation to Mr Travers that no rent had been paid for two years, and this had amounted to a fairly tidy sum. Scott was going to mention the matter to Lartington. He knew that Lartington would not pay anything out until he had seen the demand for himself. This is where the problem lay. Scott had shredded some out-of-date papers and the letter had been caught up with them as well. Scott had not realised it at the time. He had gone on leave, and not returned to the subject until he had come back to work.

It had been unfortunate that Scott had failed completely to recognise the legal significance of the document, for a few days before the start of term Mr Travers had taken the school to court in Alverston for non-payment of two years rent. The notice of the action had been sent to the school’s solicitors in Tanswold St Mary, another unfortunate coincidence, as Mr Carter-Barr was having a long-deserved break. Therefore, the school had not been represented. Mr Travers had been granted possession of his property without prejudice to the sums owing, and the statutory notice to quit had been issued and was now lying in Mr Carter-Barr’s in-tray.

Scott had spent ages looking for the letter without success. Instead, he drew up a plan that involved laying the blame on one of the girls in the office and had generated false evidence to support a dismissal for incompetence.

In the meantime, there had been a lot of work going on to prepare for the Open Day on the last Saturday in September. The dining room was looking splendid, but even so was given an extra coat of paint to remove even the faintest scuff marks. A plaque had been put up and curtains were placed over it for the grand opening of the dining room. The legend STOATE HALL had been placed above the entrance. The catering company was preparing a sumptuous buffet luncheon for the invited guests. The uninvited would have to make do with a marquee on the lawn. It had been set up after the school had paid a deposit equal to its value. Large signs had been professionally painted at vast expense to advertise the event to the townspeople and anyone else who was passing by on the main road. A good quality sound system had been hired with radio links from the most important of the microphones. There was going to be no radio exercise from the Combined Cadet Force either.

The CCF, despite having been ordered to disband, was going to parade. Stoate could not bear to have his school without a CCF. He prevailed on another member of staff who claimed to have some military experience to take it over. This time, he was a little more successful than his predecessor, in that he knew the commands and had a minor working knowledge of Queen's Regulations. Despite his best efforts, the CCF's unison in drill was still somewhat ragged. The cameraman who had been shooting the promotional video was right when he said they were like the *Tellytubbies*. Still, there was less to worry about this time; there was no army top brass coming to inspect them. Instead, they would march past in front of the Headmaster, and salute him instead. This caused a slight conflict, as soldiers were not saluting the officer, but the Queen's Uniform. Stoate possessed no uniform, Queen's or otherwise. He had lost his RAF uniform a long time ago and would not have fitted into it anyway. Instead, the cadets would be saluting Stoate's suit and academic gown. There was nothing in Queen's Regulations that covered this, but the cadets were ordered to pretend that Stoate was wearing Queen's Uniform.

Stoate was feeling contented. He was looking forward to the next day. As always, he had done nothing whatever to contribute to the preparations for the day but was ready to take the credit. It was unlikely that there would be the shambles of Speech Day. The CCF radio was firmly off the air, Frankland's vehicle was non-functional after its dip in the river and was stored safely behind the Technology Department. They had hired a good PA system. The weather had been glorious all September, although the forecast predicted a thundery breakdown for the next day, but it would happen during the late evening. The morning would start off with the Rugby match between Tanswold and King's School. Afterwards there would be the CCF parade, followed by the formal opening ceremony and luncheon. In the afternoon there would be other demonstrations and departments would be open for visitors, before rounding off at teatime. It would be a society event for the great and good of Yorkshire. The *Yorkshire Life* magazine was going to send a photographer.

Stoate sat back and mused about the morning's events concerning the Chaplain and his new but struggling physics master. He decided that he didn't like Cooke and would get rid of him anyway at the end of term. Like a fisherman playing a salmon, he would go through the motions of monitoring Cooke and warning him. It would continue to send clear messages to his staff to keep their noses to the grindstone. He would also check out those who seemed over-keen to give any support to Cooke. He did rather admire Cooke for giving the Chaplain a piece of his mind. Although the Chaplain was his only ally and provided him with a lot of intelligence, without which his war of attrition with the staff would be lost, Stoate really rather despised his obsequious style.

Chapter 3

The Opening Day dawned sunny and warm. The weather during the period leading up to the last Saturday in September had been remarkably warm, certainly as warm as any high summer. By contrast, the forecast for the day was not particularly good. As Stoate had his breakfast, he could hear the forecaster predicting a high probability for heavy showers and thunderstorms for the afternoon, although these would arrive in the region later rather than sooner. Stoate said a little prayer to the Supreme Deity that the weather would hold off until after the last parents had left. He also mused on the fact that all weather forecasters seemed to be Scottish, and, as a result, the forecast of bad weather seemed to be that bit dourer. It looked a glorious morning as Stoate looked out from his penthouse apartment in Hermitage Court. There was a light mist above the river, which had a primeval nature about it.

When Stoate got down to The Hermitage, there already seemed to be a purposeful air about it. Vans were being unloaded with a variety of provisions necessary for the success of a society occasion. Wine was being unloaded by the crate, some of which was of course champagne for the reception after the opening. From other vans crockery was being unloaded, and there was garden furniture being arranged on the lawn. Stoate tried not to think of the wreckage at the end of the last occasion. He didn't think it likely unless somebody crashed a plane into the lawn - in which case it would be carnage.

Stoate started a tour of inspection. The cadets in the CCF were practising their parade on the all-weather pitch. They were not exactly in unison and had got off to a false start several times. Mr Drake seemed more at ease with drilling them than did Mr Hardcastle, but even so they did seem to have trouble in distinguishing left from right. Stoate was heartily glad that Brigadier Gunston-Bunn would not be gracing the occasion with his presence. He also welcomed the absence of the trailer with its pontoon bridge, the fiasco of which would be famous in the annals of Tanswold School for many years to come. He gazed over to the Technology Department, where the abominable vehicle that Frankland had made was rusting quietly.

In the departments, new displays were being put up. Every department was now open to inspection. The English Department had a new Head. Stephen Booth had agreed to take on the responsibility after being leant on by Stoate. The carrot was that Stoate would provide him with an excellent reference should he apply for a position of deputy head. The downside was that the school could not afford to pay him for the extra responsibility. Stoate was pleased to see that there was a display, not of the standard of what Andrew McEwan had produced, but it certainly was one better than on Speech Day.

All over the school computers were booting themselves into life ready to do all sorts of interactive tricks with curious children and their curious parents. One or two of them in Science were crashing as well. This was due to the presence of a large Van der Graaff generator that was busy making high voltage sparks, the fields of which were irritating the processors in the machines. One computer expressed its annoyance by bleeping each time there was a spark.

As Stoate strutted about the school, he felt a lot more confident about this occasion. There was less to go wrong; what was in place was right. Occasionally he would glance up at the sky. It was misty but showed no sign of a thundery breakdown. Now he saw the first of many parents' cars driving up and parking on the grass.

At High Tanswold Farm, Mr Travers was preparing his tractor for a busy day's work. He had received the letter from his solicitor confirming that he now had possession of the field that bordered Alverston Road, and that the Tanswold School Trust no longer had any legal right to be there. It was an excellent place for the winter barley, so it would take the morning to get it ploughed up, and he would drill in the seed later on that week. He wanted to get the ploughing done as the weather was going to break that afternoon.

Mr Travers' preparations were interrupted by a call from Trevor, the head stocksman. A cow was down with "milk fever" in one of the fields. A call to the vet soon solved the problem; the cow was short of calcium and an intravenous drip soon had the cow on her feet. The cow was taken back to the barn for observation. Once it was safely inside, Mr

Travers got on with his preparations for spending the rest of the morning ploughing.

At Tanswold School, the rugby team from King's School had arrived in their coach. There was an atmosphere of intense excitement and rivalry building up between the two teams. As the two rugby fifteens were getting changed, the two teams started to needle each other. Unfortunately, what was initially good-natured banter began to degenerate into the trading of insults. One particular insult went too far and one of the Tanswold second rows lost his temper. Fists started to fly. The King's School hooker gave a good left hook to the Tanswold scrum half. Infuriated by this, James Boyle, a Tanswold prop forward grabbed the nearest object he could get hold of. It was a diffuser from one of the light fittings. He swung it at a King's School three-quarter, who ducked. It made contact with a locker whereupon it smashed to pieces. In the melee, somebody threw a body building weight that was being used as a doorstep. It went straight through a window and landed at the feet of Lionel Hyland who happened to be passing by, deep in conversation with the Headmaster.

"Good Lord, Stoate!" he exclaimed. "What the devil is going on in there? That nearly knocked my block off."

"It sounds like they have started the game already," Stoate replied with a growing sense of alarm at the crashing that was coming out of the changing room.

Stoate rushed in to find a huge maul going on. Those not in the loose scrum that had developed were hurling bags at each other. Boyle had ripped off another light fitting and was chasing the King's three-quarter with it. As he took a swing, he quite by accident caught the Headmaster on the knee. Stoate was about to yell out at the brawling mass of bodies, but the pain from his knees, which could give him trouble from time to time, roared through his body and he collapsed with his mouth opening and shutting like a stranded fish. Finally, when words did come out, they were obscenities that he thought he had forgotten when he had left the RAF. Nobody took any notice of him, and he ended up beneath the maul with his face half in the shoes of a boy who was notorious for his smelly socks.

Stoate was rescued by the rugby coaches whose chat over a cup of coffee was interrupted by the commotion. They came rushing down and bellowed in a voice that rattled the windows that had glass left, “WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON? BREAK IT UP AT ONCE!”

Surprisingly, the fight broke up at once and the two opposing teams sat down on the benches. Slowly and not with much dignity, Stoate got up. A jock strap that really needed to visit the inside of a washing machine hung round his neck. The truth began slowly to dawn on the stunted intellects of the Tanswold team. They had just wrecked the changing room, but even worse somebody had just succeeded in felling the Headmaster. They all knew that there would be hell to pay, especially if Stoate found out who had cracked him across the knees. Stoate glared at them and snarled at them, “Diarrhoea brains!” before he limped off. His black academic gown had a long rip and it billowed behind him in tatters. As he passed Mr Watson, the First Fifteen coach, he hissed, “My office, nine o’clock on Monday morning!”

Hyland doddered and Stoate limped back to The Hermitage. Behind them they could hear the two coaches bawling out their belligerent teams. The Headmaster and the Governor were both somewhat in shock and decided that a good stiff brandy was called for, strictly for medicinal purposes. Stoate was fortunate in that he had a second gown that he always kept for emergencies. If this was not an emergency, he did not know what was. Hyland was the first to break the silence, “Not a particularly good start to the day, eh, Dunstan?”

“Not at all. I shall find out which little blighter cracked me across the knees. I didn’t see the little bugger coming, but he caught me a fair cropper. My legs hurt like blazes. I will damn well make him suffer. And Watson as well. What the bloody hell was he up to?”

“The lad you are looking for is heavily built, thick set, with short black hair. Rather spotty if you ask me. I don’t know his name, but I will point him out when we go up to watch the match.”

“I’ve got a pretty damned good idea who it is. What did he hit me with?”

“I don’t know, but it looked like a light fitting to me.”

“I can’t do it nowadays, but I would like to give the whole damned lot a good hiding. I would expel the moron that clouted me, but

Lartington won't let me. The only good thing he's done is to get the dining room built."

"Well, at least he hasn't stopped our entertainment budget."

"That's true. But I can't do anything as Headmaster now. Who's running this place? Him or me? If I could, I would like to get rid of him, the sooner the better."

"The trouble is, Dunstan, that he would pull us down with him. Beggars can't be choosers, and that damned man Smith beggared us."

Stoate sat back in his chair and thought what the school would have been like if Smith had not had his fingers in the till. In the first instance, the dining room would have been built to a far superior specification. They had had to cut a lot of corners to bring the price down. Even so, the project had gone over budget, and there was a substantial bonus to pay to Carlton Quinn Construction for finishing the building on time.

He would still be in the position to hire and fire as he liked. He would be able to expel any boy whose face did not fit. He would have soon got round to expelling Samuel Proudlock for instance. More importantly he would not be facing the indignity of having girls in the lower part of the school. Stoate also would not have had to offer his retirement early. Nor would there have been the little problem of the impending substantial damages to pay out to the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock for the death of their daughter. Stoate heartily wished that Graham Smith had never existed.

Alan Watson would have heartily wished that some of his team had not existed either. He was not amused that there had been a fight, nor that the changing room had been wrecked, notwithstanding the fact that he was going to have his backside kicked by the Headmaster on Monday. Judging from the state that his team had left the Headmaster in, Watson knew that the old fart would not be particularly well disposed towards him. Of more immediate significance was that far from being ashamed of what they had done, the First Fifteen had somewhat turned up the arrogance. James Boyle was blind to his wrongdoing in pulling out a light fitting. "You can replace it easily enough," he complained when Mr Watson had a go at him. "Get Semple to do it."

“Mr Semple to you!” shouted Mr Watson. “He’s got better things to do instead of having to sort out your acts of vandalism.”

“He’s paid to do that,” countered Boyle. “We pay to come here, and we will do what we like.”

“You try telling the Headmaster that! He is going to murder you, especially as you knee-capped him.”

“I didn’t mean to. I was going to…”

“Brain their scrum half with the light fitting? You unspeakable moron, don’t you realise what kind of consequences that would have had?”

“Don’t you call me a moron,” Boyle snarled. “I’ll tell my dad and he will be in to see you and probably the Headmaster as well.”

“Can’t you see what you have done is criminal damage?”

“Well, they started it.”

Other members of the team started chipping in with their tales of offended innocence. Mr Watson could hardly believe what he was hearing and only just managed to control himself. He turned round to walk out, and switched on the light, as it was gloomy in the changing room. There was a sharp electrical bang from the ceiling. Boyle’s action in commandeering the light fitting had caused a short circuit and all the lights on the ground floor went out. Quite by chance, the ceiling itself, weakened by the separation of the light fitting from it, fell in, covering the Tanswold School First Fifteen in plaster and dust.

Back in his study, Stoate was relieved that things seemed to be returning to normal. The drive was starting to fill up with expensive four-by-fours with their expensive personalised number plates. The strident tones of the confident voices of people of superior status carried into his office through the open window. Stoate limped out of his office to be seen. As he became more the centre of attention, Stoate started to forget about his painful knee. Miles Stanton announced the start of proceedings in which the CCF would parade in front of The Hermitage.

The CCF’s drill had improved little since the farce on Speech Day. Their lack of unison was deliberate, an absurd parody of the

military. The squad still had the grace and military poise of the *Tellytubbies*. Mr Drake was getting more and more embarrassed as the cadets waddled around in front of the parents, scarcely able to tell left from right, and up from down. As on Speech Day, when called to attention, several were facing with their backs to the Headmaster, who was staring lividly at the pitiful performance in front of him. From behind some parents who were filming the show on their video cameras rose an obscene chorus, more appropriate to the rougher end of the terraces of Carlsborough Football Club.

The *Tellytubbies* analogy was acted out further, with all the cadets falling on their backs kicking their legs in the air and Mr Drake yelling blue murder. The cadets minced back to the middle on Mr Drake's instructions, and they tried it again. This time the squad split in two, each half marching in opposite directions. This time they appeared to have gained a unison of sorts, ragged though it was. Although Mr Drake had not planned this, it looked convincing enough and he went with the flow, commanding each half to wheel as they reached the end. To everyone's surprise, they did so, and came back. In front of the Headmaster, the two squads crashed into each other and started to push and shove. Some started to form a rugby scrum, and the whole heaving mass ended up on the ground. Lionel Hyland hissed into Storate's ear, "Dunstan, I think you have lost it!"

Mr Drake managed to get the squad back into its ranks, and this time they marched in the same direction, wheeled, and came back to give the salute. There was no Queen's Uniform to salute, so they had to salute the officer in the form of Flight Lieutenant J L D Storate (retired). The drill was not in accordance with Queen's Regulations, nor were the salutes, many of which would have been at home in a parade of a right-wing nationalist group. Storate stood there staring at the performance with a mixture of incredulity and outrage. The pain in his knee was an assurance that this was not a nightmare. He strode up to Mr Drake, and hissed, "Get rid of these cabbage heads at once! The CCF is now disbanded for good! I want you in my office at lunchtime on Monday."

Mr Drake was not to know that the whole charade had been planned by a group of cadets from Great Daxford School. It had been an excellent way to embarrass Storate and looking at the outraged figure standing by the front door of The Hermitage, it had certainly had its

effect. There came from behind the audience calls of “LIAR!” and “Get lost Biggles!” Parents were muttering and the atmosphere of a great society event was rapidly being lost. To prevent murder being committed, Mr Stanton called the assembled gathering to decamp to the playing fields on Alverston Road.

The First Fifteen looked a sorry sight as they walked up the Alverston Road. Many of them were covered in a fine white dust from when the changing room ceiling had fallen in on them. Others were nursing bruises from the maul with the King’s School Team who had made their way to the field earlier. Mr Watson had threatened them that if there was any funny business on the field, he might as well be hanged for a wolf rather than a lamb and he would personally thump each and every one. That had gone down with his team like a lead balloon and parents were going to write in. Undeterred by their coach’s threats, the team was belligerent, and the boys were eager to finish the business on the field that they had started in the changing room.

They were true to their intention. The two sides tore into each other with a savagery that would have made the hardest in the Rugby Football Union shudder. Some parents winced, while others muttered about a “damned good show”. It was clear that the King’s School team was far superior; within five minutes, the first try had been scored and converted. The further the Tanswold team fell behind, the dirtier the tactics became. Halfway through the first half, a King’s School winger was taken off on a stretcher with a suspected broken jaw after he was set upon in a particularly vicious loose scrum. The King’s School team set about to wreak revenge. Towards the end of the first half, play had to be halted. The war of attrition that had started in the changing room now erupted in earnest. A set scrum was the catalyst.

Like rutting bison, the two halves of the scrum charged together. A fist flew in the midst, followed by another and another. The whole scrum collapsed, and a brawl ensued. The referee tried to break it up without success, and it took several members of staff to bring things under control. For a second time in as many months, James Boyle’s shorts hung in tatters revealing to the audience what he would have preferred to keep secret, namely that he was wearing no underwear. The referee was all for abandoning the game and was going to make a report

to the regional office of the Rugby Football Union. Alan Watson managed to pacify him sufficiently to continue the game after half time, and he was going to speak severely to his team.

The crowd in the small grandstand made of scaffolding could hear Mr Watson being as good as his word, or lots of words like “disgraceful”, “shameful”, and “abysmal”. Many of these were prefixed by adverbs, which were really not intended for parental ears, but meant “very” and “exceedingly”. On the other side, they could hear the King’s School coach addressing his team in very similar terms.

Most of the crowd were enjoying the fact that the morning was warm and bright, if a little misty. Nevertheless, they were beginning to sweat a bit as it was starting to get a little sultry, and there did seem to be a hint of gloom far to the west. It did not concern them. What did catch their attention was the sight of two large tractors swinging through the gates with ploughs at the back. They gaped as the tractors moved to the opposite ends of the field in a *pas de deux* and lowered their ploughs into the ground. Right in front of them, Mr Travers ploughed straight through the middle of the rugby pitch, while his son ploughed the far side. Stoate stood speechless at first, while the full enormity of the vandalism was being played out in front of him. Even the coaches suspended their tongue-lashing and stared with their mouths drooping. Stoate tried to stride out to the middle of the field, but his gammy knee was still hurting like hell from when he got chopped down by Boyle. This and his general obesity made him waddle like a large grey duck. His face suffused with anger, he gesticulated in front of the large green tractor and Mr Travers stopped. Stoate spluttered, “What the hell do you think you are doing to our rugby pitch? Don’t you realise that this is our main sports field?”

“No, mate,” said Mr Travers coolly, “it is now my winter barley field.”

“What do you mean?” Stoate was still spluttering. “Get your tractors off here right now before I call the police. We will be billing you for the damage.”

“You can’t do that,” replied Mr Travers smugly, “it’s my land and I can do what I like with it.”

“What do you mean that it’s your land? We bought it off you for fifty thousand pounds two years ago.”

“No, you didn’t. It never went through. I was relying on the fifty thousand as well. I only just scraped by. The bank manager gave me a hard time about it. What’s more you owe me two years rent.”

“We paid for it and we demand now that you take these damned machines off our field!”

“No, mate, you’ve got it wrong.” Mr Travers got out the letter from his solicitor. “I have been granted possession in the court. You never even showed up. You owe me two years back rent plus my costs which amounts to a tidy sum. I am still going to take court action to get the rent.”

“And we’re going to take court action against you for criminal damage, Mr Travers, as well as trespass. I am going to have you arrested for this!”

As if to confirm Stoate’s last comment, a police siren could be heard and presently a police car pulled up by the gates and Constable Apps came across. “Now,” he said, getting out his notebook, “what’s all this?”

“This man has trespassed on our sports field, and you can see what he has done,” Stoate snapped, pointing out the eight furrows that cut a swathe from the far touchline to the near twenty-two. “Our pitch is now unplayable, and we have an important game against King’s School. Arrest this man for criminal damage!”

“Not that hasty, Mr Stoate,” replied Constable Apps who wanted to assess the legal situation for himself before making any hasty decision. The previous week, Civility Charles had previously been caught out by mishearing an instruction that a fax and phone had been stolen and arrested a young man carrying a saxophone. The Inspector had not been amused. “What has Mr Travers got to say about this?”

“Well, constable,” said Mr Travers, “I have a letter here from my solicitor informing me of a court decision to grant me possession of this field. Mr Stoate’s lot has not paid me rent for two years now. They think they have bought it off me. I haven’t seen a penny. You know the state of farming at the moment. I need every penny I can get. I nearly went to the wall. If you don’t believe me, look at this letter from my solicitor.”

Apps looked at the letter. It appeared genuine. Nevertheless, he radioed headquarters to check with Mr Travers' solicitor. After a pause of some ten minutes confirmation came through that the letter was genuine and that Mr Travers had been granted possession of the field as the Tanswold School Trust had defaulted on its rent payments and was in debt by some eighteen thousand pounds. Apps concluded, "There's not a lot I can do, Mr Stoate. It appears that *you* are trespassing on Mr Travers' property and he has a legal right to ask you to leave. I would suggest that you ask your guests to return to The Hermitage and allow Mr Travers to get on."

"Thank you, constable," said Mr Travers. "Now, Mr Stoate, you get those people off my field now. I will give you an hour to get your groundsman to take down the rugby posts; else I'll cut them down myself." Mr Travers pointed to a chainsaw in his tractor cab. "I'll give you a week to get rid of that scaffolding contraption or I'll shift it myself and bill you for it. Now, on your bike!"

Stoate had no bike to get on. Instead, he waddled back to the grandstand in a foul temper. As he turned, he shouted, "You'll be hearing from our solicitors, Travers!"

Now he had the distasteful task of telling the crowd and the teams that the match, one of the most important in the Tanswold School sporting calendar, was going to have to be abandoned in such ignominious circumstances. Mr Travers called back from the tractor so that everyone could hear, "If you'd pay your bills, Mr Stoate, none of this would be necessary!"

Stoate was too preoccupied to notice that the whole performance was being witnessed by a girl and her boyfriend who were leaning on a fence at the far end. Jessica McEwan and Samuel Proudlock had been cycling to badminton practice when Mr Travers had started to plough his field. They had stopped in total surprise at the extraordinary spectacle and seeing that there was more of an audience and that Biggles was going to get involved, they decided to watch. "Well, well," said Sam as they got back on their mountain bikes, "I wonder how Biggles is going to explain that away."

Biggles was indeed wondering how he was going to explain that away. It was another bit of bad publicity the school could have well done without. The fact that it had occurred during a very high-profile event was even more galling. How was it that Travers still owned the field when, three years ago, the school instructed the Bursar to enter negotiations with Travers to buy the field and earmarked fifty thousand pounds for the purpose? What had Mr Carter-Barr been up to? He had better have a pretty damned good explanation if he was going to continue to carry the school's legal brief, especially as his fees were so high. The next governors' meeting would certainly be interesting, but Stoate did not want that. Interesting governors' meetings meant that they were holding some bitter inquisition into yet another blunder somewhere, and usually they were holding him responsible for it. Of more immediate impact was that the whole episode had been played out totally in the open and everybody knew about it. He could all too easily see the headlines in the papers, *Top School's Public Eviction*.

More problems were awaiting him when he got back to The Hermitage. Governors were waiting for him in his office, and they too were not amused at what had happened. Donald Blance started, "Dunstan, what the devil's been going on up at the fields?"

"That's what I want to know as well," replied Stoate. "We bought that field. We decided on that at a meeting three years ago. Now that bloody man Travers wants two years back rent off us and has started ploughing up the field. He's going to put winter barley there."

"I know. We agreed to the purchase. We told Smith to negotiate with Travers and make the purchase. We're going to have to look into this as a matter of urgency. Dunstan, we are going to have an emergency governors' meeting on Monday evening. I would like a report from you about what has gone wrong. I know that this is not your fault, but you know that Dr Pennington is still after you. He is livid about it and wants your head on a silver platter, so to speak. You're going to have to sound pretty damned convincing, especially as methinks that Smith probably disposed of the fifty grand elsewhere."

"Like propping up the Draycott Foundation?" Sir Ronald Wiseman ventured.

“No, putting it on a horse in the 2.30 at Thirsk,” Stoate concluded grumpily. “The *Today* programme racing tips, I bet.”

In a small outbuilding that served as a pavilion for the tennis court the action of propping up was not metaphorical, it was more literal. Several boys from Great Daxford School had lost interest in the importance of the Opening of Stoate Hall. Mr Stanton, the Deputy Head, had pointed it out to them, how important the day was for the school, that it would be a major event in the social calendar of Yorkshire high society. As a result, the school was on parade and a strict code of behaviour had been imposed. This was a red rag to the Great Daxford bull, and the increasing unsavoury element in the school was planning to cause maximum embarrassment. They had succeeded in the CCF parade, turning an already not very fine body of rebellious young men into a farce worthy of *It will be Alright on the Night*. Now they had quietly made off with a crate of lager, several large bottles of wine, a considerable amount of cheap cider, and a large bottle of vodka. Nobody had noticed them, nor had they been missed, let alone disturbed.

After an hour of drinking, all of them were plastered, and staggering about the pavilion. Now the diuretic effect of the alcohol began to make itself felt, and presently they were staggering about on the riverbank, too drunk to realise that they had an audience on the other side of the river. When they did, in unison that would have been more fitting to the CCF earlier in the day, they dropped their trousers in a “moony”, exposing their backsides to several people, including the camera crew from *Bully Busters*. They staggered back singing obscene songs on the tops of their voices to the tennis pavilion and continued their party.

Stoate did not really feel like making small talk with the parents who were gathering on the lawn for the opening ceremony for Stoate Hall. He forced himself to keep smiling through all the questions about what they would do about playing fields. There was a second playing field down by Tanswold Woods, which would have to do for the time being until they could secure more land. Buying a field would probably be out of the question; Mr Travers would probably demand a hundred thousand for the field he had just taken back. Nobody would lease them

a field now that it was out amongst the land-owning fraternity that the Tanswold School Trust were liable to default on the rent. Still Stoate answered their questions with an assurance that he did not feel in the least. Other questions about the financial future of the school seemed a little bit more threatening.

And so did the sky. Stoate was not sure that the day seemed gloomier because he was feeling that way, but it had turned decidedly oppressive. The sun was no longer shining and the sky in the West seemed decidedly dark. Stoate thought he heard a distant booming, but it could have been a train on the main line. Meanwhile the brass band was under its marquee producing a violent and tuneless rendition of a well-loved favourite, out of time and out of tune with each other. Stoate caught just a hint of some ragged community singing that appeared to be coming from the direction of the tennis court, but it could have been some people out on the main road who had enjoyed a liquid lunch. Stoate felt a small sense of reassurance that things were all right by the sight of the Chaplain mincing about making small talk with all the right people. He was looking forward to making his speech about the splendid new dining room and what an honour it was that it was named after him.

Stoate went back to the Old Dining Room to meet the invited guests for sherry before the opening speeches. Amongst familiar and friendly faces, the embarrassment of the CCF's parade and the ignominy of the eviction from the playing field started to recede, especially with the rather splendid sherry that was flowing freely to lubricate things. Meanwhile parents were being shepherded to their seats while the school was being arranged to stand in forms with their tutors. Stoate was blind to the fact that this arrangement would cause a certain amount of resentment from the school, especially as the sherry reception went on for rather longer than intended.

Stoate and his guests processed out of the front door of The Hermitage in a manner that seemed unnecessarily self-important and pompous, while the band played (out of time and out of tune) the National Anthem and the seated assembly stood. The parents stood, but a good number of boys sat down while others started a slow handclap. Donald Blance stood up to start the opening ceremony. It was unfortunate that due to an oversight on the part of the company that hired out the sound equipment, the battery in the microphone was almost flat

and Donald Blance's speech became so highly distorted that it was unintelligible. "Lad-*splut* and gentle-*splut*, it gives *splut* great *splut* to *splut*. Many *splut* a- *splut*, this *splut splut* was found *splut*..."

Miles Stanton was a credit to his position of Deputy Headmaster. He took the microphone from Donald Blance, tapping it twice. The sound system gave a couple of reassuring booms in response and Blance tried again, "Lad-*splut* and *splutle-splut*, it gives *splut* great *splut* to *splut*. Many *splut* a- *splut*, *splut* this *splut splut* was *splut* found *splut*..."

"There seem to be too many spluts," commented Blance after this second false start. "What's up with it?"

Tapping the microphone was the limit of Mr Stanton's expertise in Electronics. The microphone gave out its reassuring booms, but as soon as it had to reproduce the complexities of somebody's speech, it took the easy way out and simply sent the message "*splut*" to the amplifier. The microphone's malady certainly taxed the electronic understanding of Stoate and his entire entourage of guests, which was not difficult, as their expertise pooled would have filled about a quarter of a page of A4 paper.

Mr Stanton again showed the initiative that would put him in such good stead to be a headmaster, and called out to the assembled crowd, "Does anyone know anything about public address systems?"

A father took up the challenge of being the knight on the white charger to ensure the continuity of the high society event and unscrewed the body of the microphone. A bit fell out and rolled away under the temporary staging. There were two results of this. Firstly, the microphone passed no messages at all to the amplifier, not even a boom when tapped. Secondly, some jeering started to rise from the back of the massed ranks of Black 'n Tans. The sight of a number of high-status bottoms sticking out from under the staging led to a sustained chorus of belly laughing, wolf-whistling, and catcalling.

The battery was found quickly, but its replacement was not. Mr Stanton rushed with a sense of urgency into Tanswold High Street, scouring all the shops that might conceivably sell a battery of that type. It was a wild goose chase until he got to the photography shop at the end of the town. The proprietor rummaged around for ten minutes or so trying to find one. He was sure he had one, but this was not a common

type, in fact nobody had asked for this kind for several years. Eventually he found it and Mr Stanton was quite taken aback at the price. Still, he had the prized possession that would save the Opening Ceremony from joining Speech Day as a high society farce.

To prevent that fate from befalling the Opening Ceremony would require superhuman efforts accompanied by several miracles. The latter could not be relied on at all, and the results of the former were dubious. Especially as the school wind band was instructed to maintain morale by playing to the gathered audience while they were waiting. The most charitable way of describing the musical ability of the wind band was to say that it was limited, and that was after extensive rehearsal. The band had massacred what it had rehearsed and now Mr Walker had rustled up some music that the instrumentalists would have to play by sight. They certainly did not play it by ear. To the musically refined, the resulting cacophony was torture. For those who were amused by such things the performance was hilarious. The uncultured did not know the difference.

The prolonged wait made the crowd of Black 'n Tans standing at the back restive. The whole audience had been issued with a hymn sheet on which were printed the words of the school song (an appalling piece of doggerel that nobody had ever owned up to writing), and two hymns chosen by the Chaplain. Several of the hymn sheets, converted into paper aeroplanes sailed across the seated ranks of parents and other guests. Quite by chance one landed in May Blance's cleavage which led to a whinny of outrage from the Chairman of Governors' wife, especially as its touchdown was succeeded by several cheers and a round of applause from the Fourth Form. Another paper aeroplane landed in the bell of a tuba and started to resonate in such a way that made it sound like it was breaking wind. A chorus rose, "*Why are we waiting?*"

At the same time the group of boys who had enjoyed their unofficial party in the tennis pavilion came staggering back singing some very obscene lines indeed at the tops of their voices. Stoate sidled over to Mr Walker and told him to get the band to play *fortissimo* to drown out the singing, which, although obscene, was certainly more in time and tune than the band. Simon McConnell staggered onto the stage and was violently sick, before staggering off and collapsing in front of the bandstand and falling into a deep alcoholic sleep. Mr Stanton arrived back with the prized battery, and forty-five minutes behind schedule, the

opening ceremony got under way again. Donald Blance started his speech again; this time he was not being interrupted by the spluts. Instead, it was dull and uninspirational, as this kind of speech was not his forte. Now it was Stoate's turn to speak.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed my pleasure that you are with me on this great occasion whereby we celebrate the opening of what is undoubtedly a splendid asset to the school. When I founded this school twenty-five years ago, I was determined that it would be run as a highly academic institution that would rival the best of the public schools in this country. I have a military background, and I have always felt that this is one of the most honourable ways to bring up young men, especially in the present climate of mediocrity. The declining standards in education, and the church worship, some of the most appalling examples of which are to be found quite locally, has brought this about. This school stands for tradition, discipline, and standing on your own two feet...”

Stoate's reference to his founding of the school brought a few jeers of “LIAR” from the back. Of course, the boys were too young to have been around at the time of the founding of Tanswold School. That said, they were spot on the mark as Dunstan Stoate was not the Founding Headmaster at all; it had been Mr Kent.

Stoate rambled on through his lists of dearly held prejudices that were racist, sexist, and xenophobic, laying the blame of all society's ills at the increasing influence of Europe, and the recent election result in which the Conservative Party had been routed. He mused over the passing of the British Empire and the lack of manliness in modern youth, mocking the kind of boy that preened himself in the mirror and went out with girls, instead of doing more appropriate activities such as scouts and cadet training. None of this was relevant to the new dining room, but it seemed to go down well with the sort of parents that sent their boys to Tanswold School. He finished off, “I seek to instil the Christian virtues of tradition and discipline. Boys should have the fear of the Supreme Deity and they should be aware that heaven is only for those who make it into the intellectual and business elite. I am proud that this school trains our boys for that.”

At the end of his speech, there was applause from the front and slow handclapping from the back. With the nature of a true British bulldog, Stoate ploughed on regardless, and introduced the next item,

“Now our Chaplain, the Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax will lead a short service of dedication.”

The Chaplain minced forward to the microphone. As Stoate turned away from the microphone, he knocked it and it fell forward. Kieran Pearson, who had been at the unofficial party, rushed in from the prompt side, grabbed it and pulled it off the stage. He managed to speak into it, “What do you shay to Biggles in a shuit? ‘The Defendant will rishe.’” This brought another belly laugh from the back of the audience, who started a chant of “D’Arsehole! D’Arsehole!” before their harassed form tutors managed to restore order yet again. Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax announced the first hymn, *Come ye thankful people come*. The band’s playing rendered the tune almost unrecognisable, and the singing did not carry much in the way of thanks.

Come ye thankful people come,

Raise the song of harvest home.

All is safely gathered in,

Ere the winter storms begin.

Many of the audience were hoping that they would be safely gathered in ere an autumn storm began, for as they had just finished that line, there was an audible peal of thunder from the West. They also were praying that the Chaplain would keep it short. They were to be disappointed for d’Arcy-Fairfax liked to impress his congregations with his eloquence in seventeenth century English, and his expertise in theological minutiae. In the gathering gloom, the hymn *O God our help in ages past* seemed very appropriate. The Chaplain started a prayer, “O God who in thy manifest wisdom dost bestow all manner of good gifts, we beseech thee that thou wouldst bestow on thy servants that blessing that best pleaseth thee on this most important occasion...”

God was best pleased to bestow his best blessing on the occasion by directing a bright flash of lightning that struck The Hermitage. As the old house had a lightning conductor there was no damage, but the flash and the deafening bang that followed immediately made everyone jump in a unison that had been so desired in the CCF parade that morning. The peal of thunder lasted almost a minute before it died away, to be replaced by a stunned silence and a few sobs as several of the audience recovered from the shock. In the background there was a chorus of car alarms, set

off by the intense shock wave from the lightning. D'Arcy-Fairfax tried to pick things up again, but the microphone that had been the cause of so much delay had reverted to its previous non-functional state, the radio link having been disrupted by the lightning.

Without warning, a second bright flash of lightning struck the field on the other side of the river and rain started to fall, as if from a showerhead. While d'Arcy-Fairfax struggled on looking more and more bedraggled in his clerical garb, the audience safely gathered themselves in to get out of the rain that was by now of monsoon intensity.

There had not been a storm like it for many years. The lightning was one of the best displays of celestial fireworks that many had ever seen. There were flashes that criss-crossed the sky every five seconds or so and the thunder was continuous. Although it was mid afternoon, it was like dusk. The drive to The Hermitage was like a stream. High status women tripped through the rain, with their dresses, minimalist in everything other than fashion and price, clinging to their equally minimalist bodies and revealing far more than had been intended, let alone decent. In the new Stoate Hall, the unveiling of the plaque commemorating the occasion was almost inaudible for two reasons. Firstly, in order to cut down on the costs, the roofing was of corrugated steel instead of clay pan tiles. The roof was acting like a drum. The second reason was that the thunder was so intense and unremitting. As Stoate was pulling the curtains to reveal the plaque, the foyer was lit up as if a giant flash bulb had been set off outside and there was an immediate bang that cracked one of the plate-glass windows. The lights went out.

The commemorative luncheon took place in deep gloom, as there was now no electricity. Stoate had planned for an emergency generator for this kind of eventuality so that the school could continue unimpeded, but this had been abandoned for economy. The only lighting came from the battery powered emergency lights and the flickering of the lightning outside. Although Stoate could not see it in the gloom, he had a nasty feeling that he felt a couple of drips of water falling onto his bald head during the meal.

Many of the parents, soaked to the skin, decided to cut their losses and get home. This simple intent was not so easy to accomplish since the water made the grass on which the cars were parked very

slippery and cars slithered all over the place, several of them acquiring small but very expensive dents in their bodywork. One car objected to the effect of the damp on its ignition and failed completely between the gates, blocking everyone in until a couple of public-spirited people came to push it out of the way. The late leavers found their way to the cars a quagmire and expensive dresses became covered in mud, with their wearers complaining bitterly.

The storm raged on through the late afternoon, the evening and night. Almost the whole of the High Pennines and the Middle Riding of Yorkshire, including the cities, were robbed of their electricity. The railway ground to a halt as the overhead power lines were struck, and a long goods train was stuck on Tanswold Viaduct with no electricity to power the locomotive. When the supply was eventually restored, the train was found to be welded to the rails after two of the wagons had been struck by lightning. Serious damage had also been done to the signalling system at Alverston Junction signal box, and several other locations further down the line. St Luke's Church in Alverston had been struck as well, but no damage had been done other than the lightning conductor being blown away from the wall. A number of cattle in a field that were sheltering under a tree had been killed or injured when the tree itself got struck. The Conservative Club in Alverston received a strike from a "super bolt" that set the entire building ablaze within seconds. Several houses in Carlsborough had their roofs lifted off by a mini-tornado, and many houses had their basements flooded in the intense rain that fell. Several cars in Denton had been damaged by hailstones the size of marbles. By the time the storm had finally discharged itself at midday on Sunday, the damage ran into many millions of pounds from the lightning to the flooding that had resulted from the fifteen centimetres of rain that had fallen. In several towns, including Tanswold St Mary, residents had been evacuated as the river rose in furious spate, and only just avoided over-spilling the flood defences.

Chapter 4

Stoate was not so worried about the material damage that had been done to the Tanswold School site during the weekend's storm, although that ran to several thousand pounds. A number of windows had been broken as a result of the shock waves from nearby lightning strikes. Two trees had been struck and one had fallen. The English and RE block had lost some tiles, and the school clock in its absurd little cupola had been knocked over and was totally broken. The runoff from the rain had gouged deep channels in the grass where it had been churned up by the cars sliding onto the drive, and in places the surface of the drive itself had been lifted up and cracked. The low-lying grass by the river was still submerged as the river was in full spate and the lower part of The Hermitage's lawn had a large tree trunk marooned on it.

The mess in the newly opened Stoate Hall was the biggest disappointment to the Headmaster. He had not been imagining things when he felt those drips of water on his head. The ceiling had collapsed onto the floor, and as he gazed up into the roof void, he could see several small holes where the sheets of corrugated steel should have been screwed together but had been missed. Stoate let out a sigh of disgust and ordered Mr Semple to get the mess cleared up before the boys came in for lunch.

The mess and the damage to the school premises could be repaired easily provided the money could be found to throw at the problem. No amount of money could sort out the thoroughly bad publicity that Saturday's events had generated. True, nobody could have made the thunderstorm stop in its tracks for a couple of hours. Nevertheless, the parody of a military parade from the CCF, the fight in the changing rooms, and the very public humiliation up at the playing fields all needed investigation and those at fault would pay for it dearly.

At nine o'clock on the dot, Stoate started his first inquisition with Alan Watson, the first fifteen rugby coach. Stoate's knee was still hurting like hell, which was what he intended to give to Mr Watson. Having summoned Watson into his office Stoate made him stand like a naughty fourth former. "I would like to have an explanation from you

right now about the behaviour that I witnessed in the changing room on Saturday morning.”

“I can’t tell you everything because I was talking to the King’s School coach.”

“The lot Watson, the lot!” Stoate shouted. “You leave out one iota and you will be winging your way to the unemployment office this afternoon! Who started it?”

“There was a lot of banter going on and needling.”

“Do you encourage that kind of thing?”

“You do, Headmaster. I have often heard you say that it encourages a “bit of spunk”, to use your expression.”

“I am not concerned with what I do or do not encourage, Watson,” Stoate snapped. He wondered when he had last told the team to have a bit of spunk. It was probably the Saturday before last. “Having spunk is one thing, fisticuffs is quite another.”

“I totally agree, Headmaster.”

“Why didn’t you stop it?”

“I did, when I heard the trouble.”

“That is not sufficient. You did not anticipate the trouble and that is where you have been negligent in your duty. Your duty was to supervise the teams as they were changing to make sure that they were behaving.”

“What? A bunch of eighteen-year-olds needing the kind of supervision that one would give to eleven-year-olds?”

“Yes. You should have been aware that they were not going to behave themselves in a civilised fashion and the responsibility is entirely yours. When I was in the RAF, that was the way things were done and that is the way they are done here, as you should know. You don’t need me to tell you of the damage that was done in the changing room and one of your charges belted me on the knee with a light fitting, I ask you! What have you done about him? And what about the idiot who hurled a weight through a window which nearly hit Mr Hyland? He’s an old man. You don’t know what would have happened. No, this is not on. I am now going to institute the formal proceedings for disciplinary action

against you on the grounds of gross negligence in your professional duty. The Governors' welfare and disciplinary committee will be informed and will meet with my recommendation that you be dismissed."

"I will tell you now that I will no longer do any more rugby coaching."

"That's up to you. We don't anyway have the first-class facilities that a school like this deserves and the blame lies at your door. I am also relieving you of your other teams as well. I will be looking to reduce your salary as a result."

"That is not fair; I shall be contacting the union."

"You can do that if you like, but you should also be aware that no union is recognised in this school. It shows how much attention to detail that you pay, Mr Watson. That will be used in evidence against you as well. Meanwhile you will be allocated extra duties and extra cover."

"That's right; treat me like a kid. Do you want to put me on detention?"

"You can look at it that way if you like," said Stoate dismissively. "Thank you. Good morning, close the door as you go out."

A similarly unconstructive exchange occurred at lunchtime when Mr Drake had been summoned to appear before the Headmaster. Stoate spent the afternoon interviewing the boys from the First Fifteen about their involvement in the changing room fight. Although he made short work of them with a tongue lashing, there was little more that he could do, now that he had been firmly ordered not even to suspend anyone, as this might scare their parents away and lose income. Expulsion was totally out of the question.

In the middle of the week, Stoate called a very rare meeting of his management team. Team decisions and consensus featured very little in Stoate's management style as he was used to doing things his own way, regardless of what others thought. If Stoate decided that something needed to be done, he would order that it was done, and Heaven help anyone who tried to object. Nevertheless, as the inspection loomed closer, Stoate decided that a little collective responsibility might be in order, if only to deflect any allegations of mismanagement on his part.

Any organisational failings could be off-loaded onto his colleagues while he would take the credit for the undoubted strengths of the management structure.

In order to spread any recriminations further, Stoate decided to extend his team further by including the Chaplain, and John Gonall. It was for d'Arcy-Fairfax his delusion that this was a natural reward for his steadfast loyalty to the Headmaster, and his raising of the spiritual life of the school to an unprecedented level of theological scholarship. In reality Stoate had chosen him for his gutless acquiescence; the Chaplain would make an excellent scapegoat for the shortcomings that the inspectors would inevitably hunt out.

As for John Gonall, his promotion had been a reward for his robust and steadfast resolution in ensuring that the staff maintained the highest professional standards. In other words, Gonall had been a complete and utter bastard in all his dealings with everyone. Gonall had achieved a universal and well-merited acclamation of the most loathed teacher from pupils and colleagues alike. Gonall was not a pleasant man. A short stocky man, he had been a county rugby player in his youth. He had joined the school to run the PE department, but now middle age was catching up with him. Although he retained a full head of black hair that was only just starting to turn grey, his complexion seemed grey and colourless. As he was no longer as fit as he had been (he was overweight), he had been promoted out of the way to be a housemaster. He always had had something of a chip on his shoulder, and when he did coach rugby, he did it with such a bullying and hectoring manner that even the toughest of the Colts dreaded his training sessions. His dealings with pupils and parents had led to so many complaints that even Stoate was alarmed. On one parents' evening, Gonall had seen a boy with his parents and had yelled, "Summers! What the devil are you doing here? Don't you realise that boys are not allowed to be here at all?"

"Excuse me," said Mr Summers, "my son is here with us, as we want him to be here."

"Well, he is not meant to be here, and you should get him out of here. He will have a detention from me for disobedience to that rule."

"You cannot be serious, Mr Gonall. My son is here because we want him here. As for your detention, I forbid that he attends."

“He will be dealt with in the same way as any child who doesn’t attend my detention. He will soon understand that it is not worth his while to fail to attend. Get that boy out of here, now.”

“This is outrageous. I am going to see the Headmaster now!”

Mr and Mrs Summers sought out the Headmaster, who said soothingly, “Mr and Mrs Summers, Mr Gonall is one of the rudest men I have ever met. He is rude to the boys, he is rude to the parents, he is rude to the staff, and he is rude to me. But he does get very good results, and that is what is important in this school.”

Mr Gonall’s social shortcomings were legendary. It was said of him that when he entered a room, a sunny June day could become like a sour day in February. Whenever he sat down in the staffroom nobody wanted to be near him. He would never even smile. He would sit and gaze at everyone with a basilisk stare that would put anyone off any social intercourse with him. If any colleagues tried to share any difficulty with him, he would simply snap, “It’s up to you to sort it out for yourself.” Gonall was liberal with his criticism of any shortcomings of those he considered of lower status to himself, which was virtually everyone, but did not tolerate anyone pointing out any of his many shortcomings.

Gonall taught History. In the classroom, Gonall had a stunted intellect; he was a plain bully, not averse to using physical teaching methods. In this he was sailing very close to the wind, as what he called “persuasion to co-operate” involved being quite rough, which would have left him wide open to at least dismissal in a state school, if not an assault charge. Like Stoate, he despised the quiet and gentle pupil. On one occasion he had taken exception to something that Samuel Proudlock had written in a history essay, which was, in fact, a profound insight and interpretation of the event. He had boxed the boy’s ears, and thrown him across the room, before literally kicking him up his backside through the door. Proudlock’s bruised coccyx hurt for many days afterwards, and he could hardly walk. A complaint from the Reverend and Mrs Proudlock to the Headmaster had fallen on deaf ears. Gonall could not handle the idea that pupils could possibly have insight into historical events that were deeper than his own. This was unfortunate, for it was not difficult for even the dullest boy to outshine Gonall’s very limited reading and perception into history.

It was little wonder that Gonall's name had been corrupted to "Gonad". The kindest thing that could be said was that his sense of humour had been surgically removed. The only one who liked Gonall was the Headmaster who shared his interest in rugby and was sympathetic with Gonall's desire to toughen up the youth of the day with good, old-fashioned, and manly discipline, even though some of his methods were, to say the least, unorthodox. Like that of Stoate, Gonall's pedagogy bordered on the risky. Like Stoate, Gonall was very adept at shifting the blame for unfortunate events onto other people. Several times his incompetence had led to serious incidents, and junior colleagues had carried the can, while Gonall had ensured that he had come out having masterfully regained control of the situation.

Stoate's meeting with his extended management team had a lengthy agenda. So important was it that several governors had joined it, and it now had the status of a full governor's meeting. The first item on the Agenda was an inquest into the school's very public and humiliating eviction from the playing fields. The Finance Director, Crispin Lartington, was there as he considered himself as Senior Management, and his assistant, Antony Scott, was also there. As well as giving staff and boys a rough time, Stoate had also had a preliminary inquest into the fiasco with the playing field. His knee still hurt like hell and his mood had not improved. He started, "You will know of course of the school's humiliation on Saturday, and it is my intention to look into all aspects of this affair and what can be learned." By this everyone knew that he meant that anyone at fault would be dismissed.

"I have contacted Mr Carter-Barr, the school's solicitor. We are the victims somewhat of the sloppiness in his office. Mr Carter-Barr has been on holiday, and nobody has bothered to look at his mail, which contained such items as the notice to quit. If we had had this, we would have been in a position to act. Mr Carter-Barr's office has told us that they did send some correspondence about the matter several weeks ago, including a demand for two year's back rent. What I want to know immediately is how we failed to receive this. Or, if we did receive this, how nobody in a position to do something about it got to know about it. I also want to know what happened to the fifty thousand pounds that we had set aside for purchasing the field off Mr Travers, although I am

bound to say that I have my suspicions. In the longer term we are now going to have to purchase a new playing field, which I imagine would cost at least one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, money the school does not have. Mr Lartington, would you be kind enough to tell the meeting what action your office took upon the receipt of the final demand?”

“I was not aware that we were in receipt of a final demand,” Lartington said defensively. He knew that he should have been, if indeed one had been received. “That sort of thing should have been passed to me. We obviously did not receive it.”

Stoate replied, “I am given to understand that Mr Carter-Barr’s office sent it to us on Wednesday July 22nd. It was sent by recorded delivery, and Mr Carter-Barr’s office has kept a record of the number of the delivery. They do it for all legal documents like that. I have also checked it out with the post office. They confirmed that it was delivered to the school on Thursday 23rd July. To whom was it delivered in your office?”

“I am away on a Thursday and Friday in Town, as you well know.”

Scott was looking very sheepish. Eyes were staring at him. Antony Scott was well used to throwing his weight about on a Wednesday afternoon, Thursday, and Friday. He had always liked everybody to know that he was in charge. If he were in charge, he would have got the important document. He would have signed for it. He would have read it and should have passed it on to his superiors straightaway. Now he wished that he had not opened his big trap so often and so loudly. He was going to have to account for this. He had planned for this eventuality, and he had no alternative than to go through with it.

Stoate looked back at Lartington and carried on his inquisition, “Who signs for important legal documents like this? Who would read them in your absence, Mr Lartington?”

“Should it not be you, Headmaster? You, as Director of Learning and Teaching, are the senior officer in charge in the school. Surely you should take on that responsibility when you know that I am absent. You

have done it before, I assume? After all, you are the Director of Learning and Teaching.”

“Of course, I have!” Stoate snapped. “I always used to sign for important documents when they arrived, and I would read them. What is more important is that I would actually do something about them, which you clearly have not. Now you have relieved me of that particular task, I should have thought that it would have been incumbent on you to take appropriate action, which you have clearly not. Why not?”

“I have told you; I was not here the day it arrived. My Financial Manager would have dealt with it, wouldn’t you, Antony?”

“What happened to the letter, Mr Scott,” Stoate asked, fixing the Financial Manager with a stare. Scott looked away. It was clear that he did not want to admit anything. “Why did you not inform Mr Lartington of its contents?”

“I don’t remember signing for it. One of the girls in the office did. If I find out who did, she will be out on her ear pretty damned quick!”

“Who did sign for it?”

“Cheryl, I think,” replied Scott who was implementing his plan. “I am going to interview her tomorrow with a view to sacking her for this incompetence.”

Stoate stared at the Financial Manager and smiled humourlessly at him, “You need not bother with that. I have checked with the Post Office, and they faxed me the receipt. You signed for it.”

“I don’t remember doing so,” said Scott, stalling for time.

“You’d better tell us the whole story, Scott. You’d better start remembering pretty damned quick if you aren’t going to join the massed ranks of the great unwashed in the dole office. And you’d better remember everything because you will be out, should you forget the smallest jot or tittle.”

“I did sign for a letter, possibly.”

“What did you do afterwards? Did it occur to you that it was important? After all you like to say how much responsibility you have while Mr Lartington is away? So, what did you do with it?”

“I opened it and put it on my desk. I was going to tell Mr Lartington about it when he came in on the Monday.”

“Why did you not tell him about it?”

“I mislaid the letter. Cheryl in the office cleared off a whole load of letters from my desk to shred them.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you allowed a young girl from the general office to come into your office and shred your documents? How were they selected?”

“I had a pile on my desk. I told her to go in and shred them. She must have picked up the wrong pile. I’ll have her guts for garters tomorrow.”

Mr Lartington said, “Antony, I have never seen anyone go into your office. You seem remarkably protective about your domain. You have the same attitude to the girls as I do. They know their station and they would not go into your office at all without your being there. When you send for them, they stand in front of your desk, and you give them the work you want them to do for you. You wouldn’t allow any of them to root around on your desk. Besides, like me you do your own shredding; it is our policy, isn’t it?”

Stoate carried on the inquisition, “You’re in it either way, Scott. Either you have shredded the thing yourself, a piece of gross and unforgivable incompetence, or you have allowed a young girl access to sensitive and important documents, against all the management procedures of the school. It looks like it’s the end for you. When a Johnny in the RAF has crashed his plane, it doesn’t matter a jot whether his plane hit a bird or ran out of fuel. The plane has crashed, and it is U/S, finished, knackered, whatever term you have to apply. If the Johnny concerned is lucky enough to walk away, or even be carried away, you can be sure that he will never fly again, if you get my drift?”

“Your incompetence has cost the school very dearly. Now I am not at all interested in the petty ways of bankers and accountants. I am a schoolmaster, interested in the education of boys. Mr Lartington looks after the money, and as far as I am concerned, as long as there is money to run the school, that’s all I am interested in. If you had committed a financial blunder, he no doubt would have kicked your backside to kingdom come. But it would have been his problem, not ours. What you

have done is something that I, as Headmaster, cannot stomach. We have been publicly humiliated in the eyes of the parents and friends of the school. We have been shown up in front of everyone of any importance. Our events are prime society events in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire social calendar, every bit as important as the Thirsk Races, or the Harrogate Flower Festival. Now we are the laughingstock of the whole of Alverstonshire. I founded this school twenty-five years ago, to be a leading academic institution, to have an impeccable reputation as a school that the worthy and wealthy of the area would wish to send their sons. We are now a joke, and I am not in the least bit pleased about that.

“I therefore propose that Antony Scott is to be dismissed from his post as Finance Manager with immediate effect.”

Lartington stared at Stoate, and said, “Not so hasty, Headmaster. Don’t forget that I appointed Mr Scott, not the school. He is answerable to me. I shall deal with this oversight in the way I see fit. He will stay in post.”

Stoate’s eyes were bulging with incredulity at what he had just heard. He had had total sway in the matter of hiring and firing staff. He spluttered, “Good heavens above, Lartington, are you trying to countermand my orders? This man has committed in my eyes the most unforgivable sin of the lot. He has put in jeopardy the reputation of my school. And you are sitting there and telling me that we are going to keep him on? What will the other staff think? They will take this as *carte blanche* for all kinds of sloppiness and incompetence.”

John Gonall sat listening to the exchange. He wondered what a cart blonsch was; he could not remember seeing one on the drive. Perhaps it was the office slang for the lorry that came to take away paper for recycling. Or it might have been what the gardener used to pick up leaves. He thought it was typical of Skinflint to stick up for his minion, Mingy. Although Gonall knew how much his colleagues loathed him, he shared their contempt for the Financial Director and his Manager. By this time, Lartington had resumed his action with Stoate and played his trump card, “If you insist on the dismissal of Mr Scott, Headmaster, I will resign as well. I would like you to consider the consequences of that. I spelled them out to you when I first came four or five months ago. In case you have forgotten I will refresh your memory. This school is on the borderline of insolvency. You have some fairly considerable debts

that have required a massive expansion of the school in order to have any hope of servicing them. The fact that you are here at all is due to one thing and one thing only, my influence at the bank. If I decide that this school is no longer worth my services, I will go from here. My first appointment will be to meet your bankers. Touche de Vere will be in here next week to liquidate the assets of the school, and that will be that. I have several offers coming up in the City, and, quite honestly, I would infinitely prefer to use my skills where they matter, not to support a bunch of North Country bumpkins with their pitiful attempts to emulate the great schools of the South, let alone their society occasions.”

“No, no, no,” replied Stoate, “I am not going to give in to that kind of brinkmanship. This school has had its reputation damaged, and somebody has got to pay.”

“It’s not brinkmanship, Headmaster. If you insist that Mr Scott, be dismissed, I will leave immediately. Touche de Vere will be in next week.”

Donald Blance who had been sitting back to hear out the exchanges decided that the continued existence of the school was more important than Stoate’s pride. He came down on Lartington’s side, saying, “Dunstan, Mr Lartington is serious. We cannot afford to lose him. If we do, we are finished. Certainly, the incidents on Saturday that have so damaged our reputation are most regrettable, but we will overcome them in time. If we have Touche de Vere in, that’s it. I am going to pull rank here and say that Mr Scott stays. Nevertheless, he must be dealt with appropriately by Mr Lartington. From all accounts he has been something of a loose cannon, and he must be reigned in.”

“Somebody has got to pay for this,” said Stoate haughtily. “If it isn’t going to be Mr Scott with his lamentable dereliction of duty, who is it going to be? An example has got to be made and seen to be made.”

Mr Gonall, for whom fairness was never a prime consideration, made his point, “Mr Scott has told us about Cheryl in the office. I don’t believe for a minute that she shredded the vital documents, but she is just the right person to carry the can. She is young, and inexperienced. We can say that she went into Mr Scott’s office without his authorisation and took documents for shredding that were of unparalleled importance for

the school. That might well be a way out of this, and we can explain to the parents about her blunder in the newsletter.”

“I think that seems a reasonable way out, Dunstan?” said Blance. “In fact, I think it’s the only way out.”

That Cheryl was going to be sacked under such blatantly false accusations pricked Stoate’s stunted conscience for a few seconds. Nonetheless, he put it to one side as it occurred to him that the action seemed fitting on the grounds that the end justified the means. He agreed and Lartington would dismiss Cheryl from the service of the Tanswold School Trust as soon as she arrived at work the next day.

Gonall brought up another personnel matter, “While we are discussing the suitability of auxiliary staff in the school, I must draw the attention of the meeting to some problems that are going on in the Science Department. Mrs Lesley Milton, the biology technician is undergoing divorce proceedings. It has been affecting the quality of her work, and I do not believe that it sets a good example to the boys. I would ask the meeting to consider this matter urgently.”

“No, no, no,” said Stoate, “I totally agree; we cannot have that. Mr Lartington, show Mrs Milton the door tomorrow.”

Like everyone else in the room, respect for the truth was not one of John Gonall’s characteristics. The sacking of Mrs Milton would send Peter Brett into a spin, and shake up the whole Science Department, for which Gonall had been given responsibility. Gonall’s management style, if it could be called that, was summed up in Scott’s key phrase, “Got to make it hard, got to make it competitive”.

The meeting dragged on well into the night. Occasionally there were robust exchanges when more controversial topics came up for discussion. John Gonall was not pleased when it was decided that the school did not have the funds to purchase another playing field at the present. The junior fields by Tanswold Woods were vastly inferior to the Alverston Road site. Mr Travers would not be best pleased if a rugby match were held on his newly sown field of winter barley.

That said, most people came out pleased from the meeting. The Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax was now in overall charge of History, English, and Humanities. Mr Gonall was looking forward to being in charge of rugby and the CCF, as well as being in overall charge of Science,

Technology, and Computing. The fact that he knew nothing whatever about any of these subjects was to him no reason for not getting them to jump when he told them. And they would jump high.

Pleased was not the word that Lartington would have used to describe his feelings about the outcome of the meeting. The Finance Department had clearly scored a massive own goal, if one would pardon the expression, in allowing the eviction of the school from its sports field. It was all highly embarrassing but at least they had found a way out which would carry little risk, as long as it could be explained carefully how a young office assistant had gone beyond her duty and thereby been responsible for the whole sorry affair.

Lartington was going to have to monitor Scott more closely, as it was certainly true that he had become something of a loose cannon. Stoate was satisfied as well. Somebody would pay and be seen to pay for the school's humiliation. He had also managed to keep the CCF going; the last thing he wanted to do was to disband it. John Gonall would keep the rugby squad in order by fair means or foul (as long as he did not overdo it and put a recalcitrant child in hospital). Most importantly, there was established a network that could absorb any recrimination from the forthcoming inspection.

Chapter 5

The Inspection was looming, and the whole staff at Tanswold School was busy preparing. There would be a dozen inspectors led by Alan Crompton-Barclay, the Headmaster of Deanvarne School in Hallem. Many heads of department were not used to the level of paperwork that was required, and the writing of schemes of work, and showing evidence of planning were quite new concepts for them. The English Department was in particular disarray as Stephen Booth had been involved in a car accident and would be off work for several weeks at least. The Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax found himself taking on the task of organising what set books the GCSE sets and A-level classes were going to do for their study of Shakespeare. In the chaos of the English Office, he rooted around for the latest syllabus. He found one marked 2000 and felt quite pleased with himself that he was so up to date. At no point did it occur to him that the pupils would be taking the exams in 1999, nor did any of his colleagues point this error out to him. It was particularly unfortunate that there had been a high staff turnover after Andrew McEwan had left. The only continuity was lying in a hospital bed with his leg in plaster.

D’Arcy Fairfax got the English staff to write their schemes of work in interminable meetings after school. Every jot and tittle were argued about. Although d’Arcy-Fairfax considered himself a very cultured man, with a superior knowledge of English Literature, he was all at sea with the more modern books. Fine literature and poetry for him ended at the start of the First World War. In reality, d’Arcy-Fairfax had been born out of his time. Should his span have covered the middle of the Nineteenth Century, his status and social breeding would have more than compensated for his mediocrity and carried him far in the Church. He would probably have been a senior bishop by now, instead of a clerical reject having to make do as a school chaplain. He had fought a rearguard action to protect the traditions of the Church of England against the upsurge of modern worship that had no place for the eloquent poetry of seventeenth century English.

The Chaplain undertook a series of lesson observations on the colleagues for whom he was responsible. He would spring these as he felt like it, on the grounds that he would be seeing the boys working

under natural conditions. His arrival in a class was guaranteed to cause even the most well-ordered lesson to degenerate. Boys would get up and shout “d’Arsehole!”, for which d’Arcy-Fairfax would blame the unfortunate teacher concerned. The negative reports that he would write led their subjects to have stiff and unpleasant interviews with the Director of Learning and Teaching who was becoming increasingly concerned about the professional competence in the English, Humanities, and History departments. One key bone of contention was that d’Arcy-Fairfax had little insight into any of the subjects that he was responsible for; it was a case of “a little bit of knowledge being a very dangerous thing”. It did not prevent him from questioning the subject knowledge of the teacher whom he was watching, even while the lesson was in progress. The effect of this was to inflame the boys that much more. Firstly, they were confused about conflicting versions of what they were supposed to be learning. Some lost confidence in their teacher, while others could see that d’Arcy-Fairfax had only a limited grasp of what he was trying to criticise. Whatever the reaction of the pupils, the teacher always ended up being thoroughly humiliated.

One afternoon, Paul Kelly had had his Geography lesson graced by the Chaplain’s presence. In a discussion about the economic environment of the town of Northwich in Cheshire, d’Arcy-Fairfax interrupted by saying, “You are wrong, Mr Kelly. Northwich has no chemical industry. Its economy is based on agriculture, cheese making, and tourism. You should know that. Are you sure you are up to teaching at this level? Are you meant to be teaching this stuff?”

“Of course, I am, Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax!” snapped Kelly. “It’s on the syllabus. Have you ever been there?”

“Why should I?” replied d’Arcy-Fairfax. “That is hardly relevant to the subject in question? I know...”

“Who asked you in here anyway, d’Arsehole?” shouted a tall fourth former. “You don’t even know where the toilet is, let alone anything about Northwich!”

“How dare you, Budworth?” d’Arcy-Fairfax squawked. When aroused he sounded like an angry chicken. “How dare you speak to me like that? Have you not got any respect for a superior intellect?”

“Yes, I have, but yours isn’t! On your bike, d’Arsehole!”

A chant of “d’Arsehole! d’Arsehole!” erupted which drowned out the Chaplain’s enraged squawking. After ten minutes in which no further progress was possible, d’Arcy-Fairfax beat a retreat, a chewed-up piece of paper landing on his neck.

At lunchtime d’Arcy-Fairfax summoned Mr Kelly to his office to discuss the lesson that he had just seen. The Chaplain opened the subsequent not-very-constructive exchange, “Not quite up to what we expect here, Paul?”

“What do you mean?” replied Kelly sharply. He was still smarting from the Chaplain’s unwelcome intrusion into his classroom. “Who do you think you are to come in and start watching my lesson without so much as by your leave? How dare you question what I am teaching?”

“My dear boy,” said d’Arcy-Fairfax in a tone that he thought was concerned and supportive, but actually was thoroughly patronising, “you know that we have to maintain standards of excellence here. That’s what the parents pay us for. The Headmaster wants to make sure that the parents do get value for money, and I am bound to say that you are not, from what I have observed, providing it. What did you do your first degree in?”

“Geography of course! What the devil do you think?”

“Ah, Satan and his hordes. No, I am on the side of the Heavenly Hosts. If you did Geography, how come you are so ignorant of the economics of Northwich?”

“What?” shouted Kelly. “I damn well know my stuff about Northwich, more than you do with your bits about cheese and tourism! Do you know where it is?”

“In Cheshire. I have friends there and have ridden with the Cheshire Hunt. There is a wonderful social life with the county set there, although it is better in Oxford, I must admit.”

“I happen to have been born and brought up in Northwich and I know it like the back of my hand. I damn well don’t need a book to tell me that its main industry is chemicals. It’s a good plain working town, not afraid to get its hands dirty. Have you ever been there?”

A flash of disdain crossed d'Arcy-Fairfax's face, "Good God, no! Why should I ever want to go anywhere near a working town? You get the poor there. I was in the post office the other day and a poor person came in to get their dole. Why should I have to pay my taxes for them to sponge off me?"

"Didn't Jesus preach about the poor? 'Blessed are the poor' and so on? And you are the Chaplain, preaching on it?"

"My dear fellow, you don't expect me to practise what I preach? Let the poor look after themselves. Besides, you don't understand the full theological context. By 'poor', Jesus doesn't mean poor at all. It is a relative term, and applies much more to those of limited intellect in the understanding of the domain of the co-eternal consubstantiation of..."

"Jesus Wept!" shouted Kelly, convinced that the Lord himself would indeed have wept at the arrogant drivel that was coming from His ambassador's mouth.

"You should know well, Mr Kelly 'Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain'. Now coming back to what we were discussing. Your lesson was frankly of a very poor standard, more appropriate to a comprehensive school than to Tanswold School. You clearly have major difficulties in class control, which points I shall be reporting to the Headmaster. I shall also report about your rather high-handed attitude towards me and my role in supporting you."

"High-handed? You can talk! I do not like upper-class twits, nor do I like pompous toffee-nosed windbags, especially when they patronise me and question my qualifications! My classes were perfectly well behaved until you poked your nose in. I can tell you this for free, nobody can stand you, pupil or staff."

"Good afternoon, Mr Kelly. The door is over there. It has been most interesting talking to you."

The Chaplain was as good as his word. Paul Kelly spent half an hour after school being berated by the Director of Learning and Teaching for his uncooperative approach towards the implementation of school policies to improve teaching and learning.

The Chaplain had pondered the poor quality of the teaching and learning that he had seen in his newly extended domain. He decided to

tackle it head-on by a series of meetings in which the staff would, in effect, learn how to teach. For someone who was so wedded to the old, there was a surprisingly modern and trendy element in d'Arcy-Fairfax's approach. He favoured the flip-chart method of training. In his days in the late sixties as a theological student, he and his fellow students had debated passionately about how many angels could dance on a pin. They had brainstormed their ideas onto hectares of creamy A2 paper, using up many a felt tip pen. Now d'Arcy-Fairfax imported at vast expense various facilitators who paid obsequious lip service to the professionalism and expertise of their trainees. Next, they would brainstorm onto the creamy white flip chart, before the pieces of A2 were put up with almost religious reverence onto the walls.

These twilight brainstorming sessions became increasingly resented. The week before the inspection, several members of staff rebelled at the third meeting that week and went home. The next morning, they had an unpleasant interview with Dunstan Stoaite.

The only member of staff who did not have d'Arcy-Fairfax's unwelcome intrusion was John Gonall, whose ignorance of history was left unchallenged. Gonall's intention was to catch staff unawares. His presence and reputation could quell even the most rebellious class; this was the total opposite to the Chaplain who converted the most docile group into a bunch of hooligans. Gonall would sidle quietly into a prep-room or office and take copious notes before publicly confronting his quarry. His main target for this treatment was Robert Cooke.

Shortly before the inspection, Cooke was having a difficult lesson with a group from the Fourth Form. The Fourth Year in general were proving to be problematic for the staff as a whole, as there were a number of boys who had been imported from several secondary modern schools, as well as Great Daxford. The high level of academic work they had to do was far from appropriate, as many of them would not have been out of place in a bottom set in a comprehensive school. Not surprisingly, they could not keep up and were getting more resentful and uncooperative by the day. On this particular occasion, there had been a lot of fooling about, and low-level disruption that made the lesson almost impossible for Cooke to teach. Cooke was completely unaware of Gonall's presence in the prep-room that opened out into the front of his room. Normally, Cooke would take little breathers in there just to regain his sanity, but on

this occasion he had not, as he did not dare keep his eyes off this shower for one minute.

It was Simon McConnell who noticed that Gonall was sitting there. He had got up out of his seat to cuff his friend Kieran Pearson, and he shouted out, “Gonad’s in the prep-room!” before scuttling back to his seat. Gonall came out of the prep-room and stood in the door, glowering round the room with his basilisk stare. He walked up to the front and said, “Will you kindly keep your class under control, Mr Cooke? I haven’t witnessed such a shambles in all my years in teaching.”

“Excuse me, Mr Gonall,” Cooke replied, “if you want to discuss anything, shouldn’t we do it in private, not in front of the pupils?”

“No, here will do, Mr Cooke,” Gonall said icily. “I have been listening in on this lesson and I cannot say that I am in the least bit impressed. There is not one factor that is in the least bit satisfactory, not at all. How long have you been teaching?”

“Six years. Why?”

“My impression is that you have been teaching for six days, Mr Cooke. You are worse than a novice. You have little idea of any of the basics of teaching. Your lesson is unplanned; you have limited knowledge of your subject. Your strategies for teaching and learning are non-existent. As for discipline, it’s like a fairy’s tea party, not the kind of lesson we expect at Tanswold School. I needn’t say more. I will be making a report to the Headmaster. You are being monitored closely, and it is very doubtful if you will be back here next term. If you wish to be back here, Mr Cooke, there had better be a very substantial and immediate improvement.”

With that Gonall marched out of the classroom. There was silence. One would have liked to have said that one could hear a pin drop, but as soon as the door closed, the silence was interrupted by the crash of a metal pencil case being edged off a bench onto the floor. This was a signal for the class to erupt. Some pupils took Gonall’s public dressing down of their teacher as an excuse to do as they pleased. Ben Anderson turned up his arrogance control and marched up to Mr Cooke, saying, “Mr Gonall says you can’t teach. I always said that. Mr Storate should sack you. If I don’t get a grade A at GCSE, my parents are going to sue you for every penny you have got.”

Others were outraged. Whereas their attitude to Robert Cooke varied from mild disdain to utter contempt, they all heartily loathed Gonall, and would happily have seen him sink into the very fires of Hell. The polarisation of opinion led to a slanging match between the two opposing factions with Cooke as piggy-in-the-middle. The shouting match continued beyond the end of the lesson and Cooke retreated to the prep-room and collapsed in a chair.

At lunchtime, Cooke caught up with Gonall in the staffroom. “Why did you have to come in and humiliate me in front of one of my worst groups?” he complained. “You have made them lose confidence in what I am doing with them. It is also not very professional, is it?”

“It is up to you to get it sorted out, Mr Cooke,” Gonall replied icily. “Your teaching is not of a standard that is required at Tanswold School. I told you that before. I hope I don’t have to repeat myself, for if I do, I will not be pleased. How much about your subject do you really know? Are you competent to teach it?”

“Of course, I know about my subject!”

“That is not the impression that I get, Mr Cooke. You made several factual errors in your lesson. You should know full well that positive charges move and like charges attract. You should be up on your facts.”

“Oh yes? The moon is made of green cheese. Is that the kind of fact that you would like me to put about? Before you start telling me how to teach, perhaps you should get your facts straight. For your information, positive charges don’t move and like charges repel. When did you last do physics? Since when were you such a polymath?”

“That is none of your business, Mr Cooke,” Gonall replied even more icily. He was not going to admit to a junior colleague that he had failed Physics O-level with a desperately poor mark. Besides, Gonall did not know what a Polly math was; possibly it was a parrot that could count from one to ten. Gonall continued, “I would advise you to mind your business very carefully. In case you have forgotten, your business is to improve your classroom discipline very radically over the next few days, if you are to keep your job here at all. And when you have done that, Mr Cooke, you had better make pretty sure that your teaching remains up to the mark. We have no room for passengers here.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Cooke answered. “I am under a lot of pressure. My wife and daughter are stuck in a house we cannot sell, and I am paying half my salary in rent. My wife is severely depressed, and our daughter acts up when I am at home at weekends. I don’t see my family from six o’clock on Monday morning to seven thirty on a Friday. I gave up everything for this job.”

“Mr Cooke, your family life is not of the least bit of interest to me,” Gonall replied coldly. “Your family comes a very distant second to your obligation to Tanswold School. You will do well to remember that. I should spell it out to you that you have not lived up to our expectations and that you have failed seriously in your contractual obligations. Nobody is at all pleased with the work you have done. A major improvement is required now, Mr Cooke.”

Cooke decided that this was an appropriate time to give up his conversation. Further intercourse of this kind would be a waste of time. He looked balefully at the Housemaster of Bennett House while the latter drank his coffee. At the same time Cooke assessed how much space Gonall wasted. It must have been at least one hundred and ten litres. It was irrational but Cooke could not bear the sight such a horrible man eating. And there was Gonall eating a biscuit, sitting smugly as he read a newspaper, occasionally glowering over the top, fixing colleagues with a stare from under his heavy eyebrows. Never in his entire career in industry or teaching had Cooke ever come across a colleague who was quite so unlikeable. Even the dreadful Ms Heathcote had some human charm. Cooke sat well away from John Gonall while dark thoughts ran through his mind. Sometimes they were reflections on how his job had gone so pear-shaped. He was cross with himself that he had been so taken in by the superficial kindness of his colleagues. Instead, they were out for themselves. This was true to a certain extent, for as long as Stoa had someone to gun for, his attention would be diverted from them. Other dark thoughts revolved round Gonall sinking into quicksand, never to be seen again.

Cooke’s meditations were interrupted by Eileen coming into the staff room. His heart leapt as she came towards him. There was nothing romantic about this as Eileen could not be described as a beautiful woman; instead, Cooke knew that there was more trouble ahead.

“Robert,” she said, “the Headmaster would like to see you at the end of school today. Could you please stay behind?”

Cooke felt like a naughty fourth former as he waited in the outer office, but he was not going to give Stoate the satisfaction of knowing that. Stoate kept him waiting for almost half an hour; this was Stoate’s standard behaviour towards staff who were seeing him. It was intended to give the impression that he was an immensely busy man and that in seeing them he had to break from an important and busy schedule, to do them an immense favour. If the member of staff were in trouble, it would make him or her feel a little more anxious. And that was the effect that it had on Cooke.

When he summoned Cooke in, Stoate had an almost casual air about him, and lounged back in his chair as he started, “Robert, you know, when I was in the RAF, one of the things I was trained to do was to get out of a spin. If you are doing steep turns, it is very easy to put your plane into a spin, and quite difficult to get it out. We practised and practised until we got it right. You know, you had to do it before you ran out of altitude. If you didn’t, you hit the deck and you hit it hard. Very hard. Several times I have seen them having to shovel Jonnies out of smoking craters, because they did not get it right. I think you know what I mean.

“Now the problem that I see is that you are rapidly running out of altitude. Altitude above you is one of the most useless things in flying. And you are, I am afraid, risking hitting the deck rather hard. Now, I am told that not only are you not managing to keep control over your classes, but you are also teaching them the wrong stuff. It is a bit like having water in your fuel. It doesn’t exactly help you to regain the altitude that you need to gain and gain pretty quickly. Do you see what I mean?”

Cooke didn’t, so Stoate was a little blunter, “I am told by Mr Gonall that you cannot get your facts in Physics right. Are you sure that you are qualified to teach physics? Do you have the intellectual capacity to teach it to the standards that we expect?”

“For your information, Headmaster,” said Cooke bristling at this flagrant questioning of his intellect, “Mr Gonall was wrong. Any third

year should be able to tell you that like charges do not attract. They repel.”

“Whom should I believe? For your information, Mr Cooke, Mr Gonall has been in this school and a well-respected member of staff for many years. If he tells me that you are not up on your facts, I am more inclined to respect him in preference to you. On the information at my disposal, I am satisfied that you are not totally *au fait* with the information you are putting across and I certainly doubt whether you have the intellectual capacity to teach effectively.”

Cooke’s hackles were rising, and he stared Stoaate in the eye. “Nobody, but nobody questions my intelligence, Headmaster.”

Stoaate sat back casually and contemptuously. He looked down his nose at Cooke, and said, “Perhaps, you should show a little bit more of this so-called intelligence that you claim for yourself. If you consider yourself an intelligent man, you should be able to work out ways to control your classes a lot more effectively than you are at present. Our parents pay a lot for their sons to come here. They are paying for excellent teaching, and you are not delivering. Remember that this is not a rest home for effete academics and refugees from the rough schools. Finally, I must go back to what I said before. You are rapidly running out of altitude. I hope that by the next time I review the situation that you have considerably more altitude below you than you have now. Altitude above you is the most useless thing in aviation. I think you get my drift.”

Cooke got Stoaate’s drift and wanted to put full throttle on to get the hell out of that damned office as quickly as he could. He felt trapped. He had to work on. He would have loved to walk away from The Hermitage, leaving Stoaate, the ignorant Gonall and the pitiful d’Arcy-Fairfax as far away as he could. He wanted to get the next train out of Tanswold Station and tell Stoaate to stuff himself. But he knew he couldn’t. Cooke had longed for a job like this, and he was devastated that it had gone pear-shaped so quickly. He trudged back to his Bed and Breakfast with an increasing feeling of impending doom. He would have given anything to get away. He loathed the North East and wanted desperately to get back to his native Derbyshire.

Yet again his wife went ballistic when she heard of his second interview with Stoate and told him that he would have to get another job through an agency. After he had put the phone down, Cooke sat in the hallway, and started to cry.

Mrs Burton, a kindly and motherly landlady, found him, and listened to his story. As he concluded, she said, “Robert, this might not be very much help, but you are not the only one that Stoate has mistreated. One of our friends is married to the minister over in Caldenby. His name is Andy McEwan. He was Head of English at Tanswold, and he too got pushed out in a way that was very underhand. He’s a gruff Scot with a heart of gold. Would you like a word with him?”

Cooke agreed. He could do with every bit of help he could get and felt very relieved that Andrew McEwan would be over in ten minutes or so. Cooke thought he remembered a gruff Scot when he had visited the place in May. He had heard tales of how McEwan was willing to stand up for anyone, regardless of the consequences.

Presently the doorbell rang, and a tall sandy-haired Scotsman was shown into the room. Cooke estimated his age as being late forties. Behind him came an even taller gentleman with a fine mop of long black hair, about the same age, with a very gentle face. Cooke was impressed with how outstandingly good looking the second man was.

“So you must be Robert Cooke?” said McEwan. His strong Edinburgh accent made the word ‘Cooke’ sound like ‘Cuick’. “I am so pleased to meet you, but I am so sorry that it’s in such dreadful circumstances. This is John Proudlock. He’s Rector in Alverston, in effect my wife’s boss, and he’s agreed to come along. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, no, not at all,” Cooke replied, “I need all the help I can get.”

“What’s happened?” asked Proudlock.

“Do you want the edited version or the full script?”

“Whichever you want.”

Cooke told them from the beginning, as it seemed the best place to start, while the two men and Mrs Burton listened quietly but intently. He related the incidents in which he had been intruded on by Stoate and

Gonall. He had tried to seek Christian solace from the Chaplain but found none. At this last point, McEwan could not restrain himself from comment, "I'm not surprised at that. You would get more sense from a pheasant than d'Arcy-Fairfax. He likes all the dressing up and high falutin' stuff but ask him to get involved and he's not interested."

"I know this is not very Christian for a rector to say this," said Proudlock, "but I totally agree with Andy. That man d'Arcy-Fairfax regards himself as an intellectual but has little more intellect than our puppy. He sums up everything that has been wrong with the Church for the last century, the Church Ineffective, the Church Irrelevant. Between him and our Poppy, I would choose Poppy any time, even when she chews my feet."

"As for Gonall," McEwan added, "he's just ignorant. Like all those we've blethered about, I couldn't stand any of them. But Gonall takes the biscuit, he has no clue. It's typical of Stoate that he will take Gonall's word rather than yours for what is right. I am sorry to say, Robert, that it seems that you have rather jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

"Robert, you need to get out for your own sake. I know Stoate too well. He would like to sack you. It gives him a buzz. It makes him think he's keeping everyone on their toes. I am afraid that your face doesn't fit there. I have seen too many good people got rid of very unfairly. It happened to me last term. You are a decent person. You are certainly too good for that place."

"He's a bully and his friends are bullies too," said Proudlock. "I made the biggest mistake of my life just over eighteen months ago. It is a mistake that I will never forget to the day I die. My mother prevailed on me to send my children to Tanswold School. My daughter went into the sixth form, and my son into the third year. My son was bullied dreadfully, not just by other boys there, but by the likes of Gonall, Stoate, and to a lesser extent, d'Arcy-Fairfax. Gonall is notorious for beating up the boys. I am surprised how he can get away with it, but the school also has a notorious lawyer who in many ways is totally incompetent, but has a gift to turning truth into falsehood, and *vice versa*. It's this man, Carter-Barr, who has managed to bring off some gross miscarriages of justice.

“Robert, what I want you to do is to trust God. I know it sounds trite. His word for you is that he is much stronger than a sixty-two-year-old bachelor of very dubious repute. He will see you through this, although you are going to go through some very difficult times. That school has put many through a difficult time, including my family. You may have heard that there was a severe food poisoning outbreak last term.”

“Yes, I did. A student died.”

“That was my daughter. She had a very bright future in lots of ways. Stoate was arrogant about the whole affair that went beyond cruelty.” Proudlock went on to explain some of the many miserable incidents caused by Stoate after Gemma’s death. When he had finished, he said, “Robert, there is something I want you to do. But you must be sworn to secrecy. Please don’t even tell your wife.”

“I can be trusted to keep my trap shut.”

“Do you know the *Bully Busters* series?”

“Yes. Don’t they look into managers who bully their staff?”

“That’s the one. They are producing a film about Tanswold School scheduled to go out in the spring. Would you be prepared to share your experiences? Both Andy and I have already given interviews. It must not get back to the school. If Stoate finds out he will have an injunction put on it.”

Cooke was still uneasy when he went to bed. He felt strongly that both McEwan and Proudlock had been genuinely concerned for him, as well as Mrs Burton. He had told them everything and they had not scoffed at it or given him pious platitudes for answers. There was no sense of triumphalism in their advice. They were realistic enough to state that “victorious living”, something that he had heard so much about in church, was at times very difficult indeed. He was in no doubt that in Stoate and Tanswold, he had a formidable enemy. He had not intended to make enemies of anyone; it just seemed that they did not want him as a friend. He was right. Stoate always wanted to have someone to be a scapegoat. The longer one lasted, the less likely that this would be the case. Cooke knew that he did not have much chance of lasting the term,

let alone the year. Twenty years was out of the question. At least he had McEwan and Proudlock on his side. He also knew that he was part of an army of people that owed Dunstan Stoate and his friends a very deep debt of ingratitude.

The only thing he found at all funny was how Stoate had had his title changed from Headmaster to Director of Learning and Teaching. Some staff had already referred to him as “The DOLT”. He had not heard of that word before but was highly amused when he found out it meant “idiot”.

As Cooke slept that night, he dreamed of an aeroplane. It was quite a large plane, with high-set wings powered by two turboprops. It had been flying high, but it had lost power and was now very near the ground. The pilot put it down into a ploughed field, and it came to rest with its nose buried in mud. It lay at a drunken angle with its left wing touching the ground. Bits of it looked bent and it did not seem that the plane would ever fly again. Cooke woke up with the image firmly in his mind. It would not leave him. In the small hours he tossed and turned trying to get back to sleep. He would have loved to leave teaching, but he had no money to retrain. No, he would have to go to an agency, and try to pick up the shattered remains of his career from there. The thought of where they would send him made him feel sick. Debts of ingratitude were mounting in his mind, with a considerable annual percentage rate.

Many others had partially repaid their debts of ingratitude to Stoate by talking to the team from *Bully Busters*. Now at the BBC, the programme’s director was discussing the content of the series with his boss, the Head of News and Current Affairs. They had been through two half-hour programmes. The first was on a shop manager who was giving his staff hell in order to meet his inflated sales targets, and the second involved a chef in a restaurant who was a perfectionist *in extremis* and would berate his staff with all sorts of four-letter words. When they turned to the third of the series, which was to bear the title *Very Public Scandals*, the producer said, “This one has opened a real can of worms. We are still interviewing people who have fallen foul of this man, Stoate. Some of the things he has been getting away with are quite appalling. The programme is not yet complete, but we will have a look at what we have got on it so far.”

The producer switched on the video player and both men watched intently, including several secretly taped interviews with Stoate himself. “The man is insolently arrogant,” said the boss. “Normally the bullies that you have tackled are under great pressure themselves and take it out on others. We’ve seen how contrite they are when challenged. But this one programme has opened up a real can of worms. There is not just bullying, but there is also physical violence and violation of employment law, as well as perjury and corruption. It’s way beyond the remit of *Bully Busters*. No insult to your programme, Eric, there’s been some first-class journalism here. You’ll get the credit for this. What do you reckon that we put it on *Panorama*?”

“I don’t mind passing it over, Mike, although it’s going to leave a hole in the schedules. We reckoned that this one would need two half-hour slots to give the coverage that would do justice to the story. We have spent a long time on this one and we still need to get on with the others.”

“It’s not time wasted. We could always put back the *Bully Busters* a few weeks so that your team can get more stories. There’s plenty to choose from. Let’s get this one on *Panorama*. It’s exposing high profile misdemeanours and it’s in the public interest to expose the rip-offs that have been going on.”

“We’ve got one problem, Mike. Tanswold School is inextricably linked in with the dubious affairs of Sir Kenneth Rounce. I understand that he’s under investigation for fraud and tax evasion. I am told the police expect to lay charges against him. We can’t obviously broadcast his role while things are *sub judice*.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get the legal eagles to go through it all with a fine toothcomb. Who’s the officer in charge of the investigation?”

“Detective Commander Richard Smithells of the Yorkshire Fraud Squad. I’m told he’s a damned good copper with a fine nose for financial malpractice.”

Smithells’ fine nose for financial malpractice had rooted out plenty of it in the Rounce case. This included the holding of charity functions from which very little money indeed had arrived at the intended charities. Most had been traced to Sir Kenneth’s and Lady Monica’s

overseas bank accounts. Some had been re-routed into the general funds of Tanswold School. Large backhanders to councillors had ensured that many developments of Sir Kenneth had desecrated several town centres. Sir Kenneth himself had also received a very substantial commission for allowing a huge and soulless housing estate to be constructed on a large tract of unspoiled countryside near Beckton-on-Sower. Despite the fact that there had been very substantial local and regional opposition, Barlby Inglewick had gone ahead anyway. Rounce had also made a fortune on the sale of the land and avoided paying Capital Gains Tax on it. There were many other financial irregularities, and it took Smithells a good two hours to read through the charges. It took a further forty minutes for Smithells to read through the many counts of perjury and perversion of the course of justice from Sir Kenneth's time as Chairman of the Bench.

"You'll get bail, Sir Kenneth, as these offences are not violent," concluded Smithells, "but you should consider the sums involved. If some villains did that on a bullion van, they would be in for thirty years."

"This is outrageous, Smithells!" Sir Kenneth was spluttering with rage. "Why can a member of the aristocracy not enjoy the profits of hard work and endeavour? All you damned communists bringing everyone down to the lowest level!"

"I am not a communist. I won't tell you how I voted at the last election, but it was the way that many policemen vote, and it was for the sitting MP.

"I am not prejudging the trial, Sir Kenneth, but if you are found guilty of even half of these offences, you will be going down for a good long time. You may even meet your little friend Graham Smith. By the time it gets through the court, he will have just a little of his time to do, so you might just bump into each other. You never know, you could even come across Wayne Leach whom you met a few months ago. He's in and out all the time. On the other hand, it's not my decision. My evidence has got to satisfy the jury."

"You haven't got any and you well know it! You will be horse-whipped after the trial, and I will ensure that you never work again."

"You can bluster as much as you like. If you were so convinced that I was wrong, you would be much calmer. I do have evidence, lots of

it. It's very complicated and will take some explaining, but I will explain it in detail."

"You won't get anyone to testify. I have many influential friends, you know."

"With the friends you've got, who needs an enemy? They have dropped you right in it. Mud sticks, you see, and they want to clean it off pretty damned quick. Just the merest hit of joint charges and they were singing like a canary, if you would pardon the police slang. By the way, don't think you will have much influence with the judge. We know the circles you have moved in, and we will ensure that the judge is impartial in this case. Don't get me wrong, we don't have influence with the judiciary, unlike you in times past.

"No, Sir Kenneth, I pride myself that the convictions I secure are entirely based on the evidence before the court, not on people I know. The type of people I deal with think I am just a copper, a rather low type. In fact, I went to a boarding school every bit as posh as yours. I always wanted to be a policeman. And I have dealt with some pretty rough types, some of whom you may well meet. I don't take any satisfaction in seeing a man sent down, but the satisfaction I get is from ensuring that his victims get the justice they deserve."

"I am not in the least bit interested in your life story, Mr Smithells, let alone in what motivates you. All I am bothered about is that you have disrupted legitimate endeavour and enterprise. I earn my money. I don't see why the aristocracy should have to give it away to the feckless poor all the time."

"Sir Kenneth, if your endeavour and enterprise were legitimate, you would never have met me. Nor would your estate have to be run by administrators to ensure that the taxes you have withheld for so long are rightly returned to the Exchequer. You certainly would not be facing a list of charges that have taken two or more hours to read out. As for the feckless poor, as you call them, I would advise you to consider your history, and the result of the aristocracy getting richer and the poor getting poorer. It was the French Revolution. You won't have to face what many of them had to."

"You're a policeman, Smithells, not a history professor. Don't try to teach me anything."

“I wouldn’t waste my time. All I am trying to do is to help you to see the seriousness of the situation that you have caused yourself to be in. You have been fundamentally dishonest in many dealings. If you and the likes of you were honest, there would be no need for people like me. You are arrogant and militantly self-centred. I would advise you to change your tone, because the court will not take kindly to it if you as arrogant to them as you have been to me. Rumour has it that Judge James Price may well preside at your trial. They call him ‘Three, Four, or Five’; three years if you plead guilty, four years if you change your plea to guilty, five years if you are found guilty.”

Sir Kenneth sat there in a gloomy silence. It had been a horrific day. He was not used to the lack of deference that was absent nowadays to a man of his standing. Now that he was one of the *nouveaux pauvres*, where were his so-called friends? Instead, he had spent three hours in the dingy police cell with its disgusting stainless-steel lavatory, and now was being berated by a policeman. In the old days, the police saluted him as a mark of their respect of the upper class. He could do what he had liked with impunity, until he had met Smithells. If that damned man Smith had not had his fingers in the till, Smithells would not have been rooting around like a pig after truffles. It seemed an appropriate simile. Now his life had been turned over. He had lost his home; he had to make do with the flat on the top floor. The great unwashed were now tramping all over what was rightly his. All the traditional events that made the social calendar at Gilham Park had been abandoned. Sir Kenneth missed the Hunt and the Hunt Ball, the shooting parties, the Masonic dinners, and the Ball that raised funds for the Conservative Party. Instead, they had firework concerts, vehicle rallies, family fun days, and teddy bears’ picnics. The latter Sir Kenneth and Lady Monica found particularly wearisome. Both loathed children.

Now Sir Kenneth faced the ultimate humiliation. He was going to be tried like a common criminal. Although he would not admit it, and had every intention of pleading not guilty, he knew that Smithells had a very strong case. He would have to twist the truth very convincingly if he were to get the jury to believe him rather than Smithells. Otherwise, he would be good for at least ten years. He would be well into his eighties when he came out. Pleading guilty was not an option. He had to be acquitted of every single charge. And that was where the biggest

problem lay; there were an awful lot of them. He would need a damned fine lawyer. Carter-Barr would have done it well. Carter-Barr had the ability to argue that black was white. Unfortunately, Carter-Barr was only interested in helping the well-heeled. Sir Kenneth was no longer among the well-heeled; he was eligible for legal aid. Instead, he had Keyhan Kuri, a young man from Marklew & Burwood. Not only was his young lawyer very new to the job and still finding his feet, but also had the wrong skin colour for the racist Sir Kenneth Rounce.

After his committal to the Crown Court by the magistrates at Alverston, there had been several tense meetings over the next few months in the offices of Marklew & Burwood, during which Sir Kenneth had been remarkably uncivil and Mr Kuri had threatened to walk out. Eventually Sir Kenneth decided he would represent himself when it came to court. Keyhan Kuri was heartily relieved to be shot of the case. From his initial reading of the evidence, he was convinced that Sir Kenneth was as guilty as sin. Besides, Mr Kuri had a very strong sense of right and wrong and would not have perjured himself to the extent that was required to ensure Sir Kenneth's acquittal.

Sir Kenneth knew that the legal process would be very slow and being no younger, he hoped that death or frail senility would make him unfit to plead.

While the sealing of Sir Kenneth's fate was still a far distant proposition, that of Robert Cooke was much more imminent. The Inspection was now impending with all sorts of worthy educationalists examining every detail of life at Tanswold School. The pupils were reacting in the way that everybody had feared. The atmosphere in the school had become really nasty. There had been several spats in which the pupil body had split along tribal lines. Those from Great Daxford were still very much sticking together. One afternoon, the two main tribal factions met on the all-weather pitch after school and slugged it out. The brawl had been going on for some minutes before somebody noticed and all the staff still left in the school rushed down to break it up. Despite their best efforts the brawl continued until several minibuses of policemen in riot gear arrived. One boy had been so badly beaten up that he had to be taken to hospital. Two arrests were made, and the boys concerned were charged with assault.

Stoate was livid, not so much because of the fight, which he considered part of manly development, but because the police had been called in, causing the school some more bad publicity. He would have been even angrier if he had known that the whole episode had been filmed. After calling an emergency meeting the next morning, the Headmaster berated his staff for being lily-livered cowards and gutless wonders either for having gone home or not being able to contain the fight. Stoate called in John Gonall (who had always been conspicuous by his absence in a crisis, but always managed to take the credit for bringing the thing under control) to discuss with him some ideas for tough military discipline for the disaffected of Great Daxford.

“What sort of thing were you expecting, Dunstan?” said Gonall as he chewed over the prospect. He was not short of ideas of how he could bully the most recalcitrant into submission.

“Anything you can think of, John,” replied Stoate. “We cannot afford to have a repeat performance of what happened yesterday afternoon, especially when the inspectors come next week. We should resurrect the school parade and inspection.”

“I would agree to that, Dunstan. I have always maintained that standards started to slip when we gave it up. Why did we give it up?”

“It was my fault. I was getting too lazy, I suppose. We will definitely revive it, with staff in their gowns as well. You and Miles can brief the school on how it is to be done in assembly tomorrow. We will have a practice on Thursday afternoon instead of activities. We will start at lunchtime.”

“We won’t have enough CCF uniforms for the whole school, but I will have the CCF on parade tomorrow and Thursday. I suggest we have a staff meeting about it after school.”

After school, all the staff were once again crammed into the dingy staff room, which was hot and stuffy. There was a universal and sullen resentment at Gonall’s proposal. There was a lot of muttering afoot about how Gonall was trying to usurp Miles Stanton’s role as Deputy Headmaster, especially as the latter was known to be applying for posts as Headmaster himself. Gonall’s instructions were as long-winded as they were incomprehensible. With very few exceptions, nobody understood what they were meant to be doing. The idea of doing a

military style inspection on their forms outraged several members of staff. Edward Packer voiced the feelings of the meeting, “Excuse me, I trained to be a teacher, not a drill sergeant. What is the point of all of this? Is this not one more burden that will distract us from our primary role, which is to get the kids through their exams?”

“If you wish to dispute the Headmaster’s instructions, you can go to see him now,” Gonall replied icily. “The object is to get some discipline into the pupils, which many of you don’t seem to be able to do. The primary role of this school is to produce fine young men to be the future leaders of the community, the county, and possibly the country. That won’t come without instilling a bit of backbone into the boys that we have. If the boys cannot accept it, they should go, and that should also apply to members of staff. This is Tanswold School, not Goyder’s.

“Both the Headmaster and I will be inspecting the boys. Their uniforms will be neat. Their ties will be done up properly. They will all have their house badges worn outside. Their shoes will be polished. Their trousers will be neatly pressed. Tutors are to be held responsible for ensuring their forms comply with these orders in full. That means every single boy. If any tutor is at fault as regards compliance with these orders, the first failure will be noted, the second failure will result in an interview with the Headmaster or myself. The third failure will result in disciplinary action. If you don’t like it, you had better consider your position here.”

The same atmosphere of resentment and confusion applied to the assembly the next morning. Gonall explained in the minutest detail about how each form was to stand in register order with their tutor at the outer end. The tutor would inspect them first. They were to come to attention and would salute the Headmaster as he came out to inspect them. Gonall explained how any boy whose appearance fell below the expected standard would be detained to polish his shoes or tie his tie until he got it right. While Gonall droned on, Stanton sat back, looking forward to his interview the next day with the Governors of Kelford School. He had dissociated himself completely from what Gonall had decided. Gonall could strut about playing soldiers, pretending to be a little general to his heart’s content, as long as he did not involve him. Stanton had been a senior teacher for enough years to know that Gonall’s scheme would never work. Hopefully Gonall would take enough rope to

hang himself with. Stanton knew that he had kept the school going while Stoate had been getting less and less effective. All he had to do was to put a positive gloss on that the next day. Afterwards, he would be able to enjoy Gonall being hoist by his own petard.

In preparation for the school parade, Gonall had the CCF out drilling that lunchtime. At first there was a most unmilitary demeanour about the cadets, but Gonall had anticipated this and sorted out some old Second World War backpacks, one for each cadet. He had also obtained a tonne of sharp sand, which he ordered two boys to shovel into ten kilo bags. Each boy was loaded up with ten kilos of sand. The first breach of Gonall's military discipline would result in trouble. Simon McConnell was the first to receive Gonall's persuasion to cooperate. He objected, "I'll tell my Dad and he will sue you, Mr Gonall!" Gonall was so impressed by this reply that he promptly delivered a second persuasion to cooperate, this time rather harder. Next, he called McConnell out to the front and loaded another ten-kilo bag of sand into his backpack. He ordered McConnell to sprint to the other end of the all-weather pitch and back, followed by fifty press-ups. Each time McConnell stopped to rest, Gonall yelled at him. A couple of times McConnell tried to get up to give Gonall a piece of his mind, but Gonall promptly pushed him back to the ground until the fifty press ups were completed. When McConnell had finished, he got up to walk away. This was not part of Gonall's drill, and he hissed, "Where do think you are going, McConnell?"

"I am going to get changed and I am going to report you to the Headmaster. Then I'm going to ring my dad," McConnell gasped after his physical exertions.

"No, you're not," snapped Gonall. "GET BACK IN THE RANKS NOW!"

Gonall spun McConnell about, and, frogmarched him back to the ranks. Crying with the pain and anger, McConnell resumed his place the ranks, while Gonall bellowed, "AND THAT WILL HAPPEN TO ANYONE ELSE WHO TRIES ANY SMART REMARKS!"

Gonall marched them up and down the all-weather pitch shouting for them to get into time. Although their unison was not quite as precise as the Yorkshire Light Infantry, it was certainly better than it was before,

but it was still not up to Gonall's expectations. He brought the squad to attention and bellowed, "I have seen some pretty pitiful sights in my time, but never a shower like you. A bigger collection of gay fairies it has never been such a displeasure for me to meet. We are going to go on and on until we get it right. Start with twenty-five press-ups! Now! Down – Up! Down – Up!" Gonall went round meting out further physical encouragement to those who were lagging. Stoate had come out of The Hermitage and looked on approvingly. He didn't care that Gonall's methods might well lay him open to an assault charge. Carter-Barr would see to it that such complaints would be turned on their head, and that the complainant would be found guilty of an assault against Mr Gonall; it had happened before. Gonall was Stoate's only really effective ally. If Miles Stanton were appointed Headmaster at Kelferford, Stoate would promote Gonall to be his deputy, at least until the new Headmaster took over. That might not be for a while; they had advertised twice and had received no applications at all.

The next day was cold and wet, even for November. The school practised and practised its parade. Although the CCF did not dare get their part wrong, the rest of the school were clueless as to what they had to do. Some boys scampered between the different groups. Others chattered idly despite the best attempts by the tutors to get them to stand in silence. Gonall wandered about, cuffing the odd boy here and there. Or he would berate a tutor for not having done his duty properly. Five times he made them fall in, and five times somebody got it wrong. When one small boy was failing to get it right, Gonall made him do press-ups into a puddle. Daniel Eccles shouted, "Pick on someone of your own size, Gonad!" This was followed by a chant of "Gonad! Gonad!" There ensued a savage inquiry as to who had been so impertinent. Nobody owned up. Daniel Eccles was a tough boy and would have held his own with Gonall, but he did not wish to be expelled for assaulting a member of staff.

Gonall, d'Arcy-Fairfax, and the Headmaster processed onto the all-weather pitch, while the school saluted them. Surprisingly, it was done very well in unison with the commands being called out, "Up, two, three! Down, two, three! Up, two, three! Down, two, three!" Despite that, Gonall decided it should be done again, as practice would make

perfect. By the time they went in, all the boys and the junior staff were soaked to the skin and freezing. They were certainly not in the mood to do any work. In the meantime, Gonall strutted about the school, calling out staff and pupils to dress them down where he had seen evidence of slackness.

The following week saw Alan Crompton-Barclay and his colleagues descend on the school for the long-awaited inspection. Stoate had been busy making sure that he looked as if he were an up-to-date manager with all sorts of data at his hands. So, as his preparation for the week, he decided that he really ought to use his computer. He struggled to find relevant files and wrote copious notes on how to save them. He had attempted to master spreadsheets (which he had thought was what his cleaner did when making his bed) but was totally confused. He had almost deleted a spreadsheet that had projections of future numbers. Databases were totally beyond him, but it still looked good to have a computer sitting on his desk chuntering to itself in the background.

While Stoate was having a preliminary meeting with the lead inspector, he decided to call up some material on his computer. He had not realised that some boys had used the network to access his computer and had altered the various sounds that the computer made as it went through its various routines. Instead of the opening chimes normally made as the computer woke up, there was a loud and prolonged lavatory flush. Mr Crompton-Barclay looked up at Stoate and asked, "Is this an appropriate sound to have on your computer, Mr Stoate?"

Stoate went red and muttered as he tried to call up his document. Unfortunately, he had forgotten where he had put it and got into deeper and deeper trouble as he tried to find it. This was when he found that the error chime had been replaced by a fart. In the end he abandoned his search while Crompton-Barclay looked on askance. That was not all. Every ten minutes the computer suddenly made a series of very unpleasant sounds; the boys had made a recording of a busy period in the boys' lavatories and had programmed Stoate's computer to play this each time it went through an auto-recovery routine.

As this carried on, Crompton-Barclay found it less and less amusing. Finally, he snapped, "Mr Stoate, will you turn that damned

thing off? I should have thought that you should know better at your age and in your position.”

Stoate blushed and turned the terminal off without going through the shutdown procedure. As he did so the entire network crashed, much to the annoyance of Lartington who was doing some important budgeting work on his computer. Stoate muttered, “I cannot think how these impertinent noises got onto this machine. I imagine boys must have done this.”

“I would advise you to review the security of your administration network,” said Crompton-Barclay. “For somebody who claims that you have kept abreast of the use of ICT in administration, you seem remarkably ignorant of even the most basic procedures. You haven’t even closed your machine down properly.”

“I did close it down properly,” replied Stoate, who was not relishing the forthcoming week in the company of a man who seemed to be able to see through him very quickly. “I pushed the button. It turned off.”

“You have probably crashed the system.”

Crompton-Barclay’s diagnosis was confirmed by a call from the computer technician telling Stoate to switch his machine on again and go through the correct shutdown routine. Therefore, the two of them had to endure the infantile and vulgar noises coming from the machine until it turned itself off properly. Stoate had often wondered why there were complaints about the system crashing at about the times he was using it. He could not see how the simple action of turning a computer off seemed to freeze everybody else’s machine. No, the whole thing was set up wrong. Now here was this man from another school telling him that he could not turn off a computer. What next?

What next was Crompton-Barclay’s inquisition into Stoate’s management of the school. How could Stoate account for all the scandals that seemed to have rocked Tanswold School in the last year or so? Why was the Bursar allowed to have frittered away five million pounds from under their noses without the least challenge from the trustees? How was it that the supervision of the catering arrangements had been so slack that a major outbreak of food poisoning had arisen

which had claimed the life of a student? What management strategies were in place to ensure no repeats?

Stoate tried to impress his fellow headmaster with expansive and florid answers that included all his favourite flying metaphors. Perhaps they were intended to draw a smoke screen on Stoate's actions, for there was much that Stoate had done that he ought not to have done, and much he had left undone that he ought to have done.

After two hours, Crompton-Barclay decided that he would like a tour of the school. There was more to embarrass Stoate. Apart from the rather tedious and repetitive catcalls of "LIAR!" and "Biggles!" there had appeared some obscene graffiti in the Maths corridor. It certainly did what seemed to be impossible for Crompton-Barclay, namely, to become even more unimpressed.

It was clear from the beginning the mountain that Stoate would have to climb to ensure that Tanswold School would receive even a moderately good report. As the week dragged on, it was also clear that Stoate and his team were making very little progress. Crompton-Barclay and his inspectors were not in the least bit impressed by the school parade held at lunchtime on the Wednesday, especially as it was pouring with rain and was biting cold. Nor were they impressed by d'Arcy-Fairfax, as he intoned one of his elongated and eloquent prayers in seventeenth century English.

Unlike many schools where the pupils and staff would forget their differences in an inspection week and pull together, the opposite happened at Tanswold. Just as it seemed that the pupils' behaviour could not get any worse, it suddenly did. Groups of boys wandered around like football supporters whose team had just lost. In lessons there was a range of challenging and offensive behaviour that intensified when an inspector came in. Cooke experienced just such an incident when Mrs Heald, the science inspector came into his room. Mr Gonall had planned it so that the inspector would see Cooke's worst classes, and on this occasion, Cooke was working through a particularly tedious part of the syllabus. Progress, such as it was, was painful, and he seemed to be taking one step forward and two back. It had not helped matters that some boys were wandering round the school and deliberately interrupted his lesson, which sent the others completely off the wall.

After his rather unpleasant interaction with Mr Gonall the previous week, Simon McConnell had become even more belligerent with staff. As Mrs Heald came in, he was shouting at Mr Cooke, “Why should I do this? I am not enjoying it. It’s crap!”

“I am not asking you to enjoy it, McConnell, I am simply telling you to do it!”

“I couldn’t be arsed,” butted in Kieran Pearson. “You can’t make us do anything. You can’t teach us. We pay to come here, and we certainly expect more. I’ll sue you if I don’t get my GCSE. My Dad’s a solicitor, you know.”

Cooke resisted the attempt at involving him in an even more infantile and unconstructive exchange. He set the class a written exercise and went round to see how they had got on. Not only had Kieran Pearson and Simon McConnell written nothing, but also the same was true of James Plummer, Samuel Ogden, and Adrian Stephenson. On the other hand, Mrs Heald was writing copious notes with a diligence that was remarkably lacking in Cooke’s class. She went round to talk to the various pupils round the room. One or two of the quieter ones seemed to give some sensible answers to her questions, but in general she was left with no doubt in her mind at all of the negative perception of what Cooke was trying to do with them. At the end of the lesson she left, asking Mr Cooke to see her. As she did so, Antony Heal leapt onto a desk and shouted, “The old bag’s going to give you a right doing, and about time too. When’s Mr Stoate going to sack you? The sooner the better.”

As Cooke left to go to Brett’s office to discuss what Mrs Heald had seen, he felt his already intense sense of despair increase to new depths. As he arrived there, Mrs Heald was in discussion with Brett and Cooke’s heart felt like lead as he saw that John Gonall was also in the room.

“Sit down, Robert,” said Mr Brett. “We need to discuss with you about how things went this morning. Not too well, as I gather?”

“No, they seem as uncooperative as ever,” Cooke replied. “Is this not meant to be confidential between myself and Mrs Heald?”

“No, Mr Cooke,” Gonall replied icily. “We are doing a competence assessment on you as regards your class control, so we need

to be informed. We will let Mrs Heald state her observations on the matter.”

Mrs Heald rustled through her notes. There seemed to be lots of them. Finally, she looked up and said, “Mr Cooke, I don’t like what I have to say, but there is no way that I can say that what I have seen is satisfactory. I know that you have some very challenging pupils in your classes, but there does seem to be a breakdown in the atmosphere that you are setting in your classes. You clearly do not have the interpersonal respect that is so necessary for effective teaching and learning in today’s context...” She ran through a long litany of inadequacy that Cooke found ever more depressing as she continued. When she had finished, she asked, “Is there any reason why you have approached the topic in this way. Why are you not doing practical work?”

“I cannot trust that class to do the practical exercises without abusing the equipment. It’s expensive and the department does not have the money to repair it or replace it if it gets broken.”

“It’s up to you to ensure it is used properly,” Gonall interrupted. “That is part of your professional duties, Mr Cooke, which you are singularly failing to carry out to the school’s satisfaction. You know, Mr Cooke, that you have been monitored to ensure an improvement in your performance in class control. You have not responded and there has been no improvement whatever in your performance. Indeed, it seems clear to me that, if anything, there has been a deterioration. This report from Mrs Heald will be on the Headmaster’s desk soon, and I am bound to say that you will not be working here for very much longer. I am not impressed by your performance, nor was I impressed by your tutor group at the school parade yesterday. All this will be before the Headmaster as he reviews what should be done.”

“I have tried my best! I have no worse problems than many other colleagues,” said Cooke indignantly. “You have set it up that I would not succeed. You have tried to undermine me at every point.”

“No, Mr Cooke, we have supported you,” said Gonall icily, “but you have not been competent enough to act on that support. The fault lies with you. Tanswold School strives for excellence, and we cannot afford to have passengers. You are a passenger and becoming ever more of a liability. You do not have a future here.”

“Mr Gonall,” Cooke snapped as he felt his hackles rise, “I am not going to be insulted like this. All you have done is to criticise everything that I have done. You have doubted my intelligence. You have openly contradicted material that I have been teaching. There is no way in which you have supported me. All you have done is undermine me. If you were half as supportive as you claim...”

“I have told you, Mr Cooke, that at this school you have to fight your own battles. I personally don’t believe that you have the intelligence or the initiative to do so, and that is borne out by the fact that your performance has not improved. If anything, it has become worse. These are points that I will be sharing with the Headmaster.”

“Why should I sit here and be insulted? I shall be tendering my resignation.”

“You won’t last that long. You have to give a term’s notice. If you look at your contract, you will find that. The Headmaster is likely to dismiss you long before that. If he does, you will forfeit the pay owing to you and you will have to pay for the advertising for your replacement. And don’t think of walking out, either. The school will recover from you the costs of hiring a temporary member of staff to replace you.”

Cooke felt like a large rat in a tight corner. “That is neither fair, nor is it legal!” he cried. “I will fight that in the courts.”

“You might do so, but I can assure you that the school’s lawyer, Mr Carter-Barr is very sharp, and I can give you my cast-iron guarantee that the school will win. Mr Carter-Barr’s fees are extremely high. You will stand to lose the very clothes you stand up in, so I would advise you against that course of action, Mr Cooke.”

Cooke got up and walked out. He wished to God that he had never heard of Tanswold School and that the Boar had got the job. He was not to know it, but the Boar was having similar problems himself in a similar school some way to the north of Tanswold. It would not have given him any satisfaction to know it either.

A distinct lack of satisfaction was the universal feeling when Crompton-Barclay and his team delivered their verdict to Stoate, his senior management team, and the Governors on the Friday evening. It

was a solemn gathering in the Old Library that sat round the table. Crompton-Barclay stood up to speak, "As you know, ladies and gentlemen, it is my duty as Lead Inspector to communicate our findings to you orally, before you get a more detailed written report in about ten days time. I do have to say that I shall deliver my report without discussion with you in the first instance. That said, you may wish to discuss matters as a governing body and management team. You may wish to ask me for clarification when I present the full written report. You may wish also to approach me for advice as to ways you can implement the suggested action plan. I am very willing to assist in every way I can, both now and in the future.

"I am sorry to say that the tenor of my report is not encouraging. This school has a fine tradition, built up over twenty years or so of sound academic and extra-curricular success. The leadership of the school has rather rested on its laurels and has let many issues slip. At best I would describe the management style of the Headmaster as rather egocentric and capricious. The Headmaster's approach to management issues is at best unfocused and at worst spiteful. It has occurred to us that us that the Headmaster and his senior staff and governors have granted themselves privileges that suggest that the school exists as a kind of extra extension to their real estate. This has made them rather remote from the staff and pupils alike. I do not see it to be beneficial at all that the Headmaster and his friends should eat sumptuously while junior staff and pupils have to put up with provision that is inferior. I also have to say that there appears to be little vision as to the direction the school is heading, save that pupils are piled in to be taught at the lowest possible price.

"I appreciate that the school has suffered some immense financial setbacks. The loss of the Draycott Foundation has been a grievous blow, but I do have to say that with a little bit more care and diligence in supervision, the situation could have been avoided. I also note that the Trust has had to pay out a considerable amount of money in fines and compensation, again things that could have been anticipated and avoided. It is fortunate that the financial stringency imposed by Mr Lartington has enabled the school to stave off bankruptcy. This has made the budgeting so tight that teaching and learning is being adversely affected. The entertainment budget on the other hand has not been cut; indeed, it has increased. This cannot be right or justified in the circumstances.

“Although I appreciate the cutbacks that have occurred on staff salaries, and I admire the professionalism of the staff who are having to work on reduced pay, I cannot say that I can pass on my admiration for the Headmaster and his friends awarding themselves considerable increases in salary. I am told that there is a performance element in this, but I cannot agree that it is merited by enhanced performance. Nor can I commend the Bursar, Mr Lartington, for having his office done up with no expense spared, while the rest of the school has to make do with so little. I am not surprised at the drop in staff morale when the staff have to make do with a small dingy room as their facility. In this respect there is too much of a gulf between ‘them’ and ‘us’, a situation that cannot work for positive professional relationships.

“While teaching and learning is generally satisfactory, very little of it is good. Teaching methods are unimaginative and rely too much on outdated pedagogical practice. A depressing number of lessons were less than satisfactory, even poor. I have to single out at this point two particularly bad examples of inappropriate teaching from senior members of staff at this meeting. A history lesson taught by a senior member of staff present at this meeting was littered with factual errors, and this member of staff slapped down perfectly good and valid points that were raised. I noticed in his case that books had not been marked for several weeks. In discussion with this gentleman, he revealed an unacceptable level of ignorance concerning the subject that he is teaching, and he had little clue about the syllabus.”

Gonall glared icily at the Lead Inspector. He considered himself a damned good teacher and was not going to be told anything by a teenager.

Crompton-Barclay continued his litany of gloom, “I also find unacceptable the poor performance of the Religious Education Department, by which I mean the Chaplain. His lessons were some of the most unruly I have ever observed in all my years as a teacher. He had reduced the level of understanding to the farcical. Indeed, the content, embellished as it was with long and incomprehensible words, was so pedestrian as to seem like a parody. I cannot say as a committed Christian, that I found his church service in any way spiritually enlightening, let alone uplifting. I myself was exposed to public school Anglicanism as a teenager in the nineteen sixties. I loathe it now every

bit as I loathed it then. I do not know for whom the services are intended. The boys do not understand, and I can't believe that God is particularly interested. There were lots of long words, theological jargon ending in '-ition' and '-ation', which carried little meaning or relevance. It passed way over my head, so what hope would there be for a teenager? This school is spiritually a desert full of dry bones. The lack of respect for spiritual things is born of the Chaplain. It saddens me to see boys who were Christian now professing atheism. Certainly, it will take more than the Chaplain's prophecy to breathe in new life."

For Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax, this was too much. "How dare you?" he squawked like an angry chicken. "How very dare you! I knew more about theological scholarship when I was ten than you ever will! The boys need to know their place in society and need to respect superior intellects. How can you understand God unless you know theology in its highest levels? The boys need to be aware of the beautiful language of theology and the glorious language of Thomas Cramner. Spiritually speaking they are..."

"...Like dry bones," said Crompton-Barclay. "As I said before, this report is not open to debate during this meeting, so please do not interrupt again."

"In other areas there is uninspired teaching. Too much of the material is way beyond the weaker groups and there is little attempt at differentiation. Expectations are low, leading to challenging and disruptive behaviour. Maths and Science have particularly serious weaknesses in this area, but other departments have similar problems. I have seen the notes taken of one of the Headmaster's Maths lessons. This too was unsatisfactory, with little explanation of objectives, and no evidence of progression. The lesson itself was one of confusion, and little intellectual challenge."

"I am utterly appalled at the lack of awareness of equal opportunities within this school. Sexism, racism, and every other unprofessional practice seem endemic in the school. I have rarely come across a school where the culture of arrogance and bullying is so common. There is little or no awareness of the problems facing teenagers, and the more senior the staff, the less interest there is. There was only one member of senior staff who had tried to take these issues on board, and that is Mr Stanton, who was fighting a lone battle against

apathy or hostility from other members of senior staff. This must be changed as a matter of urgency.”

Stoate looked daggers drawn at his fellow member of the Headmasters’ Conference. There was only one thing that Crompton Barclay had done to redeem himself: he had referred to him as ‘Headmaster’, not ‘Director of Teaching and Learning’. If looks could have killed, Stoate would have been in for thirty years. Crompton-Barclay continued, “I am impressed with the enthusiasm shown in the sporting life of the school. The house rugby matches were carried out with enthusiasm, although I am concerned at the poor state of the sports ground at Tanswold Wood. It is unfortunate that the school lost its facility at Alverston Road, another financial own goal if you would pardon the expression. I am concerned that there are few opportunities for boys to excel at sports other than rugby, and that perfectly good sports such as tennis, and badminton are despised as second rate. It is also a shame that the rowing has had to be curtailed after a destructive accident for which there was no insurance cover. I have to say that the lack of insurance, now rectified, was a management oversight that could have led to exposure for the Tanswold School Trust to serious claims.

“I now come on to the social life of the school. This is an area of grave concern. There is an atmosphere of deep-rooted antagonism, leading to poor discipline and a culture of bullying. This manifests itself in low-level disruption that prevents effective teaching and learning. It also leads to victimisation of weaker pupils, both verbally and physically. The pastoral care of boys is rudimentary and needs substantial development. There is no excuse for some members of staff to participate in the bullying, and physical punishment that goes on here must be stopped at once before the police get involved with assault charges. There is no place at the turn of the millennium for practices such as initiation ceremonies and fagging, outmoded public school practices that should be consigned to the dustbin of the dark ages.

“I have to say that the management of the school has to carry the responsibility for what has happened in the past, including a number of incidents that can only be described as scandals. In my conversations with the management and staff of the school, there has been the constant theme of a blame culture. The Headmaster has always been quick to take the credit when things go right but shifts the blame very quickly when

things go wrong. The school has built around itself a legal *boma*, an encampment fortified by a prickly and impenetrable fence, so that those falsely blamed cannot find any redress. It reminds me of one of those joke notices that I see in offices:

If I take a long time, I am told I am slow.

If my boss takes a long time, he is thorough.

If I don't get it done, I am being lazy.

If my boss doesn't get it done, he's too busy.

If I do something new, I am trying to be smart.

If my boss does something new, well that's initiative.

If I do something right, he never remembers.

If I do something wrong, he never forgets.

“I am afraid that there is a lot to address, ladies and gentlemen. I would go further to say that if Tanswold School were in the Maintained Sector, it would be placed on Special Measures as a failing school, and you would have six weeks to come up with an action plan. This school does not represent good value for money in its present form. I am aware of the great difficulties in the school at the present, problems that have been, for the most part, self-inflicted. I am going to give you a year to formulate an action plan, and to show evidence of its implementation. My team will return in October 1999 to see how well you are getting on with your plan. If there are signs of progress, you can count on all the support that the HMC can offer. If not, the HMC will withdraw membership from the Headmaster and the school with the strongest possible recommendation that all official recognition be withdrawn. To put it bluntly, it would be illegal for you to continue to trade. I will leave you to consider and digest what I have had to say. You will receive the full written report a week on Monday.”

Crompton-Barclay and his team got up and left the Old Library. Those left sat there in stunned silence. Stoate looked thunderously angry but kept his cool. His life's work, or the last twenty odd years of it, had been savaged. He could imagine the inevitable headlines *Top School Blasted by Inspectors* with a lot of ill-informed and sensational comment.

Finally, he summed up his feelings with an explosive, “This is outrageous!”

Donald Blance stepped in to pour oil on troubled waters, “I think we ought to adjourn to the Old Dining Room for some supper before we sit down and digest this lot. I have taken the liberty of taping all of this, so that we can have something to chew on.”

It was an unseemly metaphor, for the contents of the report were destined to give the management team and the governors acute mental dyspepsia that evening. In the Old Dining Room there was an excellent buffet supper with superb wine from The Hermitage cellars. It would not have met with the approval of Alan Crompton-Barclay. What happened next met with Stoate’s wholehearted approval. In some ways it was inevitable and Stoate had prepared for it. The telephone rang and Stoate picked it up. It was a refined voice at the other end, but one that Stoate did not recognise, “Good evening, Mr Stoate. My name is Ian Raddigan. I don’t think we have had the pleasure of meeting?”

“No, I don’t think we have. How can I help you, Mr Raddigan?”

“Over the last three days, we have been interviewing for the post of Headmaster here at Kelferford. We have been without a headmaster for this term as our previous Headmaster, Mr Keith Lewis, died suddenly and unexpectedly just before the start of term.”

“Yes, I did hear of that. It was quite a shock to me, and it must have been a terrible shock to you as well.”

“It was indeed. Mr Lewis would have wanted us to carry on as usual and get a successor in post as soon as we could. And this is why we are ringing. My fellow governors and I, as well as the senior staff, were very impressed with Mr Miles Stanton, your current Deputy. We have asked him to take up the post. He is very willing to do so. Under his contract, he is obliged to give at least one term’s notice. Now we would have him start in the summer, to get his feet under the table, so to speak, but we would like him here as soon as we can. We can come to some arrangement.”

“I am very pleased for Miles,” said Stoate graciously. “He has been a superb deputy over the last five years and has done much of the day to day running of the school. As long as we have some arrangement, I don’t mind at all releasing him from his contract. We have some

important decisions that we have to make, and you will understand that Miles will naturally have his heart set on his new post. It just so happens that we are having a governors' meeting and I have our Chairman of Governors, Donald Blance, right here. If you would like to negotiate terms with him, I am sure he would be quite amenable.”

Stoate was delighted. Not because Miles Stanton had worked heroics over the last few months, and that the school was still afloat was indeed due to Stanton's dedication and professionalism. He had acted as something of a bridge between the Headmaster and the staff, yet still had retained the trust and confidence of the staff. Also, Stanton was strong willed and would not let Stoate walk over him, something that had got up Stoate's nose on several occasions. This characteristic had led them into conflict in the past and would have done so even more with the difficult decisions to come. Stoate could not rely on Stanton to do his dirty work, but he knew that John Gonall would. Now that Stanton was out of the way, he could promote Gonall to Deputy Headmaster. No, the sooner Miles Stanton was in his office at Kelford School, the better, especially if there was a financial inducement that would be beneficial to Tanswold School. More immediately, Stoate knew that if Stanton did not know anything about the contents of this meeting, it would be a lot easier to cover things up. In short, Stanton was far too honest for Stoate.

Now Stoate was back on the phone congratulating his colleague effusively, “Miles, this is great news... Yes... Yes... No, don't worry about that... You need to get your feet under your new desk as quickly as you can, especially if you are to hit the ground running at the start of next term. You take whatever time you need. John Gonall will be taking over... No, no, don't worry about that. What does Margaret think? She must be over the Moon... We are delighted for you. You really deserve this, Miles... We'll see you on Monday and you can tell the staff your good news... Goodbye for now.”

At Kelford School Mr Garrett, who was Acting Headmaster, was relaxing at the end of a long three days with Sir Ian Raddigan, the Chairman of Governors. Raddigan poured them both a glass of wine before settling back into his armchair and saying, “How do you feel about things, Mike?”

“It’s been a hard term, Ian, but we’ve got through.”

“What do you think about your new boss?”

“I could have worked with any of them, but Miles is a good choice. I felt with him, there was much more of a meeting of minds than with the others. I think we need a new broom. I’ve been here for thirty years. I thought seriously about putting in for the job myself. In fact, I thought long and hard about it.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t, Mike. You would have made a splendid Headmaster.”

“I got as far as my letter, Ian, but I think we would have spent ten or fifteen years marking time. Miles is a new broom, and he’s got more vision than I have. But he’s also a bloke who doesn’t mind rolling up his sleeves and getting down to it.”

“He’s like you, Mike. You’re very much a hands-on person, and you have done a splendid job this term, even if you think we’ve just been marking time. The main thing is that we have got on with it just the way Keith would have wanted. We can’t thank you enough for your hard work this term. You know Miles will be starting next term, rather than the summer? I have managed to negotiate his release from Tanswold.”

“It sounds like a jail sentence, Ian.”

“From what I hear, it is. I was on the blower to Alan Crompton-Barclay the day before yesterday. He’s been inspecting Tanswold School this week. He tells me that it’s an absolute shambles down there. It’s only Miles Stanton who has held the place together at all. He had a long session with Miles on Tuesday and concluded that he was the real trouble-shooter around there. The main problem they have is that the Headmaster, Stoate, rather regards the place as a forum to act out his inadequacies, of which there are many.”

“I have heard about Stoate. Not a very nice man, vain and pompous, he bullies his staff all the time.”

“Alan tells me that Stoate is something of a loose cannon. Tanswold School have a habit of shooting themselves in the foot, and they seem to have had a basin full of bad publicity.”

“We’ve had some pretty close shaves ourselves, but we’ve all pulled together and got away with it. There have been times when I have

thought, ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. I think that’s their problem, they don’t pull together. Stoate does his thinking on the hoof, if he ever thinks at all. Well, we’ve got Miles and their loss is our gain.”

Miles and Margaret Stanton were walking back to their hotel, looking forward to a celebratory dinner. “Well, this is my new patch. What do you think of it?”

“I can’t see much of it, but it was looking lovely this afternoon. I’m so glad you are out of that place.”

“I am too. I feel I’m a rat deserting a sinking ship.”

“It’s because of you that the ship hasn’t sunk already. Even Stoate would agree with that. Who’s going to take over?”

“Gonall.”

“What? That ghastly man?”

“Yes. Stoate has wanted me out of the way for some time. Gonall licks Stoate’s boots, albeit more subtly than d’Arcy-Fairfax. Dave Woodall is retiring and Stoate is going to put d’Arcy-Fairfax in his place. I despair of the future there, although it’s not my problem anymore.”

“Hardly an inspiring team, is it? Anyway, don’t think about it. What did you think of your new team?”

“Very good people. I’m really looking forward to working with them. Mike Garrett has done an excellent job this term in stepping into the breach. He’s going to show me the ropes over the next few weeks and help ease me in. All I’ve got to do is tidy up at Tanswold. Gonall can do the dirty work.”

In the Old Library, the Inspectors’ Report was living up to its promise of giving the Governors and senior managers of Tanswold School emotional dyspepsia. Indeed, the buffet dinner was giving several members of the governing body real dyspepsia and flatulence that did not improve their tempers. Donald Blance kicked off the proceedings to consider the implications of what they had heard just before dinner, “We have two choices, as I see it, ladies and gentlemen. If we address

the report with all its concerns, the school will be changed beyond recognition. This will have other far-reaching implications for the future. Or we could maintain the status quo. Neither are particularly problem-free, as I see it. The changes required really need a change of leadership at all levels. Maintenance of the status quo will just be a stay of execution.

“Since Dunstan announced his retirement, we have advertised twice in the quality papers and the *Times Educational Supplement*, but our advertisement has produced no candidates so far. I therefore propose that, Dunstan, you should continue in post for another year. We certainly need some stability, especially as Miles Stanton has jumped ship. I am pleased to say that Kelferford School have offered us very generous terms which I have accepted. They are awash with money, and their terms should keep the wolf from the door for a few months. Dunstan, would you be prepared to delay your retirement by a year?”

“Yes, Donald, I would. In the light of tonight’s developments and the imminent retirement of David Woodall as Senior Master, I would propose that John Gonall should take over as Deputy Headmaster, and Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax as Senior Master as well as retaining his role as Chaplain.”

Dr Pennington could not stomach this and stood up to make his contribution, “Mr Chairman, we have, in several meetings, had long and heated discussion about the suitability of the present Director of Teaching and Learning to continue in post. That he has done so has been entirely due to your casting vote. Last time we discussed this issue, we agreed on your casting vote that he would retire at the end of this year, and that we could not afford any more of his incompetence. We have discussed his negligence as a Trustee in the lamentable failure of the Draycott Foundation, notwithstanding the appalling incident in which he has gained a criminal record for assault. And now you are proposing that his contract be extended another year at least?”

“Yes, Dr Pennington. We have had no applicants for Headmaster. If we are to carry out these recommendations in full, we need a new person at the helm. Dunstan would admit that himself. Now that we are losing two valuable people from the management, we need the continuity. Dunstan, what do you feel we should do about this report?”

“I propose that we do nothing in the short term, other than to write some statements of intent. We can liaise with Crompton-Barclay and get him to advise us. He is quite willing to do that. If we involve him, he will think that we are going to do something about it, and that will buy us some time. The changes that he is proposing are not ones that I would wish to countenance, and I would prefer to leave them for my successor. As yet, I don’t have one.”

“Are you proposing that you stay on?” snapped Dr Pennington.

“I am indeed; Donald has asked me to stay and I have agreed. We need continuity in leadership. We are about to lose Miles Stanton who could have taken over as Acting Headmaster until my successor had been appointed. Now he has his own post, that is not an option open to us. I am going to accept Donald’s invitation to me to stay on for a period of up to a year, while my successor is found, and in the meantime, I have nominated John Gonall as my deputy, and Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax as Senior Master.”

“What about this report, Headmaster? We have been blasted to kingdom come! What are we going to tell the parents?”

“Precisely nothing, Dr Pennington. As an independent school, we are not obliged to publish the whole report to the parents nor the staff. As for the staff, they will get an abridged edition that is relevant to them. As for the parents, I shall cover the key strengths of the school in the Newsletter.”

“Are you proposing a deception?”

“No, I am not. I shall say that there are strengths that have been identified, and there are weaknesses that need addressing. Although I am not suggesting that we tell out and out lies, we need to be economical with the truth, for if this does come out, we are finished. I am proposing that we hasten very slowly for two reasons. Firstly, sudden changes will lead to confusion. Secondly, people might say that everything in the garden is not all rosy and might lose confidence in us. The minute that we start losing pupils, that’s the minute that the bank gets jittery. Is that not the case, Crispin?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” replied Lartington, who had no intention whatever of going full time at Tanswold as recommended by the Inspector, nor of taking a part-time salary. “We cannot afford to lose one

pupil. I would add that if the bank heard about how bad our report is, they might well pull the plug on us anyway.”

“So, there we have it,” said Stoate. “This report is an absolute outrage, and we must not under any circumstances let the report be known by anybody. Are we all agreed that we must swear secrecy about this report?”

“No, we are not,” Dr Pennington snarled. “This is a complete deception, of which I am not prepared to have a part. Dunstan, I propose that you should retire as you said you would, and we should appoint me as Acting Headmaster until your successor is found and in post. This report is an absolute disgrace and a damning indictment of your incompetence! I cannot accept that three members of staff who have received such bad inspection reports are in a fit state to run this school for a moment longer.”

“What the devil do you mean by incompetence, Pennington?”

“You know damned well what I mean. You only have to have listened to a quarter of what Mr Crompton-Barclay had to say and you would realise that your leadership of the school has been a miserable failure. You have presided over the wiping out of a considerable amount of the school’s assets. You have gained the school bad publicity from which it will take a long time to recover. Your management is nothing other than a disaster. Worst of all you have a criminal record for an unprovoked attack on two teenagers. You are a liability to the school, and you should go, Stoate!”

“This is my school and I have worked hard to build it up and don’t you forget that, Pennington. Who would replace me while my successor is being sought?”

“I will. I will take a sabbatical from the University and damn well whip this place into shape. I will restore its reputation as a fine academic grammar school, not what it is now, a resort of over-indulged and arrogant hoodlums! I will ensure that the financial side is put onto a firm footing. I shall see to it that the report that we have just heard is implemented in full, so that when Crompton-Barclay returns, he will not see a thing out of place. With your expertise in prevarication, Stoate, he will close the place down as soon as he looks at it.”

“I can see your ambition, Pennington. So that’s what this is all about. For some reason you want my job. Why? Because you can’t get promotion to professor? Want to make a name for yourself? Want to lower this fine school to the lowest common denominator, so that it is indistinguishable from Goyder’s? You want to get girls in to Forms One to Five? Or do you want to realise some real estate that does not belong to you?”

“Gentlemen!” shouted Donald Blance. “I would ask you to raise the tone of this discussion from a mere balloon debate. Dr Pennington has offered himself to take on the role as Director of Learning and Teaching and to release Mr Stoate to retire. Do we have anyone to second the motion?”

Mrs Sanderson seconded Dr Pennington’s motion, and a stormy debate about it continued for some time. John Gonall listened with interest. It would be unlikely that the governors would want to appoint Dr Pennington as Director of Learning and Teaching, but they might well take a compromise route and appoint him as Acting Headmaster. He would first of all get that stupid job title changed back to Headmaster, and after that he would make the staff jump. If Pennington were appointed, bang would go his promotion. He knew what Pennington thought of him, and the feeling was quite mutual.

After thirty further minutes of completely unproductive discussion, the vote was taken, and Dr Pennington’s motion was rejected by twelve votes to three. Dunstan Stoate was confirmed in his post for an extra year by twelve votes, three abstentions and one vote against.

The defeated Dr Pennington stood up and said, “For three years I have endeavoured to serve Tanswold School as a governor. I have given much of my expertise to ensure that the school prospers as a fine academic institution. There are many things that I have been prepared to do to protect its fair name and pride. But no more. I now intend to offer my resignation, as I will not be part of a cover up and deception in the way that you propose. I know that that course of action will inevitably lead to a further scandal from which Tanswold School will not recover. I shall leave now, and I will ensure that the truth will emerge.”

“You cannot do that,” snapped Blance in an alarmed tone. “That’s plain mutiny!”

“Let him,” said Stoate who had found Pennington a thorn in the flesh. “Let him take away his trendy ideas and leave us to make the school what we would want it to be. As far as we are concerned, Pennington, you can go hang. Good riddance!”

“Publish and be damned, Pennington!” Hyland croaked. Hyland held Pennington in the same esteem as Stoate did.

“Dr Pennington,” said Sir Ronald Wiseman in a calmer tone, “you had better consider the implications of publication. If you go on record about this meeting, we will take legal action for libel.”

“You cannot be found guilty of libel if you are telling the truth,” said Pennington coldly.

“You have got to prove that. You know how effective Mr Carter-Barr’s legal representations are for the school. He has a lot of influence and a fine reputation as a lawyer. He will discredit your representations and tear them to pieces before the court, and you will find yourself with a legal bill running to millions. You will be ruined, so I would advise you that if you know what is good for you, you will keep your big trap firmly shut.

“We accept your resignation Dr Pennington. As you are no longer on the governing body, you have no further part to play in this meeting. You may go.”

As Pennington stood up to go, he placed his papers in his briefcase. Nobody saw him remove a tape from a miniature tape recorder that he had left running, nor did they see him put another tape in and surreptitiously pass it over to Mrs Sanderson. He left the Old Library and went home. Pennington had got wind that the scandals that had dogged Tanswold School would be aired very publicly. The tape he had was dynamite, and he knew that Mrs Sanderson would record more.

“Carter-Barr will shut him up,” was Donald Blance’s answer to various expressions of concern as to what Pennington would reveal. “The school could come to an arrangement with Dr Pennington, in other words, pay him to keep his big trap shut. If that doesn’t work, Carter-Barr can apply for an injunction. We will have to make sure that he

doesn't get a copy of Crompton-Barclay's report and that all the minutes of this meeting add up, so to speak."

Stoate added, "I have just the idea that will make a public demonstration of how serious we are in tackling the issues that have been highlighted in the reports concerning poor teaching. I was given a report by the Science Inspector, Mrs Heald, that the new Physics Teacher, Robert Cooke, was not performing to a satisfactory standard. I have had adverse reports from other sources, including pupils, parents, and senior staff. John, you have observed Cooke's teaching?"

"I have indeed, Dunstan," replied Gonall who had wanted to feel important by contributing to the meeting. "I have observed him on two separate occasions, and he does not know his subject, and he cannot maintain classroom discipline. His lessons are not up to the standard that is required of Tanswold School. He shows no evidence of proficiency in the skills that are required, and he commands little respect from his pupils and colleagues alike. A public dismissal will flag it up to staff that poor performance will not be tolerated."

"I can vouch for his unsuitability to work here," added d'Arcy-Fairfax. "He went on to me about how depressed his wife was because he was working away from home. We cannot afford staff to bring in their domestic problems as an excuse to under-perform. He is also one of those happy-clappy types who are threatening to undermine the fine tradition of theological scholarship on which the spiritual life of this school depends. He even tried to give me a lecture on Christian basics!"

Mr Dickens, whose wife had drawn Stoate's attention to Cooke's problems in the first place, added his weight to the argument, "Christopher cannot stand him. Mr Clifford was much more entertaining. Cooke doesn't even smile, let alone crack a joke. He's always picking on Christopher while he lets the others get away virtually with murder. He's got to go."

"We need to flag up to staff all the reasons for this," said Gonall, who really did not know what the expression 'flag up' meant. It was one of those buzzwords associated with computers, of which Gonall knew little.

"I will see Cooke on Monday with the intention of dismissal. He will be required to work until the end of this term, as is school policy.

According to school policy, he will forfeit his last month's pay and will be billed for the advertising for his replacement. If he decides to walk out immediately, he will be in breach of contract, and the school will recover the cost of a temporary teacher from him, at a cost of £200 a day. If a replacement is not found, Cooke will be made liable for the cost of hiring a temporary teacher until such time as a replacement is found. We will be able to recover the costs at the rate of £200 a day. I will instruct Carter-Barr to inform him of this formally."

The meeting agreed to this.

Mrs Sanderson felt sickened, but she would get the recording to Dr Pennington. She felt increasingly for Cooke. Her son Martin liked Cooke; he thought of him as conscientious and thorough. He was only a young man and this requirement for him to pay £200 a day seemed particularly unfair. She knew that Carter-Barr would bankrupt him, as he had with other staff that had fallen by the wayside. It had been her desire to get the Tanswold School Trust to write a fairer contract of employment. She had put it down as a motion on several occasions, but it had been talked out. She thought of how much Stoate was a loose cannon, and needed to be brought to heel, if one could pardon such a mixed metaphor. She did not listen to the rest of the meeting, which discussed in detail how the unfavourable inspection report could be given a positive spin.

Chapter 6

For Robert Cooke it was now the end of the line. Just before break, Stoate and Gonall came up together and came into his room, calling him to the back. Stoate said, “Mr Cooke, I have decided to terminate your contract from the end of this term.” Stoate handed over an envelope marked *Confidential*. Cooke opened it and read:

Dear Mr Cooke

At the end of September, I had reason to speak to you about my concerns about your unsatisfactory performance as regards class control. I arranged that you should be monitored and supported in order to improve your performance.

More recently I spoke to you in stronger terms about my concerns, as there had not been the improvement required. Mr Gonall had offered you support, but still there was no improvement.

Your teaching was formally observed in the inspection last week, and the report that I received was most unsatisfactory.

This and several other incidents compel me to inform you that your contract of employment will be terminated from the end of the term.

I must point out to you that according to the policy of the Tanswold School Trust, your unsatisfactory performance has led you to be in breach of contract. Therefore, you will forfeit the last month's salary, and the school will recoup from you the costs of advertising for your replacement. You will be hearing shortly from the school's solicitor, Mr Alistair Carter-Barr, who will outline further obligations that you have to the school.

Yours sincerely

J L D Stoate

Cooke went pale as he looked at the letter. Gonall noticed this and said, “It is hardly a surprise, Mr Cooke. You are not the sort of person we need round here. You have been warned plenty of times and plenty of support has been offered. Despite that, you have been refractory to any advice given. So, you should not be surprised at all.”

“What do you mean that I forfeit my last month’s salary, Headmaster?” Cooke stuttered.

“It says what it means,” said Gonall icily. “You can read, can’t you? I know you can’t teach, but perhaps you don’t know what the word ‘forfeit’ means? It means you won’t get paid for your last month’s work.”

“I might as well leave now. You can teach my lesson, Mr Gonall. You seem to know so much Physics.”

Stoate said, “Mr Cooke, you are not going anywhere. You will teach these boys, as it is your professional duty. If you do leave you will be in final breach of contract, and the school will recover the cost of employing a temporary teacher to cover your classes. That will cost you £200 a day. Mr Carter-Barr will be seeing you at lunchtime to discuss your final contractual obligations. You may carry on.”

Gonall was glaring at Cooke with his usual basilisk stare. Cooke suppressed a desire to give him what his grandfather called a ‘jolly good slosh’. The he noticed that the class had been listening with an interest that if it had been applied to Ohm’s Law, Cooke would have found it most gratifying. Stoate said, “Mr Cooke, I want you at staff briefing at break, and I want you to sign in morning and afternoon at my office. Please carry on.”

As Stoate and Gonall left the room Cooke went to his desk and sat down. James Boyle said insolently, “What’s it now, Cookie, a knacking or a sacking?”

“Shut up!” yelled Cooke. “It’s none of your fucking business!”

The use of this adjective set the class alight, and Cooke wished at once that he had not said it. Gareth Shotton jumped up onto a table and shouted, “If he can’t teach us without swearing, everybody out!”

Although there was almost ten minutes left to the lesson, the class packed away their books while Cooke was yelling at them not to, and they walked out rowdily onto the corridor. Boyle put his head round the door of the next classroom and shouted, “Cookie’s got the sack! Biggles and Gonad have just been to tell him, and Cookie’s just sworn at us!” There was a loud roaring from the member of staff and Boyle stepped

back sharply. Several other members of staff stuck their heads round their doors to see what the din was about.

Stoate and Gonall had heard the commotion and came back up the stairs. Stoate shouted, "What the devil is going on? Why are you out of your lessons?"

"Mr Cooke has just sworn at us, sir. He told James that it was none of his business and used the 'f'-word. He's a pretty bad teacher, sir, and we are not going to have him swear at us."

"And what did Boyle say to get this response out of Mr Cooke?"

"He only asked what you and Mr Gonall had said to him."

"Let's hear it from the horse's mouth. Boyle, what did you say to Mr Cooke?"

"I only asked what you had said to him, sir."

Stoate and Gonall ushered the boys back into Mr Cooke's room. Mr Cooke was sitting slumped in the chair at the front. Gonall went up to him and said, "Not very impressive, Mr Cooke. Your classroom control is so poor that even your fifth form group have walked out on you. Why are you not standing up when senior staff are in the room?"

"Why should I?" replied Cooke belligerently.

"As a matter of good manners and respect to staff of our status," replied Gonall icily.

"What do expect me to do? You have just come in and sacked me, and you are asking me to say, 'welcome back gentlemen'. You have a nerve, Gonall."

"Mr Gonall to you," snapped Gonall.

Stoate said, "I would like an explanation from you now as to why you used such a foul word in front of your pupils. This is gross professional misconduct. So, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Mr Stoate, what have you got to say for yourself, having walked in here and sacked me in front of one of my classes? Could you have not done that in the dignity and privacy of your own office?"

"No, no, no. That's very nit-picking. The thing I am concerned about is to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning. Clearly you

have not fulfilled your professional obligation there. Now to get back to what we were discussing, why did you use obscene language in front of your class?"

"If you really want to know, Boyle asked me if I had got a knacking or a sacking. I told him to mind his own business. It was then that I used the word."

"Mr Cooke," said Stoate, "if there is a repeat misdemeanour of any sort in the time that you are here, you will be asked to go immediately and you will be regarded as in breach of contract. We have a temporary teacher who will take over from you, and you will pay £200 a day. I would advise you to keep a very low profile. Now will you kindly get on with what you are so bad at, teaching this class?"

As Gonall and Stoate left, there were several shouts of "LIAR! DOLT! On your bike, Biggles!" which made Stoate turn round and shout, "KEEP YOUR CLASS UNDER CONTROL, MR COOKE!"

In a slough of despair, Cooke went down to the staff room for staff briefing. When he got there, Miles Stanton, who was usually compère to the meeting was calling out his accustomed, "Yes, please!" The staff rose as Stoate and Gonall came in.

"Well, good afternoon, colleagues. Please be seated. There is rather a lot from me this afternoon. Firstly, I must congratulate Miles Stanton on his appointment as Headmaster of Kelferford School. Miles has done a splendid job here as my deputy and has kept us going through some very difficult times. He will be sorely missed, especially as he will be leaving us at the end of this term to take up his new post at the start of next term. We would wish you all the very best in your new post, Miles.

"In the meantime, I have been asked to continue for another year until my successor is found. John Gonall will be my deputy and Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax will take over as Senior Master when David Woodall retires at the end of this term.

"Now the main thing I have to discuss with you is the immediate implications of the report of the inspectors last week. Frankly, the lesson observation reports were really rather depressing..."

Cooke hardly listened as Stoate droned on about his displeasure at the staff performance.

“...many staff are failing in their duty to maintain discipline within the school, and standards are not what we have come to expect. You had a meeting about it on Friday. My point is this. You have to work out your own ways of maintenance of discipline. You are professional enough to know that for yourselves. I cannot accept that teenagers can get the better of intelligent thirty-, forty-, and fifty-year-olds. It is a matter of having the spunk, the moral fibre to do it. If things are as bad as you make out, you tell me which four you want rid of and one of you step forward for redundancy.

“It is a major embarrassment to the school that the inspectors have identified poor teaching in lessons. I have therefore decided to terminate Robert Cooke’s contract of employment at the end of this term. Mr Cooke has performed poorly due to unsatisfactory class control, and his ineptitude and incompetence has led to more problems for the rest of us. There are others that have also performed in an unsatisfactory manner, and I am putting this as a shot across the bows. I would remind staff, should they find themselves in this position, of the Tanswold School Trust’s policy. Those whose performance is unsatisfactory are in breach of contract. They will forfeit their last month’s pay. They will be billed for the cost of advertising for their replacement. If they walk out during their last months’ notice, a replacement will be found, and the member of staff will reimburse the school at a rate of £200 a day and the school will seek to recover that amount in the courts.

“Meanwhile Mr Cooke will be doing extra duties in his last month in the school and will be required to sign in and out. I would advise other staff not to fraternise with him. It will be noticed if you do. John Gonall will be assessing other staff in the weeks ahead. You know what to expect; you have been warned. We cannot afford passengers in this school. The parents pay us a considerable fee for excellent teaching, and if you are among those who are not delivering the best, well, I needn’t say more.”

While Cooke sat in the pit of despair, other members of staff glared at Stoate. Several who had been to preparatory schools could remember their own headmaster ‘sending a boy to Coventry’, but they did not expect this for a new member of staff for whom things had gone

horribly wrong. Many of them were thinking either, “There but for the grace of God go I,” or applying out. The number considering applying out increased markedly when John Gonall stood up to speak, “I think as regards Mr Cooke, the Headmaster has spoken very plainly about the matter. Now that Miles Stanton is leaving us, I have been appointed Deputy Headmaster, and it is my intention to use this post to improve the standard of teaching and discipline in this school. Although I have not seen teaching as poor as Mr Cooke’s for some time, there is a lot of teaching that is not up to the quality that is rightly expected by our parents.

“I therefore will be setting in train a system of Quality Assurance, in which staff will be regularly appraised in their work. There is a facility available for performance related pay in the new contracts you signed last term. Although in the state sector, this can improve a teacher’s salary, we do not have to comply with those strictures. In our case, a rise in salary will only be awarded for exceptional performance. If the performance is good, you will have nothing to lose. If your performance is unsatisfactory, your salary will be reduced. Exceptional performance will be required to have salaries reinstated. If, on a second appraisal, there is no improvement, competence assessments will be made, leading to disciplinary action and possible dismissal.

“I shall be targeting the younger or most recent members of staff in the first instance. I would warn that even those staff that have been here for some time should not rest on their laurels.

“The necessity for Quality Assurance has arisen from the desire of the senior management and governors of this school to improve the standards in this school. The GCSE results last year were very poor for a school of our standing. The A-level results were not much better. It is unacceptable that the local comprehensives and Alverston Grammar School should obtain considerably higher results than us. We will be using A-level and GCSE results as a benchmark for your appraisals, so if your groups are not performing, you had better make them perform. How you do it is your responsibility. Frankly, there are a lot of you who should be working a lot harder. That’s the bell, and you should be getting back to your lessons.”

The sense of outrage was tangible. As staff filed out back to their classes, there were mutterings of “This is outrageous” and “If that man is

Deputy, I am going to find a job elsewhere”. Cooke sat miserably until Gonall came up to him and said, “Haven’t you a lesson to go to, Mr Cooke? We pay you to stand in front of a class over there, not sit on your backside in here.”

“Well, you are not paying me, so push off.”

“Don’t you talk to me like that unless you want to be paying us £200 a day.”

Cooke got up wearily. D’Arcy-Fairfax minced by, and said, “The less said, the soonest mended” and went to his office to write a sermon on the Theological Basis of the Christian Family. As Cooke left the staffroom, he noticed a large envelope in his pigeonhole. It was marked *A D Carter-Barr, Solicitors, 43, Hanson Street, Tanswold St Mary*. Wearily and with a deeper sense of doom, Cooke opened the envelope. Everything that he read he had heard before.

Dear Mr Cooke,

I have received notification from your employers, the Tanswold School Trust, that your contract is being terminated from the end of this term. I am informed that this is due to your unsatisfactory performance.

When you signed your contract, your attention will have, no doubt, been drawn to the policy of the Tanswold School Trust on whose behalf I am acting. Therefore, you should be aware of the consequences of your failure in your fulfilment of your contract

You are reminded that unsatisfactory performance is regarded by the Trust as breach of contract. As a result, I am instructed to inform you that your last month’s salary is forfeited, and you will not be paid after 30th November. You are required by your contract to work until the end of term and carry out any further duties directed by the Headmaster until your contract terminates on 31st December. Failure to carry out any duty will be regarded as gross breach of contract, and you will be liable to reimburse the cost of employment of a teacher to cover your duties. This will be at a rate of £200 per day, and action will be taken in the courts to recover any monies outstanding.

You are also liable for the cost of advertising in the Times Educational Supplement, the Daily Telegraph, the Manchester Guardian, and the

London Independent. You will receive the accounts from us with an additional handling fee of £50 + VAT for each account.

Should the Trust be unable to recruit a suitable replacement, you will be liable to reimburse the school further expenses, including the provision of temporary staff to cover your timetable. This will be charged to you at a rate of £200 per day.

You have a right of appeal to the Governors. Tanswold School Trust policy is that you must be represented by a solicitor nominated by you from the list that I hold in my office. No other person may represent you and you may not represent yourself, although you may wish to make a statement. If your appeal is successful, the Trust does not undertake to repay any of your expenses. If it is not successful, you will be liable for the Trust's expenses as well, including my fees. To initiate the appeals procedure, I require a deposit of £1000 to be paid into my office as soon as possible. On clearance of the cheque, I will contact a solicitor to represent you.

Finally, my fee for sending this letter to you is £150 + VAT. I enclose an invoice for this amount. I look forward to receiving your cheque at this office at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

A D Carter-Barr

The whole letter made Cooke feel sick. Not only had they ripped his livelihood from him, but also, they were going to screw him for every penny that he had, and every penny he didn't have. He had not read half of this stuff when he had signed the contract. He had been so excited about being appointed to the school of his dreams and having got one over on an overweight ex-public-school bore to boot. In reality much of it was not in the contract documents anyway. There were codicils that referred the interested reader to the Tanswold School Trust employment policy, a legal tome that was incomprehensible to anyone other than Alistair Carter-Barr. One copy was to be found in Stoate's office, although Stoate himself had little idea of where it was. The second copy was in Carter-Barr's office.

“Repulsive reading,” was the verdict of John Proudlock as he looked through the letters that evening in the company of Andrew McEwan. Robert Cooke was sitting in the study at The Rectory in Alverston with his wife Sue. Upstairs their small daughter Helen was lying on her back playing with her feet. She was gurgling with pleasure as Sam and Jess were playing with her on the bed. As an two-year toddler, she didn’t have much clue as to what was going on, other than that this was a wonderfully big house with lots to explore. Nor would she have cared a great deal, as long as there was food at one end and a clean nappy at the other.

“I will take this to my solicitor, Robert,” said Andrew. “It is blatantly unfair, and it strikes me as against all employment law in the EEC. I honestly don’t think that Carter-Barr has a legal leg to stand on.”

“He’s an arrogant sod is Carter-Barr,” said John. “He has lying down to a fine art. The trouble is that there is such a network between Carter-Barr, Stoate and the Governors there that all sorts of injustices occur. Andy fell foul of some a story made up by Stoate, and Stoate accused a totally innocent boy of making a malicious allegation. They had the police in. Stoate expelled the boy, because his mother is a widow and did not have the financial means to fight back. Stoate is a coward and picks on those who are least likely to stand up to him. The police were going to charge Stoate with malicious perjury, but there are strong rumours of strings being pulled in high places. That school causes me at times to despair.

“Robert, you have been desperately badly treated, and I am determined to help you and Sue through this.”

“Our house purchase has fallen through as a result of this,” said Sue struggling to hold back the tears. “We’ve sold our house, but we’ll never get another one. If Stoate gets Robert to pay £200 a day, we’re completely finished.”

“He won’t,” said Andrew firmly. “Our solicitor helped me to get a very handsome pay-off, and he will go through this like a dose of salts. Carter-Barr is pompous man, full of bluster and blether, but his performance in a strange court is pitiful. A year or two back, he conducted one case so badly that he was fined £10000 for contempt of court. Needless to say, the Tanswold School Trust had quite a bit of egg

on its face. There is no way that you should have to pay £200 a day. It's up to Stoate to find your replacement. If he cannot do so, that's his funeral.

“You know about this programme they are doing. What you've got to tell them is dynamite. I have spoken to the producer. He wants to talk with you as soon as possible.”

“Meanwhile, as far as your house is concerned,” said John, “I think I can help. The church was left a property just down the road from here. We are going to let it out. Would you like to rent it from us? The PCC wouldn't mind you paying a reduced rent until you got back on your feet, and we would prefer to see it let out to a Christian family.”

The last few weeks of term were torture for Robert Cooke. His dismissal had been a very public affair, designed to have maximum impact on the staff to ensure that they toed the line. Stoate had intended that the boys should be aware, so that they would react badly, which would certainly have a further impact on his staff. He was proud of his strategy for such occasions and totally disregarded the fact that his action was grossly unprofessional. Cooke was subjected to a range of abusive and uncooperative behaviour that would have shamed pupils even in the toughest of local schools. The reaction of more senior members of staff was obstructive and unhelpful. Cooke was told coldly that he had to fight his own battles. He was ordered to do bus duty every evening, a tedious task as at least one of the buses would turn up late. Other members of staff tried to help, but this was noticed by Mr Gonall who had a quiet word with them to assure them that they would be next if they continued in that way. The fact that Cooke was leaving at the end of term did not prevent Gonall and Stoate intruding into his lessons and criticising him very publicly and in a humiliating manner. The worst was an occasion on the School Parade when Gonall tore a strip off Cooke due to the behaviour of his tutor group.

Cooke bore this humiliation stoically, as he did not want to give Stoate a legal leg to stand on. The second reason for his endurance was because the producer of *Very Public Scandals* had given him a small camera for secret filming. It was while Cooke was secretly filming that the worst incident in his teaching career, so far, happened to Cooke. He

was writing on the white board when he noticed a red flash. John Nelson was shining a laser pen straight at him. Cooke knew how dangerous these things were; a bus driver had been blinded in an incident with a laser pen and had crashed his bus as a result. It had also happened at Druker Grove, and to her credit, Ms Heathcote had expelled the pupils concerned. Nelson's arrogant and insolent attitude was a direct affront to Cooke who shouted, "Bring that thing here at once Nelson!"

"No. I didn't do owt. What did I do?"

"What do you think you did? You shone a laser pen at me, at my face."

"No, I didn't. I haven't got one. Are you on drugs or something, Cookie?"

This insolence was too much for Cooke to bear. He went up to Nelson and shouted, "Go and wait outside Mr Stanton's office now!"

"No. You can't make me. Mr Stanton has gone in case you hadn't noticed. You can't make us do anything. You can't control us; you can't teach us. That's why The Dolt has sacked you. You're useless, so piss off."

"How dare you speak to me like that? Go now!"

"Piss off now."

Cooke grabbed hold of Nelson and started to push him out of the room. The air was blue with oaths. A physics textbook flew across the room and hit Cooke full square in the ear. Next several laser pens were shone in Cooke's face. He protected his eyes and lunged for the prep room. Just before he reached it, a leg was put out in his way, and Cooke measured his length on the floor. McConnell meted out the treatment to Cooke that he had received from Gonall a couple of weeks before, kicking Cooke hard in the thigh. Cooke managed to get through the door and lock it, before picking up the telephone and ringing Miles Stanton's office. There was, of course, no reply. Cooke was thinking who else he could ring when there were shouts of "Gonad's outside!" and Mr Gonall walked through the outer door. "Why are you not teaching your class, Mr Cooke? And kindly explain to me what that uproar was a few minutes ago."

“Mr Gonall, I have just been assaulted. Firstly, Nelson shone a laser pen at me. He refused to go to Mr Stanton’s office. He told me to piss off twice. Several others shone laser pens at me. I have been kicked in the thigh, and a large textbook was thrown hard at me.”

“In case you are so dim and uninterested in what has been going on, Mr Stanton has left the school. Go back into the room and get on with your lesson, Mr Cooke. Your approach was clearly not appropriate, and you still have not worked out ways of preventing this kind of indiscipline. Send Nelson in here, please.”

It came as something of a surprise that there was not a violent roaring behind the door as Nelson went to see Gonall in the prep-room. Instead, there came the lowered murmuring of what sounded like a quite civilised conversation. Gonall put his head round the door, and said brusquely, “Mr Cooke, in here, please.”

When Cooke entered the prep-room, Gonall eyeballed Cooke, saying, “I am just about fed up with you, Mr Cooke. Nelson denies having a laser pen and that is sufficient for me. You are not welcome here, and I shall be reporting your waste of my time to the Headmaster. What have you got to say for yourself?”

Cooke could take no more and exploded, “The feeling is quite mutual, Mr Gonall. You are the waste of time round here. Do you think that I was imagining things with the laser pens being shone in my face? Do you think I was making it up when Nelson was grossly insolent to me? You have made my life a misery and destroyed my job. Are you proud of yourself?”

“You destroyed your job, Mr Cooke,” replied Gonall icily, “by your repeated incompetence. Your teaching skills would disgrace a novice. I shall be reporting your gross insubordination to the Headmaster. Now will you please go back into that shambles that you describe as your lesson and teach it?”

“You get in and do it, Mr Gonall. Stoate has already sacked me and there is little more he can do with me. So, you can get on your bike.”

“How dare you talk to me like that?” Gonall snarled. He grabbed Cooke and hurled him into the room.

“That is an assault, Mr Gonall.”

“Not when I give my report to the Headmaster, Cooke,” Gonall replied. “Now will you teach this lesson?”

The incident with the laser pen led to another unpleasant interview for Cooke with Stoate. Stoate would have liked to have written off Cooke’s story about the laser pen as so much baloney, but when he came in person to summon Cooke yet again to his office, one of the class shone a laser pen at him. Although Stoate said nothing, he let Cooke know of his displeasure when he saw him in his office. Stoate did not invite Cooke to sit down but made him stand like a recalcitrant fifth-former. “You have become a real liability, Mr Cooke,” Stoate started, “and I really don’t know how much longer we can put up with you on the premises. I really am minded to tell you to go now. You are a professional misfit, one of the most contemptible creatures I have ever come across in my time in education. I don’t know what kind of job you will manage to secure, but it is my sincerest hope, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that you never go into a classroom again.”

“The feeling, Mr Stoate, is quite mutual,” Cooke replied defiantly. “I would go further. I think your management is quite the worst I have come across in all my working life and believe me I have worked for some pretty grotty people. Where strength is needed, you are pitifully weak. Where support and leadership are needed you are a damned bully. I haven’t been here that long, but I have seen enough!”

“And I have heard enough!” Stoate shouted. “I was the founding Headmaster of this school some twenty-five years ago. I was working in industry for many years before that and before that in the RAF. I had many years’ experience before you were even born. And you are trying to teach me? I will tell you this Cooke, you cannot do, and you cannot teach either. How dare you let a member of your class shine a laser pen at me? Don’t you realise what it could have done? How dare you be so rude and uncooperative with Mr Gonall? Indeed, why did you assault him? Mr Gonall is a long established and reputable...”

“Bully! I don’t believe what I am listening to. Look at me, Stoate! I am underweight as it is, and Mr Gonall is a rugby player. Do think I could knock Mr Gonall about? He threw me back into the room; you can

ask any of my class. As for laser pens, in every school that I have worked in, shining a laser pen at a member of staff was considered an assault. The pupil concerned would be at least suspended, and you did nothing but blame me. Call that strength?"

"How dare you talk to me like that? Get out of my office now! You are dismissed for gross insubordination, and you leave the premises now. I have a replacement for you, and you will be charged £400 a day for his services. You will also pay us back all your salary for this term."

"You can whistle for it, Stoate."

"I shall be instructing our solicitors to sue you for it. You will not win either. I will make sure that you will lose even the clothes you stand up in, and that applies to your wife and child as well. I will ensure that they are taken away from you, and you will end up in a dosshouse!"

"You keep my family out of this. You will only get your way by lying through your teeth which you seem rather good at, and the same is true for that solicitor of yours. He is corrupt and the sooner you are exposed, the better. As for claiming anything from me, I haven't got anything anyway."

"You wouldn't dare," snapped Stoate. "Mr Carter-Barr will have an injunction on you before you get home. I shall be instructing him straight away. Now get off these premises now before I kick you off myself."

"And get another criminal record for assault? If you do as you threaten, I will go straight to the police, and you will go down. I know all about it!"

This was too much for Stoate who picked up a brass paperweight and hurled it with all his strength at Cooke. Cooke ducked and it whistled past his head, crashing into a picture on the other side of the room. Shards of glass showered on to the sideboard. Cooke turned heel and walked out, slamming the door. Stoate sat there fuming. He could not bear it when anyone dared to stand up to him. He had certainly not expected Cooke to do so in the way he had, let alone run rings round him. Although Stoate's past was in the public domain, he was particularly prickly about being reminded of it, and he picked up the phone to Carter-Barr.

Stoate's temper was not improved when the new office junior answered the telephone and shouted across the office that there was an old codger wanting to talk to the boss. The secretary took over. Mr Carter-Barr was in court and afterwards had to meet with several clients. No, she could not possibly divulge Mr Carter-Barr's mobile number. No, she could not say when he would be back, but she would ask Mr Carter-Barr to ring back as soon as it was convenient. "Convenient to him," Stoate muttered as he slammed the phone down. "I bet that bloody man McEwan put him up to it."

Robert Cooke did not believe what he had just done. He knew by Stoate's reaction that he had had The DOLT on the hop. He certainly did not think that he had had it in him to give the old fart a piece of his mind, and he had clearly done it very effectively. True, he was now out on his ear. In some ways he was relieved. It was not far from the end of term. The Christmas hype was getting to the boys who were worse than ever. The last week of term would be intolerable, but it would not be his problem. Now the appalling Gonall would have to target somebody else. It was typical of cowards like Stoate and Gonall to pick on somebody who they thought would not stand up to them. Cooke had tried hard to meet the issues raised, but they did not want to be met. The most important thing was that Cooke had made a recording that would be dynamite.

Stoate gave a demonstration of his weak leadership the next morning in Assembly, "It has come to my attention that pupils have been bringing laser pens into school. May I remind you that laser pens are not allowed in school? You have been warned."

While Miles Stanton was getting his feet under his new desk and enjoying every minute of it, John Gonall was doing the same back at Tanswold. He too was enjoying his new-found power. The result of targeting Robert Cooke had been most satisfactory in Gonall's opinion, and it had given him a taste for firm management. It would not do for him to find a new quarry quite yet, although he had several of the younger staff in his sights. Instead, Gonall spent much of his time digesting the Inspector's Report, which made gloomy reading. Stoate had asked him to put a positive spin on it for the parents. After finding out what a positive spin was (it was nothing to do with rugby balls),

Gonall rewrote the report so that it was barely recognisable as the original.

Gonall also found out that action plans were not detailed instructions as to the way that the scrum was to play a game. Once he knew what one was, he set about producing action plans for every department. That he knew little about each department's work, including his own, was not going to prevent Gonall from implementing his plans on quality assurance. Gonall had found out about this on a course that he had attended. He had also learned many other current buzzwords in modern management, although he did not know what many of them meant. If he did, he was not sure of their appropriate context.

Gonall had also discovered the power of his computer, and from it issued frequent memoranda of monumental boredom and bad grammar, littered with spelling mistakes. When staff put up one of his memos covered in red pen, Gonall did not share the joke, and held an aggressive inquisition to find the culprit. Since d'Arcy-Fairfax had been promoted, he had virtually disappeared into his office, so the conspiracy of silence was not broken, much to Gonall's chagrin.

Nobody knew what d'Arcy-Fairfax was up to. His teaching load had been reduced since his promotion, much to the relief of his pupils and their parents. At least they would not be spending their hard-earned money on a riot for their sons. Instead, d'Arcy-Fairfax wrote tomes on school policy. Like his sermons, where three words were sufficient, the Chaplain wrote twenty, most of which were long and ended with '-ition' and '-ation'. Although his writings matched the boredom of Gonall's memoranda, the spelling was rather better. Periodically, confidential brown envelopes appeared but their stay in d'Arcy-Fairfax's pigeonhole was brief. Few people knew for sure about d'Arcy-Fairfax's private life, other than his being a fifty-five-year-old bachelor. Many had their suspicions.

Chapter 7

For Robert Cooke, January brought about a change for the worse. A supply teachers' agency, Sowerland Staffing Solutions, had found him a vacancy at the Phoenix Community College in Carlsborough. It was a cold grey January day when he went there for the first time. The school was sited at one corner of the Canterill Farm estate, hemmed in by flats and maisonettes of oppressive ugliness. What passed for a playing field was extremely unkempt, with litter blowing about in the wind and trapped on the heavily vandalised fencing. As he approached the school, Cooke noticed that the buildings themselves nestled behind a substantial security fence, a necessary precaution, for if they were not, the buildings would have been razed to the ground years ago.

Staff at the Phoenix Community College were expected to be in some forty minutes before the pupils. Robert Cooke was earlier than that. In the cold grey morning light, the school looked particularly depressing. The central main buildings consisted of a large prefabricated concrete block of late nineteen sixties design. The building had been troublesome from the day the school had opened and had been given a life of no more than ten years. Nearly forty years on, it was well past its best. It was clad in a grey mosaic, large patches of which had fallen away. On the lower floors, boards covered broken windows, and it was clear that some of these had been on for some time. Around the building was a huddle of low-rise classrooms in a similar style and state of disrepair. Further out were gaggles of temporary classrooms in wooden huts that looked as if they would collapse if given a hard enough kick. All around the place was enough litter to fill a bin lorry. The icy wind picked up all sorts of flotsam and jetsam, blowing it against the steel security fence. Bits of paper circled after being caught in eddies, while drinks cans clattered across the tarmac playground.

As Cooke walked along the steel stockade that isolated the school from the outside world, he could see evidence that people partook of materials that were even more unwholesome than the contents of the dross that was scurrying about in the wind. There were discarded syringes and needles ready to pass on their diseases to anyone unfortunate enough to be punctured by them. The wind made a curious whistling and droning sound as it passed through the bars of the stockade.

There was the hint of an unpleasant smell that permeated on the wind. Cooke could feel a headache coming on. On the other side of a piece of derelict land stood the graffiti-daubed grey concrete walls of Canterill Prison. By the school gates lay the burned-out hulk of a car. There was still warmth coming from the vehicle that suggested that the joy-riders responsible had only finished with the car in the early hours of that morning. Cooke had the uneasy feeling that the joyriders would be gracing at least one of his classes, and he was going to have to inspire them, if that were the right word, with the elementary dreariness of secondary modern school science. It was the most depressing situation that Cooke had ever found himself in, in his entire life.

The unpleasant smell of drains, which Cooke had smelled faintly on the wind, was becoming more prominent as he approached the front door to the school. He saw a colleague coming towards him, who said, “You’re a braver man than I, walking in. I wouldn’t come in other than by car round here, and I lock all the doors as I drive through the estate. You are new round here?”

“Yes, I’ve been sent by Sowerland Staffing Solutions.”

“Like a lot of us. Candidates come round for interview, take one look at the place and withdraw. They can’t get anyone to work here full time. You have to be desperate.”

To show how desperate the place really was, they were passing the burned-out shell of what was the school minibus still caged in by steel security fencing. The front door had a heavy roller shutter on it. Although it had been raised, Cooke could see that it was covered in graffiti. The office windows had steel bars inside as well as out, and there were roller shutters. The place had the air of a shabby high security prison. The slogan over the front door, “Welcome to the Phoenix Community College” really ought to have read “Abandon hope all ye who enter here”.

Cooke gazed around at his new workplace. If Canterill Farm was a little piece of Hell on Earth, this school was the Abyss. The dark brick and grey concrete with which much of the place was built had no warmth in it. The weatherboard at gutter level had rotted away in many places, where it had not been pulled off by vandals. The concrete frame of the building had originally been painted grey, but much of the paint had

flaked off in the past thirty-five years since the place had last been decorated. Cooke could see that under a boarded-up first floor window lay the remains of a stool that had been thrown out by a child in a fit of rage. With an ever-deepening sense of gloom, Cooke went in.

The entrance hall to the school was naturally gloomy, not helped by the faded beige paint that had been applied many years before. The room was completely bare, except for a pair of hard plastic chairs. There was a toughened glass window above which there was a notice stating, "All visitors are required to report to reception." Cooke looked round to see if there was anything that could possibly give the place some cheer, but he could find nothing. Instead, there was a flight of stairs, of typical nineteen-sixties design that led to a door on which was another welcoming slogan, "No admittance except on business". There was an electronic security lock, and an entry-phone.

"You don't want to go up there. We call that '*The Lubyanka*'. It's where the principal and her deputy hang out. You only go up there for a bollocking," commented another member of staff, before scuttling away through another unmarked door. A disembodied voice crackled through a loudspeaker in the direction of reception, "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Robert Cooke. I've been sent here to teach some science."

"Oh, yes. We're expecting you. Wait here."

Cooke sat there in the cheerless room. It was cold and draughty. His eyes strayed to the clerestory windows set in the roof. Even though they were narrow, it was obvious that they had been forced at some time, so they had bars over them. The door at the top of the stairs opened and a small man with long white hair and a moustache came down the stairs. Cooke stood up and decided that this man looked important, despite his diminutive size and beer-gut that hung over his belt. The man strode up to him and said curtly in a strong Welsh accent, "Mr Cork, I am Peter Williams, deputy head. Follow me."

It had occurred to Cooke that everyone in this school had left their manners for safekeeping at home. He hoped that the same would not happen to him. Perhaps he was being oversensitive. The Deputy led him along a dingy corridor to the staff room. It was empty, except for a few colleagues looking through their pigeonholes before disappearing like

troglodytes. “Wait here,” snapped Evans, who did the same vanishing trick, leaving Cooke on his own. If the outside of the school had appeared depressing, this room was positively unwelcoming. Surrounding the periphery of the room was a number of easy chairs whose webbing had deteriorated with age. Nobody could sit on them, as they would simply fall through to the floor. The floor had no carpet, but tiles that were worn out from decades of neglect. The wallpaper had a loud nineteen-sixties pattern whose garishness had faded many years before. There was a magazine rack on which stood faded educational publications, the most recent of which were six years old. The curtains, of a garish pattern long faded to a pastel hue, hung in tatters either side of two of the windows. The other window, which was boarded up, had no curtains. It looked as if the place had not had a clean for a long time. The strange thing that struck Cooke most forcefully was that there were no coffee cups left lying about. Evans the Deputy came back and said curtly, “Go to room 503. Ms Conway is waiting for you.”

“How do I get there?”

Evans the Deputy barely concealed his disgust as he gave directions, “Down the corridor to the right, and up the third set of stairs. Hurry up; you need to be in the main hall for staff briefing. I expect you down there at ten to nine, prompt.”

Cooke walked along the dark corridor. An unpleasant smell seemed to pervade the place, but he needed to go somewhere. He opened a likely looking door and went in and immediately wished he had not. The sight and smell that greeted him reminded him of the worst of the Romanian orphanages under the worst of the late odious dictator Ceausescu. The room stank of drains and had been heavily vandalised. Many of the cubicles had no doors, and there seemed to be only one operable washbasin. Cooke felt sick and retreated back to the corridor.

The corridor’s paint was peeling where it remained, suggesting the penetration of damp. At waist height, there were extensive scuffmarks gained over decades. Obscene graffiti and bare plaster punctuated the dark beige. The only other decorations were a few sad and tatty pinboards on which had been displayed pupils’ work. The latter did not last more than an hour or so, before it was torn down or defaced.

A faded sign of nineteen sixties vintage pointed up to the Science department, and Cooke made his way up a tatty stairway. The windows had been broken so often that the glass had been replaced with reinforced polycarbonate that let the light through, but nothing else. Scorch marks both in and out revealed attempts at various times in the past to set the plastic alight. Cooke got up to the top floor and went through to a long corridor that was easily as dingy as the one downstairs. There were circular skylights, each of which had bars beneath. Despite the height of the building, it was obvious that intruders were prepared to scale up onto the roof with all its attendant dangers. Perhaps the residents of Canterill Farm were too dim to realise what danger was.

Cooke went into a scruffy office. Ms Conway was a young woman, but that was where her femininity ended. Her hair was cut short, and she could well have passed off as a sixth-form boy, except that there was no sixth form in this school. Her jaw seemed to jut out permanently in an expression of unspoken aggression. She was wearing a thick pullover, as it was desperately cold upstairs, and tracksuit bottoms. She looked as if she had just come off a rock face; a large rucksack with a fifty-metre coil of rope spilling out seemed to confirm her hobby. Belays and pitons were scattered about on the floor and Cooke trod on one. “Be careful what you are doing,” snapped Ms Conway. “Sit down over there.” She indicated to a rickety lab stool by the window. “I suppose you have been sent by an agency?”

“Yes,” replied Cooke, “Sowerland Staffing Solutions.”

“I am not enamoured with supply teachers at the best of times, but I like agency teachers even less. None of them seem to understand the children, and none of them can last more than a few days. I suspect you will be the same. I don’t seem to have the choice, so you will have to do.”

Cooke repressed a desire to tell Ms Conway that he did not have much choice either. The fact that he had to earn money forced him to come to this dump and work with this bitch. Ms Conway passed a file to him. “This is your timetable, and this is the work that you will be taking up with your classes.”

Cooke looked at the timetable. The school day was broken up into six fifty-minute lessons, some of which were doubles. “Isn’t a hundred minutes rather long for some pupils?”

“It’s up to you to make sure that it is not, Mr Cork.”

“Please call me Robert,” said Cooke trying to lighten the atmosphere.

“Mr Cork will do fine, as far as I am concerned.”

“Cooke is my surname, not Cork.”

“As I said, it is up to you to make your lessons interesting. I expect the highest standards of teaching here. Lessons have got to be attractive for the students, else they will vote with their feet, or maybe even with a stool. Even though you are just a supply teacher, I expect you to teach the lessons fully, and mark work. If the students don’t like your lessons, you will find out quickly, and more importantly, I will find out. The students are entitled full access to all levels of the curriculum. I will regularly check up on your planning, delivery and evaluation of your lessons.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean, Mr Cork, is that I want detailed plans for each and every one of your lessons with the stated aims, levels in the National Curriculum, how it ties in with the National Curriculum Programme of Study for Key Stages 3 and 4. I want you to write down a list of the activities for every lesson with timings. I want you to evaluate every lesson with evidence for your evaluation. In fact, I have some copies of the form that I require all staff in my department to fill in.” Ms Conway passed a pad of pre-printed proformas.

“There seems a lot to fill in here,” said Cooke. “When do I have time? What free lessons do I have?”

“You don’t. All main-scale staff have to teach twenty-eight periods a week. The two non-committed periods are where you are expected to cover for absent staff. With the amount of absence in this school, you will have to do that cover. In fact, you are on cover this afternoon. Oh, by the way, all staff are expected to be on duty at break, lunchtime, afternoon break, and for twenty minutes after school. You are

outside this week. After school, there are meetings to check and verify work.”

“When am I going to have time to do all of this?”

“What are evenings and weekends for? I expect it to be done. If not, I shall speak to the Principal and she will withhold payment to the agency, and you will not be paid. I shall repeat what I said before. I expect the highest standards from all my staff, and I do not tolerate any unsatisfactory performance. The Principal will believe me, not you. You had better go down to the hall for staff briefing. I would add that it is college policy that disciplinary issues are carried out with sympathetic understanding of the student. Confrontation is not considered professional. Your discipline strategy is expected to conform to college policy. Close the door when you go out.”

Cooke could feel his headache turning into a migraine. Instead of going downstairs, he went into what appeared to be a prep-room, not that there seemed to be much preparation going on. It was more like a store cupboard. Ms Conway came out of her office and shouted, “Mr Cork, what are you doing in there? You are meant to be going down to staff briefing.”

“Is there a loo up here?”

“Yes, but you will have to ask me for the key.”

“Well, can I have the key?”

“Not until after staff briefing. You will have to sign it out and back.”

Cooke felt increasingly miserable as he followed Ms Conway down the grubby stairs. He would have rather spent a week in the dreary company of the appalling Mr Gonall than ten minutes in the company of this ice maiden.

The assembly hall was an unspeakably dreary room. It was also bitterly cold, which made it even more cheerless and unwelcoming. Members of staff were coming in, all looking as miserable and cheerless as the grey January morning outside. Some were coughing; all looked pale and pasty. None seemed to have much time for each other beyond a few grunts of acknowledgement. All ignored Cooke. The diminutive figure of Peter Evans came in followed by what Cooke took to be the

Principal, Ms Purslove. In a comedy situation, the apparition that was Ms Purslove would almost certainly have raised a laugh before she had even said her first lines. This was as far from comedy as it was possible to get, other than a funeral wake, and usually in the latter case the time was eased by with liberal libations of Scotch. There was no such comfort here.

Ms Purslove, it was generally agreed, was not an attractive woman, either in looks or temperament. Cooke immediately rightly assessed her femininity as even less than that of Ms Conway, somewhere about the level of a rugby scrum half. She was dressed in a mock leather trouser suit, which strained round a pair of powerful and heavy thighs. Her hair was cut even shorter than Ms Conway's and stood vertically upwards from her head like the prow of a ship. Her ears stuck out like the handles of a toby jug. Her expression made the aggression on Ms Conway's face look like maternal gentility, and her mouth looked like that of a bulldog that had just bitten on a wasp. Ms Purslove strode to the centre of the room and started the ramble that passed for her motivation of her staff. First of all, she read out her engagements for the week. Cooke remembered how in 'happier' times the Boar had included in one of his diatribes about the headmaster of his school doing just that. It seemed that Ms Purslove had an awful lot of meetings. It made Cooke think of an old saying, "Meetings – the practical alternative to work". Ms Purslove was turning to other things. "You will be aware that the school minibus was set on fire at the end of last week. The culprits have been identified, and I have spoken to them. There seem to be some issues here, I am afraid. They feel that nobody really understands them, and I have interpreted this as a plea for help."

A gasp rose from the staff. A tall thickset man stood up and said, "Excuse me, Ms Purslove, but have the police not been involved in what was a blatant criminal act?"

"Thank you for your interruption, Mr Dawson," said the Principal icily. "It is against college policy to involve the police, as you well know. This was a plea for help by some students who feel that the staff do not understand their needs and feelings. They need our support, not alienation. They will spend this morning with me, thinking over their actions and discussing with me how they can move forward."

“This is a criminal act!” replied Dawson incredulously. His tone reflected the feelings of the staff as a whole. “Are you going to do anything more other than give them thinking time? The college no longer has a minibus. It was only insured for Third Party, not even for fire and theft.”

“I repeat I will not have the police involved, as this will cause further alienation between the students and the college. It is our duty as professionals to reach out to them, get on their wavelength and understand their concerns. You should not be making middle-class value judgements in the way that you have done this morning.” Ms Purslove added with more than a hint of menace, “I will discuss this further with you at five o’clock, Mr Dawson. Please see my secretary to confirm the appointment.”

Dawson looked as if he were about to explode but sat down knowing that his meeting with Ms Purslove that evening would be anything other than amicable. Ms Purslove glared at her audience with a withering look of utter contempt, her bulldog mouth looking more than ever as though the wasp had just stung it. She continued with her peroration, “This whole incident has made me think even more urgently about the quality of teaching and learning within the college as a whole. There seems to be a complete failure on your part to understand working-class youth culture. You bring in monstrous middle-class value judgements such as the one that we have just heard this morning. Such value judgements are against college policy. If the quality of teaching and learning is up to standard, the students would hold you in such esteem that this kind of incident would not happen. I am therefore satisfied that your teaching is not up to standard, and that is an issue that I will continue to monitor and address. I will be checking into the quality of provision for the students who have been identified, and any shortcomings on the part of any members of staff involved may be a disciplinary matter. The bell’s gone; you’ve got registers to do.”

Ms Purslove and Mr Evans walked out of the assembly hall with a flourish of haughty arrogance. Like almost everybody else in the room, Cooke got up wearily, thinking that if it were not for the unpleasant necessity to earn money, he would push the file in his hand as hard as possible down Penelope Conway’s throat, give Ms Purslove two fingers and walk straight out of this hellhole. Instead, as he walked out, Evans

the Deputy popped up like a little jack-in-the-box (without the smiley face), and snapped, “Mr Cork, you’ve got a register to take. 10 H.”

“Where do I get the register from?”

“The office of course. Now get on with it. You will be late enough as it is.”

As Cooke walked to a room across the other side of the school, the long-misunderstood students at the Phoenix Community College jostled him. Although there was meant to be a uniform, few students wore it. Ms Purslove refused to enforce the rule, as she regarded uniform as an imposition of outdated middle-class values on an alienated working-class culture. In reality, she was scared of what the parents would say and do if she pulled up their children for not wearing the uniform; it was easier to blame the staff for not gaining the respect of the students sufficiently. Ms Purslove had similar views about school rules, which she called the community code. So did the students, the result of which and the general depravity of the Canterill Farm Estate made the college a bear garden.

Registration of 10 H was a nightmare, and the register bore no relation to who was actually there. The bedlam in the room made it impossible for Cooke to be heard, let alone for him to hear the replies. The scant comfort was that the bedlam seemed to be echoed in other rooms in the vicinity. Cooke’s scant comfort was short-lived. A head popped round the door and yelled, “Mr Cork! Do you mind doing something meaningful with these students? It is not just child-minding you know. You are meant to use the twenty minutes of tutor time constructively.”

Cooke looked round but did not know who the owner of the head or the voice was. 10 H disregarded the intrusion completely and carried on their bedlam undisturbed. The bell rang and Cooke made his way upstairs. At the top of the stairs, he met Ms Conway who curtly said, “You’re in Room 517,” and disappeared as quickly as she had come out. Cooke looked for 517 among the melee of children around him who were pushing, hitting each other with bags, as well as swearing and fighting with each other. Eventually he found it, but the door was locked, and he had to find Ms Conway, whose sighs made it clear that Cooke was nothing but a damned nuisance and should have thought about the key before. Cooke asked, “Could I have a key?”

“No,” replied Ms Conway, “I don’t give them to agency teachers. If you want anything you get it off me before school. By the way, I want to see your paperwork at the end of school with all your evaluations.”

Cooke went in, with the pupils barging in past him. It seemed to him that none of them had any rudiments of good manners, or the least conception of civilised behaviour. It seemed to have rubbed off on the staff. He had been in this place for an hour, and nobody had yet addressed him in a way that seemed remotely polite, let alone friendly.

The room was a dump. Like the rest of the school, it had not been decorated since the school had been built, except for the presence of dried up chewed-up paper, known as soggies. These gave the room a curious “artexed” look, but not one that even the most inferior decorator would have liked to achieve. The floor, like all the others, had been covered in vinyl tiles, but these had worn through in places due to age and abuse. The benches in the room were so covered in graffiti that it was difficult to see the wood below, except in places where there were deep gouges in the surface. These gave the benches a pock-marked appearance not unlike the surface of the Moon.

Cooke attempted to make a start to his day’s work, but it made little impression on the class who regarded the lesson as a continuation of the social intercourse that had started when they had arrived at school. They paid no attention to Cooke’s initially polite requests to settle down, positively enjoying his increasing stress levels. For Cooke, whose values were traditional, the class before him represented everything that he had grown to dislike in teaching. These third years looked and acted ignorant. Indeed, they were arrogantly proud of their ignorance and would give any pupil who tried to do better a very hard time. The behaviour of the girls was loudly tartish; the boys were disruptively loutish. Even the appearance of the pupils was repulsive; the girls looked like boys, and all the boys had close-cropped or shaven heads. One or two had tattoos of an extreme right-wing group, which thrived on the deprived depravity of the Canterill Farm estate.

The group in front of him set the tone for the rest of the day, and he started to get used to the loutish indolence that was the ethos of the place, rooted in the disaffected sub-culture of the Canterill Farm estate and Ms Purslove’s sympathetic understanding. Cooke was genuinely surprised at what the pupils were wearing; designer clothes and training shoes were

de rigueur. They had either been bought on the drip (at extortionate interest rates), stolen from shops in Carlsborough town centre (most likely), or were pirated copies bought at the market or cheap shops. The children looked decidedly out of place in these designer clothes. The model girls and boys who advertised them were all thin and sleek. This was not a description that could be applied to many of the children of Canterill Farm. Living on high-fat junk food, many of the pupils in Cooke's class were decidedly overweight, and some were obese, a situation that was not helped by the lack of sports which Ms Purslove had outlawed as too competitive. There was a lingering smell that Cooke associated with poverty, a general BO which was mixed with a faint taint of stale urine, the result of not changing one's clothes often enough. A second more pungent smell arose from time to time when a boy would shout out, "Sir! Wayne's just trumped!" Cooke would know that the noisome smell of faecal decay would soon permeate. It had happened before in all his schools, not least Tanswold, but here, due to the appalling diet of the children, it had a particularly offensive quality. The more offensive the smell, the prouder the perpetrator seemed to be.

At one point, during a particularly unpleasant lesson, an aggressive fourth-former told Cooke to "fuck off" and Cooke immediately went into the prep-room to ring for a senior teacher. Twenty minutes later Evans the Deputy arrived and took the boy out. Cooke could hear the child giving Evans the Deputy even fouler mouthed abuse than Cooke had received himself. The boy came back in, picked up his coat and pushed past Cooke and went out. Evans the Deputy came back in and proceeded to tear Cooke off a strip for wasting his time with such trivia, and that he should learn to teach more effectively if he was to stay there. The class relished it; they liked to see their teachers humiliated and it meant that Papa Smurf was not getting at them.

Cooke mused for the rest of the day as to how funny it was that time passed so quickly when he enjoyed himself; this day seemed to be lasting a week. By the end of school his headache had developed into a full-blown migraine, and he was feeling quite sick. He packed his files into his briefcase – they only just went in, and his briefcase weighed a tonne. He was just going out of his room when a voice shouted, "Oi, Mr Cork! Where are you going?"

"It's the end of school, Ms Conway. I'm going home."

“No, you are not. Firstly, the college works a college contract. Staff do not leave until half-past five, except when there is a meeting, when it’s half-past six. Secondly, I want a word with you now, in my office.”

Cooke felt like a naughty pupil as he entered the chaotic cubby hole that passed for Penelope Conway’s office. She did not invite him to sit down but glared at him from behind her desk. “Mr Cork,” she started coldly, “you are working in not just any school, but the Phoenix Community College. We are like a premier division team here, and your performance is really rather like a player from the Conference. Do you understand what I mean?”

Cooke intensely disliked football, and after his experience with Dunstan Storate, liked metaphors even less. Through the muzzy haze of his migraine, he heard himself saying, “What do you mean by that, Ms Conway?”

“What I mean, Mr Cork, is that your performance today has been far from satisfactory. This morning there was a complaint from Ms Maugham about your lack of control of the form you were registering and that you were not doing productive work with them. Next there was that incident in Year 10. Why did you call Mr Evans?”

“The boy told me to ‘fuck off’. That is gross insolence in my book. I will ...”

Ms Conway cut him short, “And what right have you to impose your middle-class values on these students? Don’t you see that they come from a very deprived background and it is our duty to liberate them from the shackles of a discredited system that stems from the iniquities of the class structure? I am not pleased that you were so confrontational with Wayne that he had to tell you where to get off. This kind of incident stems from uninspirational teaching and a failure to understand working class culture.”

Cooke wanted to plant one on the plain young woman sitting there spouting her own comfortable version of middle-class socialism. Instead, his migraine prevented him from even muttering, “Bollocks!” Now she was demanding to see his lesson plans for the day and his evaluations.

“These are not the kind of thing we are looking for,” snapped Ms Conway in a mocking tone. “Look at this, ‘Not much achieved, pupils

not attentive'. What activities had you planned? Where was the variety of activities? What were your formative assessments? What were your summative assessments? Were your objectives and outcomes made clear? How are you ensuring that there is adequate differentiation? Why have you not done any practical work?"

"There doesn't appear to be a technician," Cooke replied feebly. His migraine and the nightmare of the last three months had broken his spirit. He despised himself for not standing up to this jumped-up little madam, but he could not bring himself to do so.

"I know that, but I manage to do it," snapped Ms Conway. "You can spend the next couple of hours looking round the prep-room and seeing where things are. You make sure you book the equipment so that you are not denying another class of its use. You write in your plans a full list of equipment with a diagram as to how it is going to be set up. I want to see your objectives and outcomes. You show me your folder before you go tonight."

Cooke went wearily back to Room 517. It was dark outside. The room had been cold all day, but now it was positively frigid. The heating in the school was barely functional, so that it was little warmer inside than outside. Due to the poor state of the heating system, the temperature in the college was less than the legal minimum, but Ms Purslove had always refused to close the college on that account, stating that the students still had a right to their education. It was a right that many would happily have eschewed.

Cooke found little basic equipment that science teachers take for granted. Most of it had been stolen over the years. Ms Purslove regarded Science as an elitist subject and refused to spend what little money the school did have on it. Cooke went into the preparation room. It was a tip, and there was very little equipment that he could use. Where the benches were free of paper, vandalised and broken equipment lay. His eyes strayed over to a college prospectus that was lying on a table. It was an amateurish document; unlike the prospectuses he had seen in other schools. He flicked through, skimming over the pious educational psychobabble that formed the Mission Statement and the Student Code. Finally, he arrived at the GCSE results in the back; it made depressing reading. Two percent of the pupils had gained 5 or more GCSE passes at Grade C or above (the highest score was a Grade B), and only 1 pupil

had achieved even a C in science. Indeed, fifty-two percent had left without achieving even one GCSE at Grade G. So much for Ms Conway's sanctimonious lecture on being a Premier League teaching team!

"What are you looking for?" snapped another female voice. There was another plain looking young woman, but in Cooke's eyes, she was a beauty compared to Ms Conway.

"I am looking for a model of the digestive system. It should be in cupboard D33 according to this list, but it isn't. Do you know where it is?"

"No," said the woman helpfully, and as she walked out, she called, "You will have to find it yourself. I haven't got time."

"Typical," thought Cooke, as far as his migraine allowed him to think, "Nobody has time for anybody round here."

He was wrong in this assumption. Ms Conway had plenty of time for him when she looked through his lesson plans. There was a feature that Cooke had never come across before. Each sheet had a grade; Cooke was awarded Grade E (Unacceptable, to be referred to the Principal. Even a Grade A was regarded as merely "satisfactory".)

In the darkness, Cooke walked slowly through the bleak streets of the Canterill Farm estate. Soulless on a warm summer's day, on a biting winter's evening it was grim. In the distance Cooke could hear the revving of a high-powered car, and the sickening screech of tortured tyres as the joy riders did handbrake turns. The life was being thrashed out of somebody's decent motor car; it did not matter; it would be torched as soon as the joy riders had finished with it. He had been right in his thoughts that morning; he had heard them bragging about the car they had torched outside the school gates. He had noticed that everybody else had come in by car and that staff cars were secured in a compound. It would be a half-hour drive from Alverston instead of a two-and-a-half-hour journey using a train and two buses that did not connect with each other, and shank's pony. He would put his foot down and insist on having the car the next day. If the kids realised that he was a teacher, he would get beaten up. It had happened before.

The next day, Cooke had caught the first train and two early buses and was walking wearily through the estate. He had just crossed the road when a loud and superior car horn blared at him. A silver BMW Roadster pulled up, and the female driver shouted at him to look where he was bloody well going. Cooke recognised her as Ms Purslove, the principal. The car sped off, but as Cooke rounded the corner, he saw the car again. He noticed that it had a personalised number, KEP..., which he assumed were Ms Purslove's initials. This time it was slowing down again because there were six youngsters walking in the middle of the road. And this time there was no blaring of horns. Very meekly and mildly the BMW followed the youngsters as they dawdled along. The pupils passed the school gates and the BMW turned in. To Cooke's surprise it did not go to the stockaded compound that was the staff car park. Instead, it drew up in front of a roller door which rose obsequiously but smugly to Ms Purslove's command. It was weird, really, rather like one of those films that Cooke had seen where the spy disappeared into the high security bunker, many metres below the office block. It did seem to fit in well with his colleagues' description of the Principal's corridor as '*The Lubyanka*'. Another car drew up and Cooke recognised the driver as Evans the Deputy.

Cooke went into the bleak entrance hall. This time he didn't wait but went into the main corridor. A friendly voice called out, "You back again for more?"

"I didn't particularly like my first helping," Cooke replied, surprised that anyone had been civil, let alone friendly, "but I have to keep body and soul together. How long I will manage, I don't know. Nobody seems to like me much."

"You're not the only one. I'm Ken Sewell. I teach Technology, if teaching is the correct way to describe what we do in this madhouse."

"Ken, you are the first person here who has not been rude to me. Why are people round here so unfriendly and uncivil?"

"Come over to my room, and I'll tell you."

"I'd love to, but Ms Conway has told me to see her first thing each morning with my lesson plans. I was up until midnight last night working on them."

“Ignore that little girl,” said Sewell in a tone of voice that Cooke did not want to argue with. “She’s been here five minutes and is hardly old enough to wipe her own arse, let alone provide support and back up to staff in trouble.”

“How old is she and how did she get here?”

“To answer your first question, she’s twenty-three. Your second question takes a bit more answering. I’ll tell you a bit about this place. Now come to my room and I’ll put the kettle on. In this place walls have ears.”

It seemed to be an appropriate metaphor, for as they walked along the covered way to the Technology Rooms, fruiting bodies of dry rot fungi were emerging from just above the windows, many of which were boarded over. Soon they were in a gelid classroom of unimaginable dinginess.

“It’s a dump,” said Sewell as the few working lights flickered into life. “It’s totally devoid of charm in the summer when it’s warm; at this time of year, it’s like a prison. It just about sums this place up. They used to have machine tools in here, but they have all been taken out. Nowadays it’s just cutting up bits of cardboard with scissors; and that is about all we can trust the kids with. Give them a chisel, and they would stab each other, before nicking the chisel to murder someone else with.”

Sewell put the kettle on and got out two chipped mugs. Cooke’s eyes strayed around the room. Loose live electric wires stuck out of the ceiling. Sewell said, “I know what you’re thinking; it’s an accident waiting to happen. I have told the powers-that-be many times. Sowerland County Council sends little men round in Fiesta vans, and they come with clipboards and note it down. Eventually it gets put away in a filing cabinet.”

“What is the history of this place?”

“Not a lot. The college is not exactly of long-standing foundation. What do you know of the area, Robert?”

“Very little, except I wish to God that I had never come here. I hate it.”

“I’m not surprised. I have lived in the area for most of my life. When I was little, Canterill Farm was just that. It was lovely around

here; you could go for all sorts of country walks, and I did with my mum and dad. The landowner who was in with the bigwigs of the county set and the council decided to sell at a vastly inflated price. He turned the farmer out, and the council started to build the estate. The architect won a prize, and there is still a lot of talk of back-handers to the council from the architect, the builders, and Uncle Tom Cobley. In fact, the landowner I believe was something to do with your old school.”

“Sir Kenneth Rounce?”

“Yes, I think that’s the name.”

“He was before my time, and they say that he’s gone bust.”

“They demolished the farm and built the estate. There were problems from the start. The estate went down the pan from day one. The houses and flats were so badly built that they are officially condemned. There were decent people who moved onto the estate at the beginning, but within a couple of years they were queuing up to leave. The place began to get a bad reputation, not helped by riots in the early eighties. Now they use it for problem families from all over the area. You know they call it ‘The Devil’s Arsehole’? And the tower blocks just opposite are called ‘The Willy Flats’ because they stink of urine and sewage. They have never got the drains right.

“You name it; the problem happens here, child abuse, drugs, crime, and murder. This patch has a real name for murder. When people are up in front of the beak, nine times out of ten, they are from the Canterill Farm.

“As for this madhouse, it has always had a bad reputation. It was opened when the estate was built in the late sixties. Like the rest of the estate, it was built on the cheap and the council did very little to maintain it. In those days it was called Canterill School. Within a couple of years, its name changed to Alderman Warren Community School – John Warren was a local councillor with an ego as big as his belly. That lasted up to about two years ago. It got a very bad OFSTED report. We got put on special measures, but even so it didn’t work. They closed the old school and reopened it as the Phoenix Community College. They thought that it would sound good, but it was really to get us to work even longer hours. They brought in a super-head, but she lasted about a term, and they lumbered us with Purslove.”

“She seems very strange. She blasted her horn at me as I was crossing the road just by the Willy Flats. A couple of minutes later I saw her driving really slowly behind some kids who were in the middle of the road.”

“That sounds very typical of Karen Purslove. She despises her staff but is scared witless of the kids and their parents. She has some very wacky views and if you ask me, she’s a bloody menace to the community.”

“Where did they get her from?”

“It goes back a long way. When I first came here twenty years ago, Stan Dennis was headmaster. The kids were pretty awful, but Stan took no nonsense from anyone. Even the parents were terrified. He was one of those larger-than-life figures, both physically and in personality. He retired and they brought in another bloke who was a lemon, and the place went completely down the pan. That was about five years ago. It got an awful inspectors’ report, and they decided to put the school on special measures. We got a so-called super-head. She lost control of the school straightaway and lasted no more than half a term before she quit. That is when they closed the school down and made everyone apply for their own jobs. That was when they appointed Purslove. Just as we didn’t think that things could possibly get any worse, they suddenly did.

“When Purslove arrived, she put us all on new contracts, which basically means that she can hire and fire at will and make us do what she likes. In theory we are meant to take evening classes, but they are wilfully pig-ignorant round here and education is alien to them. That’s why we are not allowed to leave before five. The unions were useless, worse than useless. Each year we have to apply for our jobs. We usually only keep them because the other candidates take one look at the place and jump straight back into their cars, provided that the kids have not nicked them in the meantime. Talking of which, why were you walking in?”

“I don’t have a choice,” replied Cooke. “I tried talking my wife into letting me have the car last night. I didn’t get back until nearly ten. I tried to be assertive, but we ended up having a blazing row and she made me sleep in the back bedroom.”

“If I were you, Robert, I wouldn’t be seen walking through the estate. Once the kids know that you are a teacher here, who knows what might happen to you? It happened to Graham Phipps; he got stoned and savagely beaten up. He was in hospital for a week. The police were involved, and they got some of the kids. When he limped back to work, Purslove told him not to press charges. He did, and she took out a competence assessment on him on the grounds that the attack, which got into the papers, was provoked by a confrontational style in the classroom and that the teaching and learning were of poor quality in his lessons. He tried to hang on, but she sacked him. When it came to court, there was Purslove standing up telling the beak how the children were totally misunderstood and that they needed care, not punishment. She rubbished Graham in open court. The kids got off virtually scot-free, and Graham hasn’t worked since. So, don’t get seen walking!”

“I need to get here. Does anyone live Alverston way?”

“Only la Purslove,” replied Sewell. “I don’t think she would give you a lift, somehow.”

“Why’s that?”

“She hates men. She is a militant feminist. The only use that she and her female partner have for men is the occasional dirty weekend...” Sewell went on to describe Purslove’s weekend activities with twenty-five-year-old men in graphic detail, which Cooke found quite revolting.

“It’s sordid!” muttered Cooke.

“And not over natural either. Talk about mutton dressed as lamb! Did you see what she was wearing this morning; leather jacket and leather hotpants that revealed half her arse, with leather boots to match? I’m told that her outfit is worth almost two grand. And there she is telling us to be understanding about the working-class poor. By the way, don’t let her hear you going on about God. Purslove is an evangelical fundamentalist atheist. She has totally banned any celebration that has any religious connotations at all. She didn’t allow any Christmas carols or anything last term. She won’t even call it Christmas; it’s the Mid-Winter Festival. That said she has a real knees-up with her lesbian friends back at the ranch, plus of course her twenty-five-year-old men, whom she then discards with as much thought as a used deodorant can.”

The internal telephone rang, and Sewell went to answer it. Cooke could hear Ms Conway's shrill voice from where he sat. "Where's Mr Cork?" it demanded.

"Mr Cork?" Sewell replied, "I don't think we have a Mr Cork down here."

"He was seen going down to your department with you. Send him up here."

"Now I have a Mr Cooke," replied Sewell, "he is down with me and I won't have finished until staff briefing."

"What do you mean? I want him here now, and I don't want you patronising me."

"Would I do that Penny?"

"Ms Conway to you! What are you doing anyway?"

"None of your business, Penny. If you really want to know, I am showing him the ropes, which you as his head of department have singularly failed to do. Now if you will ask me politely, I will ask him to put his head round the corner after staff briefing."

"Oh!" yelled the voice from the other end and there was the angry click of the receiver being slammed down. "And the same to you!" shouted Sewell. "If I had my way, you would be serving chips in MacDonald's."

"Why are people so rude here?" Cooke asked. "You are the first person to have spoken to me in a pleasant way and given me time of day."

"It's the pressure. Purslove thinks that her management style is modern and dynamic. In fact, it is plain bullying. And she is aided and abetted by Evans. He's a nasty piece if ever there was one. He comes from the wilds of North Wales and as far as we're concerned, he should go back there. We call him lots of things, the politest of which is Evans the Deputy. He is Peter Evan Evans, so he is known as Evan Two-Times, and it seems to fit. He has been known to get his leg over girls young enough to be his daughters. If the day has a D, an A, or a Y in it, he's in a bad mood, which isn't mollified until he has bollocked a member of staff. Purslove keeps him as her token man and gets him to do her dirty work, of which there is plenty. You may have noticed that

all the Heads of Department are women, and they are all young and single. She doesn't like them to use the title 'Miss'; it has to be 'Ms'. I think she selects them because they turn her on. It is certainly not because of their competence. You look at Penelope Conway. She's a spoiled little madam if ever there was one. She had been teaching less than two years when she came here at the start of last term. She hasn't a clue. Like all of them, she is on the ladder. She will come here for two years, cause utter chaos, and at the next interview she will pass it all off as progress and what a wonderful thing it all has been. She will get another position on the ladder and will be a headmistress by thirty-five. God help that school if you ask me. You might have noticed that nobody refers to each other by their first names."

"Yes, I had and that makes it all the more unfriendly."

"That's Purslove for you. She thinks it's unprofessional."

A bell rang loudly and petulantly for several seconds. "Ah," said Sewell, "that means we've all got to be good little boys and girls and be in. You will have noticed that the bells have two kinds of ring. The long and loud ring is for the staff. The quieter, pulsed rings are for the students. Another five minutes and we will have to go and be motivated."

The telephone rang again. Sewell answered it. Cooke could hear a grating voice at the other end, and he put it down with a sigh. "Robert, we have been 'invited for tea and biscuits' with la Purslove. Five o'clock in *The Lubyanka*. It will happen about once a month if you are a man. Come on, let's go and be motivated."

Chapter 8

John Gonall had every reason to feel satisfied. He was now the Deputy Headmaster of Tanswold School, and if he played his cards right with the right people on the Governing Body, they would surely look on him with favour to take over when Dunstan Stoate retired. Although he had announced that he was going to retire, the old fart was sure to carry on until at least the current crisis had been weathered. Gonall would have to ensure that when a successful conclusion had been reached, it would have to be seen to be due to his competence and acumen. If they could be convinced of that, he would push the old fart over the side anyway and promote Tanswold School to be an academic hot house in the best traditions of the long-established grammar schools at Leeds and Bradford.

Gonall's ambitions were based largely on arrogant self-delusion. It had never occurred to him that to run a school of the calibre of Leeds Grammar required a man of vision as well as intellect. That Gonall possessed neither was no bar to his ambition. In reality Gonall was intellectually a pigmy, and his stultified vision was that of a bully. The latter were features he shared with his boss, but, unlike Stoate, Gonall had no redeeming features; there was no way he could be described as a raconteur, let alone a *bon viveur*.

His first step in this process had been successful. He had got rid of Cooke, a young man whom he had heartily despised from the start. He now had several more of the younger staff in his sights. He decided that there had to be a strategy to his firm management style. It had even penetrated Gonall's tiny brain that firm management could be controversial, and it needed to be backed up by some management theory. At the crudest level, nowadays you could not go round thumping your staff. If you did, you would be likely to be in front of some policewoman who had a heart that bled for the incompetent and was likely to get you sent down on an assault charge. Recent changes on the Bench had made such an outcome even more likely. So Gonall decided that he really needed some training in management theory.

At first Gonall had bought several books on school management but had found them heavy reading. This was not surprising as he was not

noted for his literary ability. He had heard some of the buzz-phrases of management that were going about at the time. One that seemed to be particularly in vogue was “performance-management”. At first, he was confused. He knew that his car had a performance management system as part of the engine. Gonall knew little about the simplest petrol engine, let alone the hideously complicated engineering that was the feature of most modern cars. What was worse was that it involved a computer. Like his boss, Dunstan Stoate, Gonall was something of a technophobe, and his computer was little more than an ornament on his desk, other than to write memoranda of monumental boredom and bad grammar.

So Gonall heaved quite a sigh of relief when he realised that performance management involved neither a computer nor a course in modern car mechanics. Instead, he spent a delightful few days in January in a London hotel being briefed on performance management. The course was run by a very sharp and dynamic young man who demonstrated how one could bully staff (and get away with it) while convincing them that you were really being an “investor in people”. Extra tasks, targets, monitoring, pressure, and stress were seen as personal investments to make in one’s career. It also could be shown that you were caring. If one dropped dead on the job, well that was decidedly unfortunate, if not downright careless. The removal of dead employees from the payroll was quite justified. In short, Gonall was delighted and came back brimming with half-remembered ideas.

It was high time that somebody at Tanswold School had some joined-up thinking, so Gonall thought. Stoate was incapable of anything resembling joined up thinking, flitting from idea to idea. As for his other colleague on the management team, Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax seemed to be incapable of thinking at all. Nonetheless to plot a *coup* against them was out of the question. Both Gonall and d’Arcy-Fairfax had been recently elected to the Honourable Membership of the Byland Foresters. Gonall would have to bide his time until the old fart retired, and he would have to wait on the Byland Foresters to help d’Arcy-Fairfax to be promoted to the level of his incompetence.

Instead, Gonall decided to put his plan concerning performance management into place. He put his ideas to a meeting of the Senior Management Team. Stoate seemed to be looking at Gonall in a rather

quizzical way. “What do you think you are going to achieve, John?” he asked after a silence.

“An improved management of performance,” Gonall replied, annoyed that the old fart should be asking him any questions at all.

“What do you mean by improved management of performance?”

“Just as I say. I shall be looking at the job descriptions of all the staff and identifying where they are falling short.”

“Job descriptions? The job description of the staff is to damned well do as we tell them to do. So, they are doing it, aren’t they?”

“No, Dunstan, they are not.”

“Well why not? We tell them to teach to the highest standards and keep the boys under rigid control. That is what is being done, isn’t it? That is what the orders are to the staff.”

“Dunstan, we had to get rid of that cretin Cooke last term. He had failed, and there are others too. I have had to deal with quite a few complaints from parents and the community about what some of the boys have been up to.”

“We will have to make an example of someone else.”

Gonall despaired of his boss. His thinking appeared to have become even more disjointed, if that were possible. Judging from the generally vacant expression on Stoate’s face, he seemed to have given up thinking at all.

Stoate had tried to banish the unpleasant events of the previous six months from his mind. There had been some miserable incidents and the metaphor on his mind was of a ship limping to port. He did not dare to think of an aviation metaphor; it would have involved the attitude indicator pointing decidedly down, a rapid run out of altitude, and a smoking stinking crater. Lartington piped up, “It’s the in thing nowadays, Headmaster. It’s called ‘Investment in People’.”

“Why the hell should I want to invest in people? I damn well pay them, and I expect them to work for their pay, and if they aren’t doing so, I want to know why.”

“I said before, Headmaster, that it’s the new in-thing in management. It’s a way of keeping close tabs on your workforce. In the

old days the workforce got suspicious if you were snooping about all the time. Now you can do just that and tell them that you are ‘investors in people’ and they think that you are taking an interest in them. You can tell them to pull their socks up or you will invest in someone else.”

“I would just sack them,” muttered Stoate who found modern management techniques far too hard for his limited intellect to grasp, “just like I did with that little runt Cooke. I seemed to have chosen a lemon there. Mind you the other bod I interviewed was pretty awful. Talking of investment, have we got the money out of Cooke yet?”

“Not yet,” replied Lartington who had not done anything about that but quickly decided that he should. “I have sent letters to Cooke, but I have not received a cheque yet.”

“By the time we have tidied up the whole sorry affair, we should be able to claim about forty thousand from him,” said Stoate smugly. “It will help us a little bit until we have steadied our course.”

“What if we don’t get anything out of him?” said Lartington, whose experience in such matters led him to suppose that Cooke barely had two pennies to rub together. A cheque for forty grand was likely to bounce.

“We’ll damned well take him to court. Get Carter-Barr onto it, and Cooke won’t even have the clothes he stands up in. We will be getting every penny of his salary for the rest of his natural life. Now that’s what I call ‘investing in people’!” Stoate chuckled loudly at his joke. “Come to think of it, John, if your performance management wheeze comes off, we could target maybe half-a-dozen members of staff and do the same trick as we have done before. Get Carter-Barr to lean on them and take them to court. He has always had the cases heard before Sir Thomas Handley, who has always, without fail, found in our favour. You all know what a warm friend he is of the school.”

Stoate was bound by his pledge of secrecy not to reveal that Sir Thomas Handley was a senior member of the Byland Foresters. Although his senior management team were also Byland Foresters, Lartington and Scott, his minion, were not. Stoate carried on, “John, get your performance management system and quality assurance in place as soon as possible. Piers, can you help John in the quality assurance side?”

Gonall was only too delighted. He had thought that things were going against him. Stoate's notorious inability to indulge in joined up thinking had actually swung in his favour. There was a downside; that chinless wonder d'Arcy-Fairfax was now in on it. Gonall held a heartfelt contempt towards the Chaplain but could not do anything about it for reasons of honour. It would be an Achilles' heel for his scheme, as d'Arcy-Fairfax's lessons were an utter shambles and he was universally despised. Gonall would press on regardless and give d'Arcy-Fairfax tasks that either even he couldn't mess up, or, if he did, it wouldn't matter. The harder bit would be to get rid of Stoate and persuade the Governors that he would be most suited to be Headmaster. He certainly would not be the Director of Learning and Teaching. Gonall revelled in the thought. His school would be an academic hot house of the highest standing. As for discipline, there would not be even a hair out of place.

At Robert Cooke's new school there was not much hair to be out of place; shaven heads were *de rigueur*. Regular grooming was with a Number One. The last thing that Robert Cooke's new school could be described as was an academic hot house. Hot was not in it. The thoroughly badly designed nineteen-sixties building along with its pitifully inefficient heating system made the building as cold as charity. Cold draughts droned through the tatty classrooms. Although it never snowed, that January was bitterly cold, and in Carlsborough, the sun was not seen at all for six weeks. Some of the classrooms that Cooke had to teach in were so cold that one could see one's breath, and the pupils wore their coats, despite Ms Purslove's decree that they should not. As for academic, the Phoenix Community College was definitely bottom of the class, propping up the entire national league tables, with a headline GCSE pass rate of one and a half percent.

That Cooke was there at all to witness winter at the Phoenix Community College was not so much because they liked him, but more because there was nobody else that Sowerland Staffing Solutions could send along. Indeed, after only two days, Cooke had incurred the disapproval of the Principal and had been 'invited to tea and biscuits' after the end of the college day, along with Ken Sewell who went in first. Cooke waited outside '*The Lubyanka*' at the top of the stairs that led up

from the cheerless entrance hall. He sat on an uncomfortable chair on the exposed landing, watching without interest the comings and goings through the main door. Like the rest of the building, it was cold and Cooke found it hard to keep warm. Ken Sewell came out of the door with a face like thunder.

As Cooke started to go in, Ms Purslove was coming down the corridor, and snapped, "Wait outside until you are sent for, Mr Cork." Cooke retreated from the warmth of the Principal's suite, as *The Lubyanka* was officially known, back into the gelid air of the landing. He sat down again. He watched Purslove unlock a door marked 'For Principal's Use Only'. Despite his sense of outrage at her, there was something quite physically attractive about her. She was not much older than him and was clearly a very athletic woman. As she stood at the door unlocking it, he could not help but admire her long slender legs in knee-length boots. She was wearing expensive leather hotpants which barely covered her bottom. Under her leather jacket was an expensive Kashmir sweater. She disappeared into the little room and closed the door.

It was another fifteen minutes before Purslove emerged from her little room and strode down the corridor. A disembodied voice crackled through the intercom, "Come to my office, Mr Cork."

Unlike the rest of the school which was trapped in a nineteen sixties time warp and a cycle of increasing neglect and decay, the Principal's Suite was a model of minimalist and expensive fashion. Purslove's desk was set at the end of a long room and was clear, other than a computer and two telephones, in a minimalist way that was intended to appear intimidating. Cooke looked around for the independent witness who was going to be present at the meeting but only found Evans the Deputy. Ms Purslove's secretary was serving them tea and biscuits from a bone china tea set. Needless to say, Cooke was not offered anything. He just wished that the Boar had been there. The Boar would have helped himself and stuffed several biscuits into his mouth without asking.

"Where's the independent witness?" Cooke asked. "On the memo, it said there would be an independent witness."

"I am the independent witness," snapped Evans, "I am the representative of the National Union of Teachers."

“Sit down, Mr Cork,” said Purslove brusquely. She started to tap the keys of her computer. She sat imperiously in her chair and started the inquisition, “Mr Cork, I have summoned you here for two reasons. Firstly, there was an unfortunate and unacceptable incident with Wayne Parrett. Secondly, you have shown an attitude towards your Head of Department that is not to the professional standards that we expect here. What have you got to say for yourself?”

The knot in Cooke’s optic nerve seemed to tighten more, and he was scarcely able to think through the pain of his migraine. Even so, he recounted the event, “He told me to ‘fuck off’. I consider that to be gross insolence, which I will not tolerate.”

“Who told you that you could make such a judgement? Who do you think you are to apply your middle-class values in such a value judgement? It is College policy that staff do not apply value judgements to the students. It is mandatory that dealings with all kinds of breaches of discipline should be carried out in a sympathetic and understanding manner. You have clearly failed in this matter, Mr Cork. You were unnecessarily confrontational and that led to a situation, which required the intervention of the Vice-Principal. He has better things to do than that. You are expected, if you are going to carry on here, to understand the working-class culture and to value it. You have got to have the students on your side, and you will only do that by having excellent teaching and learning. All bad incidents can be traced back to the quality of teaching and learning.”

Cooke’s spirits were so crushed that he could not muster up more than the most gutless defence, “What about those who torched the College minibus?”

“That is none of your business, other than for me to reiterate that had the students been given good quality teaching, they would not have done this.

“As for your disrespectful attitude to Ms Conway, that is going to change. She will be monitoring you closely from now on and reporting to me on a regular basis. There had better be an improvement, Mr Cork. I shall be reviewing the situation at the end of next week.”

“My surname is Cooke, Ms Purslove, not Cork,” Cooke said feebly.

“Do not interrupt, Mr Cork,” snapped Purslove. “The first thing you are going to do now is to apologise to Ms Parrett, Wayne’s mum.” Purslove spoke into an intercom. A moment later a second door opened, and a creature of indescribable dereliction and ugliness waddled through the door. (Three years later, Cooke watched the highly acclaimed BBC series *Walking with Beasts*. When they described a group of large killer pigs as the ‘hogs from hell’, he had a strong sense of *déjà vu*.) The creature sat down and cackled, “Are you going to say it, Mr Cork?”

“Go on, Mr Cork, apologise to Ms Parrett,” said Purslove in a rather patronising tone.

“Ms Parrett, I have to express my apologies for what happened yesterday,” Cooke muttered, his spirit crushed by the two days he had endured. He understood what it was like to be captive of a secret police force. If he thought that Ms Parrett would say that it was all over and done with, he was very badly mistaken. This was the cue for this woman to launch a well-rehearsed and vicious tirade at him. “And I should bloody well think so! You pick on my Wayne and I’m not going to have you picking on him. I have rights, you know, and so does Wayne. He’s no trouble at home. He comes in at eleven and goes straight to bed...” There followed another ten minutes in this vein, but rather more foul-mouthed and abusive. It seemed to be a golden opportunity for Ms Parrett to offload all her woes against Cooke in particular, the school as a whole, the social worker, the council, and the world in general which were not giving her the rights to which she was entitled. The thing that really annoyed her was that she had been taken to court for cheating the benefits system.

As she spoke, Cooke tried to pay as little attention as he could to this unpleasant apparition, which was as alien to him as something from Mars. As he turned his ears off from the foul-mouthed tirade, littered as it was with four letter adverbs meaning ‘very’ and ‘exceedingly’, his nose kicked in. There was an unpleasant miasma of foul breath (the missing teeth confirmed to him Ms Parrett’s complete lack of knowledge of dental hygiene) mixed with the several bodily odours of someone who clearly needed a bath. Although smoking was strictly forbidden in the college, Ms Parrett only stopped her peroration to light up a cigarette. Cooke had a life-long loathing for smoking. It got up his nose at the best of times; when he had a migraine, it made things worse.

Cooke looked round at the senior staff while this pile of lard whined on and on. Purslove sat there smugly. Evans the Deputy regarded the whole situation with a contempt as lofty as his diminutive frame allowed. When Ms Parrett had finally run out of steam, Purslove was nauseatingly obsequious to her, "I am so sorry that this has happened, Ms Parrett. The College has clearly failed Wayne on this occasion, and I am going to ensure that my staff will deal with students in the most professional way in the future. You can be assured that I will be taking further action against Mr Cork to make sure that there will no repeat of this."

"Right, I'll be off," said Ms Parrett, "but Mr Cork, if you pick on Wayne or any other my kids, I'll come in and leather you. I have rights you know. I shall be telling my social worker all about this." With that she waddled off out of the room, leaving a trail of cigarette smoke behind her.

"You can see that you have upset her," was Evans the Deputy's first contribution to the proceedings. "It does not do to go about upsetting the parents, Mr Cork. I think you should be considering what further action to take to remedy the situation."

"I agree with that Mr Evans," Purslove added. "Mr Cork, you will be writing a letter of apology to Ms Parrett, and to Wayne. What has happened is completely unacceptable."

"I agree too, Ms Purslove," snapped Cooke who had been stung so badly by the whole thing that despite his migraine, he was struggling to hold his temper. "I agree totally that it's unacceptable...that a member of staff should be threatened in this way and you do not even utter a whimper against it!"

"How dare you speak to me like that, Mr Cork? For your information, the purpose of this college is to serve the community. It has to maintain its reputation which is not served by having upset parents."

"Nor is it served by having members of staff threatened. What's the union line on this Mr Evans?"

"That these incidents are brought about by a marked failure in the process of teaching and learning, Mr Cork," replied Evans the Deputy. "It is college policy that staff are expected to gain the respect of the

students through the excellence of teaching and learning. I agree that it is a challenge, but here we only accept the best.”

“But what is the union line? You have told me the college policy. You are supposed to be an independent observer.”

“Yes, I am,” snapped Evans the Deputy, annoyed that someone should question college procedures in this way. “I am here to ensure that college disciplinary procedures are followed. I do not expect my role to be debated again.”

“Can I count on the union support if that woman comes in and assaults me as she threatened? If she did, I will call the Police.”

“You will do no such thing, Mr Cork,” snapped Purslove. She looked really angry. “The students are alienated from the police whom they regard as the imposition of middle-class elitist values on their culture. In this college, we expect staff to deal with all these situations in a non-confrontational, sympathetic, and understanding way. You have got to learn the working-class culture, especially in this estate, where there is a lot of disaffection from society. You cannot expect to impose your old-fashioned grammar school values on these students. Our purpose is to liberate them to be free spirits...”

“To swear at staff? To sell drugs? To steal peoples’ cars and torch them? In my old school, pupils were suspended for swearing at staff.”

“Please do not interrupt, Mr Cork. It is the height of bad manners. In this college we do not call the students ‘pupils’. That again has connotations of a repressive grammar school regime. As for suspension, that is against college policy. We do not give up with anybody. They all have a right to be educated. No student has ever been excluded while I have been Principal. If you involve the police in anything that you have overheard, you will not work in this college again. Do I make myself clear, Mr Cork?”

“Yes, Miss Purslove.”

“Ms Purslove to you,” snapped the Principal. She emphasised the ‘Ms’ as if it were really important to her. “That will be all, Mr Cork.”

“Well, why don’t you pay me the respect of getting my name right? It is Cooke, not Cork.”

“That will be all, Mr Cork! I shall be passing on my findings to Sowerland Staffing. You see I do not like agency teachers. Close the door when you go out.”

Cooke could see why Ken Sewell had left with a face like thunder. He walked out of the office, leaving the door open. He knew that he would compose some thoughts about Purslove, but not at the moment. His migraine was making him feel sick, and every beat of his heart made lumps of pain bounce around the inside of his head. He felt as if his head was going to burst and splatter his brains on the ground. At the moment he could not join any thoughts together, other than he had come across two of the most repulsive women in the world. Firstly, there was that derelict divvy that had threatened him. If the Canterill Fram estate was the Devil’s Arsehole, she was a turd waiting to go down the Devil’s lavatory pan.

Cooke had heard about Ms Parrett, who had children to every boyfriend that came along. It summed up the depravation of the place. He didn’t want to, but in his mind’s eye came his imagination of Ms Parrett and her latest boyfriend, a shaven headed and heavily tattooed and obese moron. His mind’s eye came up with *“The program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down”*.

Secondly, he turned to Purslove, who clearly had the money behind her to live according to her delusions. There she was with all her do-gooding socio-babble, yet she wore clothes that would take a lifetime for these people to pay off on the drip. And she went around in that working class mode of transport, a £25000 BMW Roadster, with a personalised number plate worth even more. Talk about hypocrisy!

Cooke was glad it was dark. He would be able to get out of this hellhole without being seen, provided he did not get mugged. He had missed his bus and would have to wait for another hour to get the next one. It was bitterly cold, he was feeling decidedly ill and felt utterly abandoned.

At Tanswold School, Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax thought he was alone. The school was quiet and dark, and the last of the boys was going home eventually. He had composed his sermon for Friday church, threatening hell, fire, and damnation for the vile teenage sins of having crushes on

girls, or even worse, boys. Such behaviour was at the roots of the fall of empires throughout history, not least the Roman Empire, nor, more recently, the British Empire. If boys had maintained firm tradition, discipline, responsibility, and standing on their own two feet, more than half the world would still be red. It was now time for a crusade against the forces of trend, and fashion to go back to the simple virtues and beautiful poetry of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible. As an afterthought, d'Arcy-Fairfax decided that the final hymn should be sung in Latin. The *Dies Irae* would be particularly appropriate.

He made himself a cup of coffee and sat in his easy chair. He opened a folder that contained several brown manila envelopes. He pulled out the photographs and stared at them for some time, before going over to the computer and opening up his Internet browser. He spent the next two hours looking at various sites based in Thailand, before switching the machine off and going back to his small flat off Tanswold High Street.

At the same time, Dunstan Stoate was attempting to master his computer that decorated his desk. His efforts were in vain. It still blew raspberries at him, did lavatory flushes and made unpleasant, juvenile, and basic noises when he pressed various commands. Yet again he gave up in disgust and helped himself to a brandy, which he felt he deserved, strictly for medicinal purposes. He gazed out into the dark night, and it seemed rather to reflect his mood. Although he publicly stated that everything was under control, he was having doubts. True the ship was limping to port, but would she turn turtle in the meantime? He tried to think about aeroplanes, which normally gave him much pleasure, but the only thing that came to his mind's eye was a plane that was running out of altitude rather too quickly, somewhat before the runway.

The atmosphere in the school had not improved since he had got rid of Cooke. The staff had obviously not taken the message to pull their socks up, despite Gonall's performance management scheme, which had gone down like a lead balloon that afternoon. Hopefully Gonall would smoke out a few more staff that were not pulling their weight and get rid of them. He was not sure that it needed such a fancy-pants scheme to do it. Stoate would just target the dead-legs and kick them out. If they did

kick up a fuss, the court had always found in the school's favour, thanks to the influence of Sir Kenneth and Sir Thomas Handley - except that Sir Kenneth was *hors de combat* and Stoate wondered how much longer Sir Thomas could swing things in their favour. There was a more pressing matter.

Stoate knew about and had sanctioned the filming of a promotional video to recruit new pupils to the school. Lartington had insisted that no money should be spared, and that the video should portray the life of the school through the year. The scenes would have to include a retake of Speech Day; there was no way that the fiasco from last year could be included. It had seemed that there had been rather a lot of filming, and that the company had taken on the services of the *BBC*. With their know-how, it would be a very professional video indeed. That said, Stoate was having one or two nagging doubts in his mind. Was it really necessary to continue filming a group of louts shouting "d'Arsehole!" especially as it would have to be edited out? As Stoate was pondering this and wondering whether he should be smelling a rat, the telephone rang. Stoate picked it up and barked, "Stoate!"

"Good evening, Mr Stoate. I am Linda Caswell from Caswell Productions for the *BBC*. You will know that we have been filming at Tanswold School."

"For our promotional video? I am looking forward to it. I understand you have been helping what's-their-name who are doing the video. It should be very professional with all your expertise."

"Oh, it is, and we would like to show it to you and invite your comments on the content. We've still got a little work to do, but we do anticipate finishing in about six to eight weeks."

"Well certainly. May I look in my diary...? I can see you in mid-March."

"That will be fine." In her London flat, Miss Caswell put down the telephone. The old fool seemed to have taken the bait remarkably easily. She had been briefed on the promotional video, but the video she was going to show Stoate was intended to have the opposite effect.

Stoate put down the phone and decided he was getting paranoid about rats. There were more important things to worry about. He would have to do something decisive about the bad discipline in the school, but

he did not know what. He had told Cooke that he would have to pay the school £400 a day to arrange for cover. That would last until at least the end of the school year, so Cooke would end up paying about £40000 plus expenses. Get a few more staff out like that and the school could easily pay the interest on the loan for Stoate Hall, which was at the moment crippling the school financially. There was a little bit of a risk in this. Stoate had heard mutterings that Sir Thomas Handley had aroused the interest of Detective Commander Smithells.

After the New Year, a far more pressing matter came from a completely different direction. The first public examinations of the year were underway. The A level English class were waiting to sit their exam on *Coriolanus*. They went in and sat down. The Chaplain was supervising the exam, and when he told them to start, there seemed to be a more agitated rustling of papers than usual, until finally a hand went up. "Sir," said its owner, "we've been studying for *Coriolanus*, but the questions here are on *Much Ado about Nothing*. Have I got the wrong paper?"

"I've got the wrong paper too, sir," several other voices piped up.

"You'll just have to get on with this one," snapped d'Arcy-Fairfax who vaguely remembered something about laying the law down to the English Department that the set play was *Coriolanus*. There had been several objections that the set play had been *Much Ado about Nothing*, but d'Arcy-Fairfax had pulled rank and overruled these. He had been up to date, while those in the English Department were clearly not. Nevertheless, he thought that he would have to check it out with the examination board in Manchester.

His telephone call had confirmed his worst fears; the set play was indeed *Much Ado about Nothing* and that *Coriolanus* was the next year's set text. There were three alternatives. The first option was to admit the blunder, but it was not very attractive to him. Stoate would have his guts for garters. Second was to blame Stephen Booth who had recently returned to work after a long period of treatment after a bad car accident. There were two problems, the first was that there was a small matter of the commandment *Thou shalt not bear false witness* (unless there are compelling reasons for thee to do so). The second was that Booth had

not been at work during the Autumn Term. If Stoate sacked him, the truth would inevitably come out, and that would not do. The third option was to say nothing and disown the whole affair. The pupils would simply have to get on with the exam, and if they got poor marks, the English staff could be called to account. Booth could field the inevitable flak and d’Arcy-Fairfax would keep a low profile. This seemed to be the least unattractive option and d’Arcy-Fairfax plumped for this one. He gave instructions to the receptionist that all problems involving the English Department should be referred to Stephen Booth in his capacity as Acting Head of English. If he played his cards right, d’Arcy-Fairfax could even emerge from the whole unfortunate affair with some credit. If it did not pull off, he would fall back on the second option.

It did not. By lunchtime things had gone decidedly pear-shaped. Some bigmouthed sixth former had squealed to his mother about being taught the wrong stuff for the exam, and by the end of the day, Stephen Booth was fielding some very angry questions from very disgruntled parents. The phrase, “I shall be consulting my solicitor over this matter” seemed to accompany a depressingly large proportion of the conversations. After a particularly prolonged and fractious conversation, Stephen Booth was in a thoroughly bad temper and resolved to get to the bottom of the matter. Discussion with his colleagues confirmed that the finger of blame was to be pointed at d’Arcy-Fairfax. Booth resolved to tackle the Chaplain on the matter and was ready to commit murder. He strode to the Chaplain’s office, knocked on the door and walked in without invitation to come in. D’Arcy-Fairfax, having been caught unawares, quickly shoved some photographs into their brown envelopes and turned round, squawking with outrage, “How dare you burst into my office like this, Mr Booth?”

“I have a bone to pick with you,” Booth growled.

“I don’t know what you mean. What I do know is that you have disrespectfully burst into my office. Please leave now.”

“No, I will not leave, Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax. I want to know what the devil’s going on. I have just got back to find out that my department has been teaching the wrong play. And now the students have sat an exam. What’s the game?”

“It seems to be your poor leadership,” replied d’Arcy-Fairfax arrogantly. “In fact, I would say non-existent over the last term.”

“What do you mean by that?” Booth growled threateningly. “You know damned well that I have had a bad car accident. I didn’t ask some drunken clown to put me in hospital for twelve weeks. Or are you taking the Mickey?”

“You should have taken more interest in your department while you were off. You should have been monitoring the progress of its work at least on a weekly basis. You obviously have not, an oversight for which you will have to have a pretty convincing explanation when the Headmaster, Mr Gonall, and I investigate the matter.”

“I have got a pretty good explanation you moron! I was unconscious in intensive care. The priest was called to give me the Last Rites. I only gained consciousness at half term, by which time you had countermanded my instructions that I had given my colleagues about what was the set text...”

“Thank you, Mr Booth, that will be all,” interrupted the Chaplain. “The Headmaster will see you in the morning. You have provided a most interesting insight to the affair.”

“You’re the one who needs to give the explanation, Chaplain. I am sure they will understand the position.”

“Thank you, Mr Booth, close the door on your way out.”

As Booth left the room, the Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax switched on his computer and started to compose a sermon for his Lenten series on *Thou shalt not bear false witness*.

While Dunstan Stoate and his senior colleagues were congratulating themselves on the decisive and dynamic way in which they had dealt with the unfortunate matter of the exam with the wrong text, the Reverend Proudlock was having to help yet another of his parishioners to pick up the wreckage of his career. As Proudlock listened to Booth’s tale, he felt an increasing sense of helpless outrage at the injustices that Tanswold School was dishing out as if there were no tomorrow. The letter received by Robert Cooke demanding instant payment of £40000 was an affront in itself. To hold a man responsible

for someone else's blithering incompetence was an obscenity, aggravated further by the fact that at the time of its occurrence, Booth was close to death in intensive care. Although it was against his Christian nature to hold grudges, he could not help but wish that Tanswold School could be stopped in its tracks before anybody else got hurt. He particularly loathed the way that Stoate and his friends made a positive virtue of discarding people with little more compunction than a used paint tin and publicly humiliated them in the courts before screwing them for every penny. He knew of too many people who had been reduced to penury after an unproductive contract with the Tanswold School Trust.

It outraged him more when he saw an article on the affair on the local news that evening. The school had anticipated considerable local and possibly national interest and, unlike previous occasions, Stoate was well prepared with a press release that was comprehensive in its mendacity.

A most unfortunate incident came to light yesterday morning when pupils in the Sixth Form sat an English Literature examination. It was discovered that the pupils had been taught the wrong text for the examination, a matter confirmed by the Northern Examination Board. The Board has undertaken to consider the circumstances when the scripts are marked.

In the meantime, the Headmaster and senior staff at the school have undertaken a most thorough investigation of the affair. The responsibility for this lies with the Acting Head of English for a serious failure of leadership. Mr Stephen Booth had misinterpreted the syllabus and has taken full responsibility for this unfortunate incident. As a result of this, it was agreed that he should be dismissed from his post with immediate effect.

The incident is very much regretted, and it is expected that there will be no recurrence. We can assure parents and prospective parents that even more stringent quality assurance measures will be taken to supervise the work of departments.

John Gonall was particularly pleased at the structure of this press release. He had also done a bit of research on the topic of Quality Assurance and had found that it was a current buzz-phrase in educational circles. Although it conjured up for him an image of a man in a white

coat peering into lavatory cisterns and putting on a sticker marked 'Proudly inspected by...', he found that it was a perfect bedfellow to his scheme for performance management. He felt ready to field any questions from the press. It had been decided to give a press briefing. Stoate thought it would look good for the school, showing that everything was under control.

Unfortunately, quality assurance was another of these modern management concepts that Dunstan Stoate could not master. Stoate had pulled rank and announced that he was going to answer all the questions. It was a pity, because Gonall had a pre-prepared answer in case there was an awkward question about quality assurance. Stoate broke down completely when asked about the quality assurance scheme that was in the school.

"Do you know what is meant by quality assurance, Mr Stoate?" asked the BBC's Education Correspondent.

"Yes, it's simple. We assure that there is quality," replied Stoate.

"How? What techniques do you use?"

"We tell the staff that they have to give quality teaching. You can be assured of that."

"But what are the formal ways of doing that?"

"If a master doesn't do his job properly, he's out. And he has to pay for the supply cover until he is replaced. That assures quality of teaching."

"Do you know anything about modern management techniques, Mr Stoate?"

"Of course, I do! If a member of staff does not pull his weight, he's out on his ear. There is no room for passengers here. We got rid of a little runt last term."

"That does not sound like good management of staff, if you were to ask my opinion."

"Well, I am not asking your opinion," Stoate snapped. "I shall bloody well manage my staff how I like. This interview is now terminated."

If he had intended to improve the school's image by his resolute action against Booth, and the subsequent press briefing, Stoate's performance had resulted in a spectacular own goal. The press leapt onto his tantrum and pictures of Stoate storming out of the press briefing were broadcast across the region, and the next morning, newspaper headlines like *Top School's Exam Blunder* were splashed across the front pages.

As Stoate browsed through the morning papers a headline caught his eye, *Minion sacked for boss's blunder*, followed by an article about how Stephen Booth was having to carry the can for d'Arcy-Fairfax's incompetence. Of course, any reasonable man would have realised what in truth had happened, but for Stoate, loyalty to a fellow Byland Forester was far more important. Now Booth had gone to the press, Carter-Barr could instigate legal proceedings for libel, and Sir Thomas Handley would ensure that justice would be done. Stoate started doing his sums. Forty thousand each from both Cooke and Booth, plus at least quarter of a million libel damages each from Booth and the *Northern Echo* would certainly pay off a large chunk of the loan for Stoate Hall. Stoate decided to act decisively and picked up the telephone to Carter-Barr.

John Gonall had come to a decision too, but this would have to wait until an opportune moment. The old fart would have to go. Gonall was not so stupid as to attempt an immediate *coup d'état*. Pennington's two unsuccessful attempts at getting rid of Stoate during the previous terms showed that Stoate could still command the loyalty of about half the governors. On the other hand, it had been a very close-run thing on the first occasion, and Stoate had been saved by the casting vote of the chairman, Donald Blance. Things had changed somewhat, as Lionel Hyland, whose health had been failing for some years, was now seriously ill, and it seemed quite likely that he would not recover. Soon there would be a vacancy and Gonall thought about whom he could canvass to fill it, and how he could harness the reservations that many Governors had about Stoate's competence.

Robert Cooke had not been at all surprised to hear of Stephen Booth's experiences of justice Tanswold School style. The letter he had

received made repulsive reading and he had taken it immediately to Mr Wrightson, his solicitor who urged him to fight the action all the way. Mr Wrightson had also thought that Ms Purslove was sailing rather close to the wind in some her management decisions at the Phoenix Community College. Judging from the tales that were coming from the college, there was *prima facie* evidence of discrimination against men, every bit as illegal as the discrimination by men against women. Cooke resolved that should he be invited on another occasion to tea and biscuits in *The Lubyanka*, he would bring Mr Wrightson along with him. It would only be a matter of time.

Cooke had always been amazed as to how fast time flew by when he was enjoying himself. This explained why every minute spent at the Phoenix Community College seemed to last an hour, every hour a day, and every day a week. There was no day that he went in on which he didn't have a migraine. It was his constant and unwelcome companion as he walked through the bleak streets of the Canterill Farm Estate on his way to the school. The most depressing bit was negotiation of the bleak paved area between Hamden Heights and Eaton Tower, both of which were collectively known as the Willy Flats. There on the grey concrete flags were ever-growing piles of the detritus of serious deprivation and domestic dysfunction, old TV sets smashed to pieces by their fall from the fifteenth floor, dead dogs, bin-liners, old settees and so on. At the time of morning that Cooke passed by, the only life there was the large rats that fed amongst the rubbish. On one morning, Cooke had been narrowly missed by a bag of nappies that had hit the ground explosively behind him. After that experience, he decided to stick to the road, although it meant an extra ten-minute walk. At least it would save him ten minutes in the unpleasant company of Penelope Conway.

It had been four weeks since he had had tea and biscuits with Karen Purslove, and he frequently wondered what had happened to Ken Sewell. Such were the demands of each day, with his early morning tryst with Ms Conway, being on duty at break and lunchtime, and endless meetings after the school day, that he had not had the time even to talk with his immediate colleagues.

One morning, Ms Conway had rung in sick, and this offered Cooke a golden opportunity to meet up with Ken Sewell in the Technology Department. He found Ken in low spirits. "I have been

having to watch my back,” he said. “There is nobody I can trust around here. Her Ladyship up there has her little Gestapo spying on us all the time. I had another invitation to tea and biscuits last Friday. When Queen Karen summons you on a Friday, she keeps you a long time and concludes things on the Monday or Tuesday so that you can sweat it out over the weekend. She always goes into that little room of hers and I am sure that Penny Conway was in there at the same time. Anyway, she gave me a real bollocking and has given me a final warning.”

“What for?”

“It’s been a long running thing. It started at the end of last term. Here, I’ll show you what I mean.” Sewell rummaged through his desk drawer and brought out two pieces of typed A4, both of which were headed MEMORANDUM. The first read:

In view of the impending Mid-Winter Festival staff are required to work according to the following guidelines when decorating their rooms in a festive manner.

No religious images are allowed. Religion is a cause of alienation to students, and it is college policy that there is no religious element to any festivities attended by the students. It is also considered that students should of [sic] grown out of the need for religion by the time they arrive from primary school.

No pictures of Santa are allowed, for the same reasons.

No pictures of Xmas trees surrounded by presents are allowed, because they portray a middle-class perspective of excessive hedonism which can cause envy and divisiveness among the student body. Such division leads to psycho-social disaffection.

Under no circumstances may songs or carols of a religious nature be sung on the premises. Staff are reminded that serious disciplinary action may result.

In the interests of staff professionalism, staff should not accept Xmas cards from students. If they are accepted, they must be declared to my secretary with a precise monetary value.

The second was a spoof on the first giving further guidelines including the banning of the second verse of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and a sizing gauge for decorative baubles. Sewell continued,

“Your little friend Penny Conway spotted me doing this on the staff room computer and reported me to Purslove.”

“I didn’t know that we had a staff room computer.”

“We did. It was the only one for the whole staff and it got nicked over the holidays. So little Miss Conway reported me for wasting computer time and resources. In the meantime, I had photocopied it and given it out to staff as a seasonal joke, trying to get a vestige of Christmas cheer into this miserable hellhole. The problem is that Purslove has had her sense of humour surgically removed in a pioneering operation. And there is Conway licking her...

“The upshot was that Purslove suffered a complete failure in her sense of humour and has instituted formal disciplinary proceedings for wasting college resources. It doesn’t matter to her that I actually paid for the thing to be photocopied. As you can see, I did a bit about Nativity scenes, and that has totally grated on her fundamentalist and puritanical atheism. Since then, she has been looking for other things, and her little fancy girls have been stirring up all sorts of filth and fabrications.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I am. I have been in this madhouse long enough to know that if it can happen, it will. Unless it’s good, of course, and it’s just fairy tales,” Sewell commented sadly.

“Just what makes that woman tick?” Cooke asked.

“She has enough money to live by her delusions,” Sewell replied. “She comes from a family of liberal and trendy thinkers who are very wealthy. You have probably heard of Charles Purslove who made his fortune with a chain of department stores. The family has been awash with money ever since. They get onto councils and one of them stood for Parliament. You see it doesn’t cost anything to spout psychological claptrap, but when it comes to actually digging into their coffers, well I don’t have to tell you, do I? As for the wonderful Karen, she decided to carry out her do-gooding in education. She went in to all the trendy schools in London and took a year out to do a thesis on *The Role of Dance in the Development of Feminism in Working Class Northern England.*”

“WHAT?”

“She made us read it as well, so that we could understand where she was coming from. I have never read such drivel in my life. It is pitiful to realise that somebody actually believes all that stuff. It obviously went down a bomb amongst the educationalists in London. They loved it, so I’m told. You can imagine it in a pub, the Islington chattering classes coming out with all these long words, with four letter expletives to show that they have something in common with the urban man. ‘The augmentation of psycho-sensual experiences is designed to liberate the spirits of women in urban working-class areas, so that they can challenge the stereotypes that are imposed by a paternalistic masculine culture that has its roots in aristocratic elitism’. It goes on like that for a hundred pages.

“Despite what she writes, you would never find her anywhere near this place outside college hours. She sold her big town house in Canonbury. She bought a large flat so she could have a *pied à terre* in London and bought a vast country property in Quarmby. Even so she is still sitting on a fortune.”

“Wonderful working-class transport, a BMW Roadster. That kind of person makes me sick. Why did she come here though?”

“All part of her being a do-gooder. She made her way up by going on this, that, and every other course she could think of. She could come out with all the latest buzzwords in education. She rapidly became a Head at the age of thirty, caused chaos in several schools and moved on to leave someone else to clear up the mess. Now here she is, a super-head at the age of forty-two. She is being paid a fortune to improve this place. I am told it’s over a hundred grand a year. The council think she’s doing a wonderful job. They just go on the headline pass rate. Going from two to three percent is a fifty percent improvement.”

“The best improvement around here would be to knock the damned place down, not just this school but the whole estate. It’s horrible.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks that. They have thought about it lots of times. They had spent millions trying to do it up about ten years ago, but as soon as anything was done up the local head-bangers wrecked it. One councillor got into real hot water when he said, ‘Put them in palaces and they would still be pigs.’ Five years ago, they had a plan to flatten the place, but nobody could think of what to put in its

place. The trouble is that the council regards it as a social service to take in all the problem families and anti-social tenants from everywhere else and other councils pay them to do so. There are two problems. The first is that if they did flatten the place, they would have to send the head-bangers that live round here somewhere else. The second is that they would have to demolish the other two estates next door, the Prior Wood and the Kirkby Hall, both of which have suffered badly because of this place.”

Cooke could see the evidence of Sewell’s assertion each morning as he walked from the bus through the Prior Wood Estate. No buses would go through Canterill Farm, and the main road on the other side of Prior Wood was the closest they would go. Prior Wood had once been a pleasant area to live, but the increasingly and aggressively anti-social behaviour of gangs from Canterill Farm had forced many people out. Now many of the houses were derelict shells. Cooke was about to recite his exposition on what should be done to the area when the shrill and officious clangour of the bell summoned staff to be motivated by la Purslove and Papa Smurf.

John Proudlock would have liked to do to Tanswold School what Robert Cooke wanted to do to Canterill farm. It was a problem of faith with which he often struggled, seeing good people damaged in a cruel and unjust way, while those who were doing the damage not only got away with it, but also seemed to thrive. Sometimes he felt that his assurances of how justice would be done and that everything would turn out right in the end were just hollow platitudes, as ephemeral as the echoes of his voice in an empty church. It was always the hardest part of his pastoral care, to have to answer the question why terrible things happen to good people. The simplistic answers offered by some Christians were at best irritating, at worst downright destructive in their fatuity. The last few months had taken its toll with a number of challenging pastoral issues, as well as the tragedy in his own family, the cause of these stresses being the rotund form of Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate.

He had now seen several members of Stoate's staff dumped unceremoniously to prove a point. All it had proved to him and others was that Stoate was a vain and pompous bully who would twist things so that he got his own way. Andrew McEwan had been the first to suffer Stoate's recent series of fabrications. In that case there had been a happy outcome, as McEwan had had the clout to take the Tanswold School Trust to court for unfair dismissal. And had won his case. There was still the small question of serious damages for libel, and the Tanswold School Trust were making every effort to evade their responsibilities to make good the considerable damage they had done to his reputation.

Next, there had been that wretched incident with Richard Thorndale. They had taken the widowed Mrs Thorndale to court to recover lost fees until the end of the year and had almost beggared the woman. (The case had been heard under Sir Thomas Handley.) A chance win on a lottery scratch card had saved her from losing her home.

Now there were the cases of Robert Cooke and Stephen Booth, and that wretched man Carter-Barr was suing them for every last penny they had and suing Booth for telling the truth. As Proudlock thought on, he found the actions of his fellow cleric, d'Arcy-Fairfax, beneath contempt.

And the school had acted shamelessly in his own case. Their cavalier disregard for the safety and well-being of the pupils at Tanswold School had cost his daughter her life. As he sat there in his study, Proudlock's eyes filled with tears as he thought of his lovely daughter, a real Daddy's girl, who had been so cruelly snatched from him. And behind this, adding insult to injury was the haughty arrogance of Dunstan Stoate and Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax, both stalwarts of the church irrelevant. It sickened him that they had not only made a humiliating example of Sam (and tried to stir up trouble for him at his new school) but also had expelled Lucy Simpson for being at the bedside of her best friend as she was dying.

Proudlock tried to read his Bible to help him make sense of all of this. He could not; it was just words. And he was a man of the cloth, Rector and Rural Dean. He was meant to be good at God. It seemed that evil was gaining the upper hand and shouting its triumph from the rooftops. Certainly, Tanswold School had expanded, and seemed to be going from strength to strength, bar the odd hiccup like preparing the students for the wrong examination. With chinless and gutless wonders

like d’Arcy-Fairfax perverting the Gospel of Christ, it seemed little wonder to him that Christianity was all but vanquished in Britain. Perhaps he should go back to his old career of designing electronic circuits. They were in desperate need for electronic engineers, and the salary was good. John Proudlock felt very inadequate as he sat in his study. He wished that Ruth was there; she was at her parents’ having some rest, as she was now heavily pregnant.

Proudlock turned his thoughts to the imminent arrival. Even the smelliest nappy was infinitely preferable to the rotund and pompous image of Dunstan Stoate, with his pasty grey deputy, John Gonall, and that chinless upper-class twit, d’Arcy-Fairfax. They knew that the imminent arrival was going to be a boy. Although they had not wanted to know the sex of the baby, an ultrasound scan had made it very obvious. John was praying for safe delivery, as Ruth had had a difficult pregnancy, despite which she had only now started to slow down and take things easier. And she had taken some persuasion to do so!

He heard the front door slam and a shout of “I’m home, Dad!” before a clatter of outsized feet up the stairs. Upstairs some loud music came from Sam’s room as he changed from his school clothes. John Proudlock recognised the music instantly as Rick Wakeman; he had listened to Wakeman’s earlier music in the seventies, much to the annoyance of his mother. Sam always made his father feel better. Sam had been a very loving child when small, and even at a time when most teenagers are not noted for their altruism, Sam had an excellent relationship with his parents. When John Proudlock was tempted to doubt like this and throw in the towel, there was Sam who was a living example of the lovely side of young Christianity. Sam had been able to support his father at times like this with a gentle graciousness that was unusual in a fifteen-year-old youth. Sam never seemed to dwell on the injustice meted out to him and his family, simply summing it up as “Biggles has got a problem.” Sam had forgiven Stoate even though the loss of his sister caused him still a great deal of pain. Despite that, Sam shared his father’s outrage at what had happened to other people.

And there was Sam’s girlfriend, Jess, who was not just to be a girlfriend, but also a sister to Sam, and a daughter to them. Jess was now seventeen, nearly two years older than Sam, but there was no age or maturity barrier between them. Sam and Jess’s teenage romance read

like something from a *Mills & Boon* novel. The simplicity of their Christian faith along with their deeply affectionate relationship was surely what teenage love was meant to be all about. It made a contrast to the backbiting and violence that was said to make good television. It could also have taught a few of his older parishioners a thing or two. There were many young people coming to his church on a Sunday evening, bringing in a warmth and liveliness that Proudlock found refreshing. And there was Sam's friend Jamie, an intelligent and gentle seventeen-year-old who was an anxious and rather mixed-up young man. Jamie had responded well to John's counselling and had been baptised and was going forward for confirmation. There was the Badminton that Sam and his friends enjoyed. They had competed successfully at a number of high-level competitions and there was talk that Sam and Jess might go forward for junior national trials.

It all helped to convince Proudlock that his ministry was not in vain.

The bright side was not the way that Robert Cooke was feeling at the Phoenix Community College. He had been in the hellhole for four weeks now but had not yet been paid. Sowerland Staffing Solutions promised that his first wages would come after two weeks. When he rang to enquire as to what happened to his wages, the girl on the desk had told him that the school had not sent in its weekly return and payment could not be made until this were done. Cooke tried to chivvy things up from his end, but found the office to be rather obstructive, saying that the Principal had to sign the forms. Ms Purslove initially ignored his requests for her to do something about it but later told him that she would sign the forms only when she considered him to be effective.

The morning had started off badly. Ms Conway had come into school unexpectedly and was not pleased that Cooke had spent the first part of the day talking with Ken Sewell instead of going through lesson plans with her. Ms Purslove had motivated her staff by reading out of her diary all the important people she was going to see. She did no teaching and had little idea of what it was like in a room with thirty head-bangers from one of the worst estates in Britain. Cooke had to cover a maths lesson in one of the gaggle of rotten huts that served as temporary classrooms. These had been installed almost thirty years before. They were second-hand then. Since they were only there on a temporary basis, even less maintenance was carried out than on the main school buildings. The result of this was that the huts were incredibly squalid. All the windows, which had bars across them, had been boarded up or the glass replaced by polycarbonate that had gone opaque. The inside walls had holes in them, while the wooden exterior shells were visibly rotten. They bore the scorch marks of several attempts at arson; it was always said that the wood was too rotten to catch fire.

Needless to say, the hundred and ten minutes with Year 9 lasted like a hundred and ten hours. No work had been set and Cooke's request to Ms Heath, the Head of Maths was that he should have found out earlier and planned for it. He would just have to make do. He found ten tattered copies of an appropriate maths textbook and asked, "Where have you got up to?"

"Dunno."

"What did you do with Mr Hicks last lesson? You must have done something."

“No. He just lets us sit and chat. I twagged it yesterday anyway.”

“Can I see your book, so I can see what you did?”

“No, piss off.”

“Please may I see somebody’s book so that I can set you some work to be getting on with for Mr Hicks? Thank you. Vickers page 56, do Exercises 12 and 13.”

“We’ve done that before.”

“Not from what I have seen here.”

“We have. I’m not going to do it. It’s boring. This lesson’s crap anyway,” interjected an ugly looking girl who had a temperament to match.

“Are you refusing to work?”

“Piss off. Don’t you come near me. I’ll tell Ms Purslove. She believes us before she will believe you.”

“DON’T YOU TALK TO ME LIKE THAT!” roared Cooke, whereupon the child got out of her chair, threw her exercise book at Cooke, and shouting “I’m going to see Ms Purslove”, flounced out of the hut slamming the door.

The juvenile nature of the conversations going on round the room along with unconstructive exchanges like the one with the ugly girl wearied Cooke and his dull headache was rapidly turning back to a migraine. The clock, which was only functional due to a wire mesh box that protected it from marauding little fingers, seemed to be on a go-slow, although frequent checks with his watch indicated to Cooke that it was actually correct. Cooke heard a conversation between two shaven headed boys.

“Me and Wayne were doing handbrake turns on South Parade. Wayne had found a Vectra. He hot-wired it and it went like a bomb. We did 120 up Main Street.”

“Don’t they have an alarm?”

“Oh yeah, but they’re dead easy to get round. It was wicked; we burned rubber round Carlsborough, and the pigs were nowhere to be seen. We hit a grunter. She flew over the bonnet.”

“Wicked!”

The two boys continued their graphic accounts of their respective skills of Taking and Driving Away. On the local news there had been a story about a Vauxhall Vectra that had been stolen and driven at lunatic speeds round Carlsborough. An elderly lady had been knocked down and critically injured. The car had later been found burned out on the Canterill Farm estate. Wicked it was. Not only had a valuable motor car been stolen, driven recklessly by two louts, and burned out, but also an elderly lady, somebody’s mother and grandmother, was now fighting for her life. And here were two shaven headed morons laughing about it without the least hint of either shame or remorse. Cooke would have to do something about it.

The detailed nature of the accounts led Cooke to suppose that these were not merely boys bragging about how hard they were. The boy who had stolen the Vectra was recounting the tale in detail that exactly matched the police account. The police were asking for witnesses. At the end of the lesson, he went up to *The Lubyanka* to report the matter to Senior Management and ask advice as to what to do. He rang the entry phone and the secretary answered, “You’ll have to make an appointment, Mr Cork. Ms Purslove and Mr Evans are very busy people.”

“It is very urgent. It concerns a crime,” replied Cooke.

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

A minute later, Purslove’s voice came on the entry phone, “Alright Mr Cork, you’d better come in and you had better make it quick.”

Cooke went down along the corridor to Purslove’s office. Purslove stared at him aggressively while he recounted the tale. She said, “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Call the police? These boys are vital witnesses.”

“WHAT?” Purslove yelled. “Are you proposing to bring the police into the college to arrest these students? You had better remember that the police are a vehicle of the repression of the working classes by elitist and *bourgeois* interests. They are a symbol of the alienation that many of our students feel. It is against college policy that police should be allowed access to our students while they are in school.”

“They have committed a serious crime. They were bragging about it and called their victim a ‘grunter’.”

“Mr Cork, if you call the police, your time at this college is over. You have the cheek to demand that I see you without an appointment on some trivial pretext. I have better things to do than waste my time on this sort of thing. Close the door when you go out.”

“An old lady lying critically ill? Is that trivial to you? Besides you always say you have an open-door policy.”

“Yes, the door is open. Go out through it, Mr Cork. You are meant to be on duty.”

Cooke was burning with anger as he left *The Lubyanka*. The hypocrisy of the woman was breath-taking. He would have loved to take a swing at her; that would have got the police there pretty quickly. He went to the receptionist, but all he got was, “It’s more than my job’s worth.” He tried ringing from several phones but found that all of them required the receptionist to connect them to an outside line. The payphone was vandalised. He eventually found Ken Sewell who lent him his mobile.

Constables Cox and Sutcliffe responded to his call. Cooke had just finished a lesson when the receptionist rang, “Mr Cork, there are two policemen here to see you. If I were you, I wouldn’t let Ms Purslove see them here. She doesn’t like policemen on college premises. You shouldn’t have used the college phone to ring them you know.”

“I didn’t. I used a mobile.”

“Whose?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh hoity-toity. Don’t you come that tone of voice with me. Ms Purslove wouldn’t like that either. She won’t be happy when I tell her.”

“And a happy New Year to you as well!” snapped Cooke and slammed the phone down. He went to meet the constables and told them the story.

“That sounds like our Wayne and our Kyle,” said Cox. “Both of them have form. We think it’s them as well. I think we had better send for them.”

“This is the hard bit,” said Sutcliffe, “getting the Headmistress to part with a couple of her darlings. We know what she’s like.”

Sutcliffe was right. Getting into *The Lubyanka* was the first obstacle, overcome only when they threatened to get a warrant and break the door down. Ms Purslove was livid. “How dare you burst into the college like this?” she shouted.

“I would suggest you calm down, Ma’am,” said Cox.

“I do not want the forces of bourgeois oppression in my college. I suppose it was that man Cork who rang you. He has deliberately flouted college policy. Well, that’s it, he’s out.”

“That’s your problem Ms Purslove. Our problem is that we want to interview two of your pupils, Wayne Parret and Kyle Jackson about the theft of a motor vehicle, reckless driving, causing severe injury to a Mrs Pearson, and arson of a motor vehicle. Could you please tell us where we can find them?”

“It’s against college policy that police arrest students while in class.”

“Will you send for them here?”

“I have just told you; it’s against college policy that police arrest students anywhere on college premises. You will have to visit them at home. The police are...”

Constable Sutcliffe was getting angry as well. He leant over the desk, and Purslove backed away. He hissed, “Miss Purslove, will you cut your trendy heart-bleeding lecture? I have heard it all before. I will ask you once more and once more only. If you do not comply with our reasonable request, we shall radio for assistance. We will go and pick them up ourselves, and we will also arrest and charge you with attempting to obstruct a police officer in the course of his duties. Will you please send for Wayne Parret and Kyle Jackson?”

As Purslove stabbed away at her computer, Cox added his word in edgeways, “You know, Miss Purslove, you are a damned menace to the community. You make our job twice as difficult with all your trendy

stuff. You are a joke at the station. You try to stop us getting at these little villains...”

“They are not villains!” squawked Purslove. “They are free-living spirits oppressed by society with its middle-class values...”

“Like freedom from the fear of crime? Is that so middle class? What about that big place of yours at Quarmby? You were quick enough to call us out when the garden shed got done, and when someone attacked your horse?”

“Well, that’s different. It was a poor innocent creature.”

“Not in my book. Why don’t you try swapping your big house with one of the flats in Hamden Heights? You would know what life is like down here. Fireworks through your letter box, the toilet upstairs emptying into your flat, the incessant shouting from the domestic next door. Your car is smashed to pieces and gets burned out. Drug dealers on the stairs. There are the rats and the bed bugs. No wonder the place is like it is! It certainly not helped by bleeding hearted do-gooders who make every excuse for the common criminal and totally ignore the victims. What would you say if they had torched your BMW? You sit up here in your fashionable office, and the kids in the school sit in shabby rooms. Talk about equality!”

Wayne Parrett and Kyle Jackson did not turn up at *The Lubyanka*. Instead, they legged it. Constables Cox and Sutcliffe had thought of that. Officers were planted at strategic points about the school, and Parrett was caught squeezing through a hole in the railings, while Jackson was caught at the school gates.

Meanwhile Cooke’s day was deteriorating with his migraine. He was back up in the freezing cold classroom that passed for a science lab. The Year 9 group were difficult, and reluctant to do the tasks set. There was a lot of infantile banter as well as pushing and shoving. There was also the sour miasma of what Cooke called ‘farmyard smells’. They did crowd round Cooke as he started to set up a demonstration. Suddenly Cooke felt something wet and very slimy on his shirt. He spun round and saw a fat and aggressive looking boy wiping slaver off his face. Cooke drew himself up and roared “SIT DOWN AT YOUR PLACES, ALL OF YOU!”

“Fuck you!” shouted the boy. “Go on, get him!”

At this point the class erupted, and bits of equipment were hurled at Cooke and another boy connected hard with Cooke’s face, blacking his eye. Cooke beat a retreat to the prep room while stools started to fly about the place. A window broke loudly as a stool was hurled through it. The stool fell explosively to the ground twenty metres below. Pupils were running over the benches shouting obscenities. Cooke was picking up the phone when Ms Conway came into the prep room, who said, “You’ve lost control, haven’t you Mr Cork?”

“I have just been spat at and assaulted.”

“Go back in and settle them down. I will talk to them.” Conway added with more than a hint of menace, “And will talk to you later.”

Ms Conway had little more authority than Cooke and she beat a rapid retreat, before picking up the telephone and ringing for Evans the Deputy. It was Ms Purslove who came up and stood at the door. She had little effect as well until she shouted, “All of you go home and I’ll talk to you in the morning. Come up to my office after assembly.”

The class cleared out and within seconds there was silence, while Cooke, Conway, and Purslove viewed the wreckage of the room. “I’ll let you deal with it in the first instant, Penny. Mr Cork, I want a full written report on my desk tomorrow morning. I shall be seeing you later in the week about this incident, but I must warn you that I am not in the least bit pleased.”

“Leon Kaye spat at me. You can see it on my shirt, and Jon Naden blacked my eye.” replied Cooke as he tried to hold his temper.

“You know that all these incidents are down to bad teaching,” said Purslove and walked off.

“I want a pretty convincing explanation from you, Mr Cork,” Ms Conway snarled. “That room is now unusable and will remain so for some time.”

The end of the line came for Cooke that Friday after college. His name went up with two other male staff who were invited to tea and biscuits in *The Lubyanka*. True to form, just as he was about to be called in, Purslove did her usual disappearing act into her little room, making

him wait for another ten minutes. When she came out, Purslove was ready to do murder. “Mr Cork,” she started in a tone full of anger, “you know well how little time I have for agency staff, and I have had it up to my ears with you. Several incidents have occurred that make me consider whether you should work here any longer, the most appalling of which was to call the police in to arrest Kyle Jackson and Wayne Parrett...”

“Ms Purslove, before you carry on, I will not be saying anything until I have my solicitor, Mr Wrightson, here. I will give you no explanation of what you consider to be misconduct until that time,” Cooke replied firmly. He was surprised how well he was holding his ground.

“DON’T INTERRUPT!” shouted Purslove. “You have risked serious alienation of students by inviting policemen into the college. You have committed a flagrant breach of college policy. I no longer have need for your services, Mr Cork. I shall not be filling in any forms for the agency that supplied you.”

Cooke leaned over Purslove’s desk and hissed, “Try to get it into your thick little head that my name is Cooke. I want you to know, for what it’s worth, that this is without doubt the worst school in the country, and I shall be writing an article for the *Times Educational Supplement* about my experience here. And I will name names. How you have not caused a strike, I don’t know.”

Purslove was visibly shaken. “You can’t do that,” she squawked, “How dare you patronise me like that with your sexist remarks.”

“I can and I will, Miss Purslove,” replied Cooke, who turned on his heel and walked out, leaving Purslove fumbling for her Worry Crystal which changed colour in moments of stress.

Leaving the warmth of *The Lubyanka*, the gelid air of the entrance hall hit him. He walked out of the front door, which had the holes from several air gun pellets. He walked away from some of the ghastliest women that he had ever met, turning his back on so much psycho-claptrap. He was leaving some of the most evil kids he had ever come across in the foulest area he had ever seen. He resolved that never again would he be humiliated by children who could hardly write their

own names, let alone construct the simplest sentence of English. As for Purslove, she could preach her godless hypocrisy to someone else.

Whereas earlier in the week, Cooke would have merely demolished the Canterill Farm estate, now he would have happily detonated a thermo-nuclear device to flatten Carlsborough completely.

Chapter 9

If Robert Cooke was going to abandon teaching for good, Alistair Carter-Barr was going to ensure that he would be beholden to it for the rest of his natural life. The pursuit in the courts of failed staff had over the years provided the Tanswold School Trust with periodic windfalls. The reason for this was the blatant disregard of employment law on the part of Carter-Barr, the Tanswold School Trust, and Sir Thomas Handley, who had always heard these cases at the County Court in Carlsborough. When judgement had been made against a failed member of staff, the unfortunate defendant would face not only humiliation in the court, but also massive compensation and enormous costs. Carter-Barr, it was said, would realise the assets even down to the last shirt button. He would also arrange, through a friendly financier, a loan at a high interest rate. In effect, the loan would never be fully repaid in the defendant's lifetime.

Two such cases were pending, that of the Tanswold School Trust *v* Cooke, and the Tanswold School Trust *v* Booth. Another case against Booth for libel was also pending, on the grounds that his statement to the press was a complete fabrication that put at jeopardy the fair fame and pride of the school.

For Robert Cooke, the period before the case was utter purgatory. Despite the assurances of Mr Wrightson who was utterly convinced that the Tanswold School Trust didn't have a legal leg to stand on, Cooke could not help but think of the previous form of such cases. They had always been in front of Sir Thomas Handley, and the outcome was inevitable. Not that he had two pennies to rub together. Sowerland Staffing Solutions had not yet paid him for the time he had done at the Phoenix Community College. Purslove had been true to her word. She had not signed the forms. She had done that in the past, so her behaviour was no surprise to them. In the end they had eventually agreed to pay Cooke, and to bill the college accordingly, but as yet the money had not come through. The overdraft at the bank was growing; by the time that Sir Thomas had finished with him, he would be utterly bankrupt.

The case of the Tanswold School Trust *v* Cooke was heard at the end of February. Cooke waited nervously outside the court room while

Wrightson seemed to be ebullient. Perhaps he knew something that Cooke did not; that was not hard as Cooke knew little about the Law other than what was natural justice. Enslaving him for the rest of his life for a job that had gone pear-shaped seemed particularly unfair. Carter-Barr was swaggering about in his gown and wig, with the arrogant air of someone who knew the case to be a forgone conclusion. As in previous cases, he had done very little preparatory work. He would only have to get Stoate to produce a sob story about the damage done to pupils' prospects. Sir Thomas would do the rest...

While he was waiting to go in, he chatted easily with Stoate. He did not register that the judge was going in, and it was Dame Judith Lowson. Mr Wrightson did register the fact, and whispered his delight to his client, "Robert, it's definitely our day. Sir Thomas Handley isn't hearing this case. Carter-Barr has slipped up here good and proper. Nobody buys Dame Judith."

As Carter-Barr walked into the panelled courtroom, his mood changed from arrogant ebullience to decidedly sombre. He whispered to the clerk of the court, "What's going on? Where's Sir Thomas?"

"He was due to hear this case, Sir," replied the clerk, "but Sir Thomas was called out at the last minute to see a Detective Commander Smithells."

The name Smithells made Carter-Barr's blood run cold, and Stoate was visibly shaken when Carter-Barr communicated this to his client. Before either could compose himself, the clerk of the court announced, "The case of the Tanswold School Trust v Cooke. The court will rise."

After Dame Judith Lowson's preamble to the case, Carter-Barr started his case, "M' Lady, I am bringing this case to your attention as no doubt you will agree that there has been done grievous harm to the work of my client by the incompetence of the defendant..." Carter-Barr rambled on about how Cooke had failed consistently to maintain discipline in his classes and was therefore in serious breach of his contract. It was important that a serious example should be made, and exemplary damages should be sought. He cross examined Stoate who reiterated Carter-Barr's admission. Carter-Barr spent little more than twenty minutes in his submission and cross examination.

Dame Judith looked inscrutable as befitted a judge of her high rank. “Is that the plaintiff’s case? Do you wish to call any other witnesses?”

“No M’ Lady.”

“I would now call on the defence to present its case.”

Mr Wrightson put up a robust defence about the events that had led to Cooke’s dismissal, and rubbished Stoate’s claims of support. “Do you consider that telling a member of your staff that leaky ships are not seaworthy, or using aeroplanes running out of altitude is the constructive support that should be offered?”

“Yes.”

“I have seen the notes from your conversation, and it does not seem to be that to me. How long had Mr Cooke been a member of your staff?”

“About five weeks.”

“Is that an adequate amount of time for an employee to settle in? In most concerns, the employee has hardly been inducted, let alone had to chance to prove himself to his employer.”

“I expect the staff in my school to be the best. I have no time for passengers.”

“Nor does it seem that you give them much time. How do you expect a new employee to maintain discipline with no constructive system of support in a school that is notorious for its discipline problems? This is not anecdotal fabrication. There are incidences of bad discipline that are in the public domain. For example, there were news reports of a riot in a church service. Was my client responsible for that?”

“My school has excellent discipline.”

“Not according to the reports that are established facts in the public domain. What makes you assert that, Mr Stoate?”

“A high standard of discipline is maintained. That’s the orders given to the staff. It’s like a bombing raid. The target is hit because that’s the orders given to the pilots.”

“For an ex-RAF aviator, that seems to be remarkably ignorant of the lessons learned in the Second World War. Aircrews exported bombs

and hoped that some had hit the target. The commanders realised this, and much work was done in improving the training of aircrew to do this and giving them effective equipment. To draw analogies, I put it to you that you have failed in your role to provide this.”

“I didn’t. I got Mr Gonall to support Cooke.”

“You did indeed. Are you aware of Mr Gonall’s behaviour in my client’s lessons?”

“Yes. He supported him in the way that I would have expected him to.”

“By undermining his authority in front of a class, by rubbishing his work, bullying him, and finally assaulting him?”

“I expect my staff not to need such support.”

“Would you describe Mr Gonall as an aggressive man?”

“He expects excellence, as I do.”

“Do you deny that assault took place on my client from Mr Gonall?”

“I have told you that I expect all my staff to be excellent in every area and Mr Gonall supports me in every respect. I don’t care how it’s done. From my recollection of the events, it was Mr Cooke that assaulted Mr Gonall and did him actual bodily harm. I should have called the police.”

“Take a look at Mr Cooke. You have described him as a runt. How would you describe Mr Cooke, Mr Stoate?”

“Tall and skinny, rather weedy in fact.”

“How would you describe Mr Gonall? Short, powerful, ex-rugby player? I put it to you that your allegation of an assault by my client on Mr Gonall is a fabrication. Now I want to go on to laser pens, as in this incident laser pens were involved. What action did you take?”

“I reminded the boys that laser pens are banned from school.”

“What did you do to the boys who had shone laser pens in Mr Cooke’s face?”

“I reminded the pupils that laser pens are banned in school.”

“Are you aware that the shining of a laser pen in the face is in itself an assault? My client could have been blinded. I put it to you that you failed in your duty of care to your staff in two ways. You failed to give your staff the adequate support in a serious disciplinary incident. You also failed to take serious sanctions against the pupils responsible. Do you not consider that your management of this incident was weak in the extreme?”

“No. The fault lay with Mr Cooke. His teaching was not inspirational, which led to an atmosphere of resentment.”

“You are showing to the court a lack of leadership that is quite astonishing, Mr Stoate. The problems that my client faced at your school were no more serious than faced by the rest of the staff. Indeed, at least one of your senior staff, recently promoted, has an unenviable reputation for extremely poor discipline in his lessons. Is it fair to single out a junior member of staff to make an example?”

“The colleague you refer to is an extremely well-respected member of staff. Your client is not and has done unending damage to my school.”

“No, Mr Stoate. You have done the damage by your incompetence in handling a number of serious and miserable incidents that have happened in your school. You have shown a consistent failure of leadership...”

Wrightson continued his cross-examination of Stoate for another half hour. Carter-Barr tried many times to protest on the inadmissibility of the evidence. Sir Thomas Handley would have agreed, but Dame Judith considered it perfectly good jurisprudence. At one point, Stoate got quite angry, and Dame Judith ordered him to temper his comments, otherwise he would be removed from the court.

To prevent his case looking completely discredited, Carter-Barr called on John Gonall to corroborate Stoate’s story. He was not a star in the witness box. His version of events had inconsistencies in it that were leapt on by Mr Wrightson, “So you claim that Mr Cooke assaulted you when you went into his lesson and that is why he was dismissed?”

“That is correct. He pushed me so that I fell into the room. I considered that an assault, so I reported the matter to the Headmaster.”

“You are a stocky man. You are powerfully built, consistent with a rugby player. You are the senior rugby coach, and you command the CCF?”

“Yes, I do.”

“How can it be that a man that you describe as a runt and a cretin could push you so hard that you fell into a classroom?”

“Well, I did.”

“I have taken statements off a number of boys, who saw you throw Mr Cooke into the classroom.”

“You have no right to approach our pupils to do that,” said Gonall with a hint of menace. “I shall be considering our position on that.”

“M’ Lady! I object!” squawked Carter-Barr. “My learned friend has no right to approach the boys of Tanswold School to give statements. This evidence is inadmissible!”

“Well, Mr Wrightson?” said the judge.

“These boys were not approached. They asked to see me to give statements of their own volition. Some even offered to stand up in open court. They are willing to repeat their statements and, M’ Lady, they are on the video link if needed. To the best of my belief, this evidence is admissible.”

“I agree, Mr Wrightson. I am overruling Mr Carter-Barr’s objection. I would like to hear the boys’ statements from you, and I would like to hear them over the video link.”

“I object in the strongest possible terms!” cried Carter-Barr in a shrill tone that belied his increasing sense of desperation.

“Your objection is overruled, and your court room manner is, I am bound to observe, most extraordinary. I warn you now, Mr Carter-Barr, that you are not representing your client in the manner that this court expects. If you persist, I will have you removed from the court,” snapped the judge. She took off her wig and spoke into the camera, “I am Judith Lawson. Jonathan, could you tell the court what you said to Mr Wrightson? Please take your time...”

The disembodied voice told of how Gonall would come in and interfere with Mr Cooke’s lesson. He would shout Cooke down and

insult him in front of the class. Jonathan thought that it was very unprofessional to do this. Just before the end of term, there had been some terrible behaviour in Mr Cooke's class. There were kids who were really out to cause trouble for everyone, and they took it out on Mr Cooke because, being new, he was a very easy target. Jonathan felt ashamed about how they had carried on; they had never wanted to get Mr Cooke into trouble. He was a really good teacher.

"The boy's a damned liar!" shouted Carter-Barr. Dame Judith ordered silence. Jonathan carried on. Mr Gonall had thrown Mr Cooke into the room. There had been uproar because several boys had shone laser pens into his face. Mr Stoate's reaction had been surprising. The boys had got away with it, and Mr Stoate had just warned the school that laser pens were forbidden.

"Who is this boy?" Stoate spoke out loud. "I shall be investigating, and I shall have him expelled for gross disloyalty to the school."

"Silence in court," shouted Dame Judith and banged the gavel loudly.

Jonathan concluded his statement, and Gavin appeared on a second video link to corroborate Jonathan's story. Stoate and Gonall were as dark as thunder as Mr Wrightson asked them more questions. Carter-Barr made a final last-ditch attempt to save his ill-prepared case by more aggressive cross-examination. Dame Judith overruled his cross-examination style, as the boys were too young to be exposed to adult cross-examination techniques. Carter-Barr's questions were lame and revealed the desperation of his position. Finally, he made an emotive appeal to the judge, "Those boys have got together to concoct their story. Surely, M' Lady, it can't be admitted. You've got to stop the damage that the defendant has done to my client, and you cannot admit these lies. Their story is an utter fabrication!"

Dame Judith was unimpressed. She turned to Mr Wrightson and said, "You may continue your cross-examination of the witness, Mr Gonall."

"You have told the court that you supported Mr Cooke in his job?"

"Yes, I did. He was incompetent and didn't know his subject. He told his class that like charges repel. Any idiot knows that they attract."

“What makes them attract? Why do you say that?”

“They like each other. So, they are attracted to each other. Any idiot knows that, and Mr Cooke is an idiot. He was weeded out as he could not meet the exacting criteria of our performance management structure.”

“This idiot doesn’t. Now my physics lessons were a long time ago, and I wasn’t very good at it. But even I know that like charges repel.”

“Mr Gonall,” interrupted the judge, “I will not have emotive phrases like ‘idiot’ used in my court. Please withdraw that comment.”

“No, M’ Lady, I stand by it.”

“I will give you one last chance to withdraw it; otherwise, I will hold you in contempt of court, for which I have the power to send you to prison.”

“I withdraw it.”

“Mr Gonall,” concluded Mr Wrightson, “I have heard the evidence that you have brought, and that of Mr Stoate. You say that you have supported my client effectively according to your system of performance management and quality assurance. Just what do you mean by performance management and quality assurance?”

“Managing performance and assuring quality, of course. Mr Cooke’s performance and quality were lousy, and he got his just desserts as far as I am concerned.”

“We have Quality Assurance and Performance Management procedures in place in our office, Mr Gonall. Your version of these ideas does not tie in, thankfully, with the version we use. If your procedures were in place, I would no longer have a practice, and it would not be much of a loss. We use it to show areas where we are good, and identify areas where we are weak, and develop ourselves to improve our weaknesses. Should that not be what your procedures are about?”

“We don’t tolerate weakness. Everyone has got to be excellent in every area. People would not pay our fees if we had passengers. Mr Cooke was a passenger, he was incompetent, and he had to go.”

“So, it seems. I have interviewed Mr Cooke, and to me he seemed very conscientious at his job. Did you ever take that into account in your dealings with him?”

“He couldn’t keep discipline. To me that meant that he was not up to the job.”

“It seems that most of your staff are not up to the job, Mr Gonall. Tanswold School is getting an increasingly bad reputation as far as pupil discipline is concerned. Are you going to use your so-called performance management, and quality assurance procedures to get rid of them? Are you going to bully staff so that they leave, so that you can delude yourself that you are a dynamic manager?”

“If members of staff are not up to the job, they have no place in my... I mean our school.”

“Why is it necessary to charge a failed member of staff £400 a day?”

“We would have charged him £200 a day if he had worked to the end of term, until we had found a replacement.”

“Is it fair to charge him anything?”

“Yes. He has breached his contract because he has failed to live up to the standards that we expect. We have to pay somebody else to cover for him until we find a permanent replacement. It’s the policy of the Tanswold School Trust. It’s on the contract.”

“How much are you proposing to charge him?”

“It will be the start of the new school year before we can get a permanent replacement for his post. We have to get someone of high quality, which is not easy in Cooke’s subject. We calculated that there would be 100 days at £400 per day. That makes £40000, plus our expenses and Mr Carter-Barr’s expenses. That makes about £60000.”

“And how do you suppose my client will pay for this?”

“It’s up to him and no concern of mine. The school is demanding compensation, and that is the important thing to us.”

“You say that the charging of staff for their replacement is in the contract. Have you seen the contract? Did you ever sign a contract?”

Nobody, as far as I have been able to establish, has ever signed this contract. Are staff aware of what happens if things go wrong?”

“As far as we are concerned, when a new member of staff agrees to work for us, he has agreed to our contract. The contract is available for inspection.”

“At Mr Carter-Barr’s office and they have to pay £150 plus VAT?”

“That’s our policy and if members of staff do not like that, they should go.”

Mr Wrightson was starting to become annoyed at Gonall’s arrogance and his questioning became louder, “So you are telling the court that your action is fair?”

“Yes, it was. Mr Cooke did not meet our standards. He shouldn’t be in the job.”

“So, you have targeted a member of staff who is away from home, missing his wife and daughter. You have bullied him and undermined him at every opportunity. You have used emotive phrases such as ‘runt’, ‘cretin’, ‘idiot’ to describe him. You talked about my client to boys. I am not a teacher, but I do understand that that is one of the most unprofessional things to have done. You failed to support him when he was assaulted; indeed, you turned the table on him, saying that he assaulted you. You sacked him as a result of this fabrication, and you have congratulated yourself on your role as a dynamic manager. You have not paid him for his last two months’ work. And now you are asking the court to make an order against him that will beggar him for life so that you and your Headmaster can continue to wallow in luxury. In effect you are asking us to give sanction to a modern form of slavery.

“No, M’ Lady, I am putting it to the Court that the management of the Tanswold School Trust are indulging in gross profiteering at an innocent man’s expense. While there may just be a case to gain compensation from an employee who maliciously caused serious damage to a company, in this case we are looking at an employee who tried to do his level best for the company. Common employment law puts such practices outside the law, and the Court must reject the plaintiff’s case. Further, I would suggest that previous orders made on behalf of the Tanswold School Trust were illegal in themselves and need thorough investigation. I rest my case.”

“Mr Carter-Barr, do you have any other questions?”

Carter-Barr was clearly at his wit's end and tried to vilify Cooke before the court. He aggressively asked Cooke some thoroughly nasty and irrelevant questions about his life outside school. When he asked Cooke about his sexual activities, the judge intervened, “To what purpose, Mr Carter-Barr, are you posing these questions? Are they informing the case that you are putting forward?”

“I am trying to establish that Mr Cooke is as unreliable a witness as he is incompetent at his work.”

“Such impertinent and personal questions are not only offensive to the defendant but also bear no relation on Mr Cooke's fitness or otherwise to practise his profession. They are inadmissible. Please do not pursue this line of questioning further.”

Carter-Barr tried again and was ordered even more firmly to desist. Now Carter-Barr gave his closing statement. It was a lame apology for the damage that Mr Cooke had done to the reputation for academic excellence of Tanswold School. It was accompanied by ham acting worthy of a pantomime. The recompense they were seeking would hardly make any impact on the damage that had been done. Mr Stoate and Mr Gonall were dynamic, modern, and forward-thinking managers who had done their utmost to support an incompetent lame duck. Dame Judith Lowson announced, “I shall retire to consider my verdict. The court will be adjourned until tomorrow.”

“The Court will rise,” announced the Clerk of the Court.

Stoate left the court in a foul temper. As the taxi took him and Gonall back to The Hermitage, Stoate fumed at the mauling that Mr Wrightson had given him in court. He particularly resented the part where his management of staff was described as ‘incompetent’ and ‘as capricious as the worst of a Victorian mill-owner’. How dare that little runt get such a lawyer? Hopefully that would be taken into account when the compensation award was made. Hopefully also the man's fees would be so damned high that the little runt would be totally bankrupted. There was that damned do-gooding judge who told them off for using words like ‘cretin’ and ‘runt’ in court. He would damned well use them when he liked to describe people that he so heartily despised. And what the devil had happened to Sir Thomas? If Smithells were involved, who

would know what would happen? Stoate did not like it one little bit. Sir Thomas would have seen to it that Tanswold School would have profited from Cooke's uselessness. Certainly, he would have put a stop to all this aggressive and impertinent questioning from Mr Wrightson. It would have been a foregone conclusion, and the bailiffs would be at Cooke's house to take off even his shirt down to the last button.

Gonall, sitting next to Stoate, did not have enough sense or vision to realise that his management style had been called so seriously into question. He thought he was a brilliant manager with the kudos to turn Tanswold School into a premier league institution to compete with St Paul's and Eton. There were only two things that stood in the way of Gonall's ambition, his complete lack of talent, and Dunstan Stoate. The latter, Gonall was planning to push aside into early retirement. As for the former, Gonall did not recognise it.

The next day, the case of the Tanswold School Trust *v* Cooke was going to be concluded. Mr Wrightson was feeling ebullient, as solicitors always did when they knew that they were going to get a large fee, regardless of who was paying it. Also, the case had seemed to go very well, and he had certainly put the Tanswold School Trust through the hoop. He had also taken the wind out of the sails of that pompous windbag, Carter-Barr. In court, Carter-Barr was his 'learnèd friend', but in reality, he was neither learnèd, nor was he a friend. Carter-Barr had depended on his acquaintance with several of the judiciary whose impartiality was, at best, dubious. Now several of his acquaintances had suddenly retired, and new brooms were coming in, and were starting to expose vast areas of legal pig-ignorance in Carter-Barr, even to some of the most elementary points of law. As for friend, Mr Wrightson could not abide Carter-Barr.

It was with an unworthy sense of pleasure that Mr Wrightson saw Carter-Barr coming into the entrance lobby to the court looking decidedly flustered. The representatives of Carter-Barr's client looked rather under the weather as well. Mr Stoate was looking decidedly grumpy. As always, Mr Gonall had no expression at all, just his usual greyness; he was lost in his ignorant self-delusion. Cooke could not share Mr Wrightson's ebullience. He had not slept at all the previous

few nights; he still imagined himself stripped of everything and wished to God that he had never set eyes on Tanswold School.

After Dame Judith's judgement, the same could be said of Carter-Barr. She was scathing of Tanswold School in general and of Stoate and Gonall in particular, "...I have been profoundly disturbed to hear of the endemic and systematic acceptance of bullying as an accepted management tool. I have heard many cases where this has happened in the past, but not where it has become so established within the ethos of an organisation. Schools seem to attract the worst kind of manager; teachers who have possibly been school bullies themselves. They cannot teach, so they move their way into management where they cannot manage. I have heard many cases involving employee and management relations, and I would say that when there are managers of Mr Stoate's and Mr Gonall's calibre running things, that is when there are major disputes. These often end in strike action, or before the courts where there has been evidence of a complete failure of management's role.

"The cases that I have usually heard have also involved employees who have parted company with their employers after a bitter breakdown in relationships that have made it impossible for either party to work with each other. This case is different. There had been no time given at all for the defendant to establish any relationship at all within the organisation. I am satisfied that Mr Cooke tried his level best to satisfy his employers who not only gave him no support whatsoever but also added to his burdens. I cannot see that there is any way that he broke his side of the contract. From all the material that has been submitted before this court, I conclude that Mr Cooke is conscientious, almost to a fault, in his job. The dealings with him were neither just, nor fair.

"The dealings described before this court are not those of managers who are charismatic, as they would like to be thought of. The victimisation of employees, for the case before this court is by no means unique, is not the sign of professional managers, but of bungling amateurs, people who consider that their role is theirs by right, and not by merit. In Tanswold School, there is generated an atmosphere of arrogant elitism from the top. Those who do not fit in and try to do things differently are hounded and disposed of. The terms that the managers described the defendant have been emotive and insulting and bordering

on the contempt of this court. These are clearly words of people who are not really in control and are not fit to carry out a management role.

“There have been previous court actions that have merely lined the pockets of the already well-heeled, while beggaring the defendant. And this is what this court is being asked to do in this case. The defendant has had all his assets stripped and has been saddled with a massive loan at high interest rates, some of which has been passed in commission to the Tanswold School Trust. The loans are not paid off during the lifetime of the defendant, and this strikes me as a modern form of debt bondage, a circumstance that is wholly unacceptable at the turn of the twenty-first century.

“It is also unacceptable that employment practices from the grim mills are still in use today. It was to prevent such practices that modern employment legislation was drawn up. In this court, there has been demonstrated an incredible ignorance of such laws by the plaintiffs. Indeed, the court was being asked to endorse a practice that is clearly illegal.

“I find in favour of the defendant Mr Robert Cooke. I utterly reject the case of the Tanswold School Trust. It has not been my experience so far in my career as a legal practitioner to have heard a case so badly prepared on not just flimsy grounds, but grounds that are illegal. It is therefore the order of this court that Mr Cooke be paid the salary owing to him. He is under no obligation whatsoever to pay the compensation sought from him, and I am awarding him compensation of twenty thousand pounds for the distress that he has suffered from the actions of his employer. It is also the order of this court that the payment of salary be made immediately, and the compensation be paid to the court at the end of this month, otherwise legal proceedings will be undertaken to recover it. In the event of default, the Tanswold School Trust and its representatives will be considered to be in contempt of court. As for costs, the entire costs of this action should be borne by the plaintiffs, including the costs incurred by the defendant.

“As for the conduct of the plaintiffs’ representative, Mr Carter-Barr, I have found your conduct quite extraordinary. I would advise that in the future you bring no further actions of this kind. Your preparation of this case and your conduct in court have been so extraordinary that I

deem you to be in contempt of court, and fine you the sum of five thousand pounds.

“I am concerned about the precedents that have been set by the Tanswold School Trust in which compensation awards have been made against previous staff and parents of pupils at the school. These have no basis in law, and I shall be referring these cases to the Lord Chancellor’s Department for review. In the meantime, it is the order of this court that no further payments be made to Doberman and Pinscher Financial Services who have arranged the loans. I shall be ordering an investigation into their practices, and the conflicts of interests between the Tanswold School Trust, Mr Carter-Barr, Sir Thomas Handley and Sir Kenneth Rounce. The case is closed.”

With that the court rose, Dame Judith Lowson bowed and left the courtroom. The champagne remained in the cellar of The Hermitage, while Robert and Susan Cooke opened a bottle of home-made blackberry wine to celebrate.

The Old Library at the Hermitage saw the inquest into the significance of the previous day’s judgement against the Tanswold School Trust. The significance, in the form of the court’s written judgement, did not make pretty reading. Although Mr Wrightson had not submitted his fee yet, it was expected to run into tens of thousands of pounds, as was Carter-Barr’s. There was the compensation due to Cooke, and that rankled with Stoate and Gonall. What was worse was that Booth was known to be seeing Mr Wrightson and the way was now open for him to take the school to the cleaners. There was also the matter of some very bad publicity. The case had been on the regional news and in the papers were headlines like “*Blunder Head’s court wiggling*” and “*Judge blasts top school for not doing its legal homework*”.

The Governors were, not unnaturally, concerned and even Dunstan Stoate’s most stalwart allies were becoming critical. The mild-mannered Donald Blance was furious, “What the devil’s been going on here? It is an absolute disaster. It’s going to cost us at least forty thousand pounds. Where are we going to find that sort of money? What was Carter-Barr playing at?”

“He’s a liability,” answered Stoate. “He should never have got us into this position at all.” It had conveniently slipped Stoate’s (and everybody else’s) mind that Stoate and the Governors had instructed Carter-Barr to act on the basis that with the case being heard before Sir Thomas Handley, the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

“What’s happened to Sir Thomas?” asked Sir Ronald Wiseman.

“It seems that somebody has been mouthing off about him, and Smithells has become involved,” replied Dr Whittier. “The trouble is that when Detective Commander Smithells gets his teeth into somebody, he doesn’t let go. If he traces everything, we could all be for the high jump.”

“And there’s the small matter of Stephen Booth,” added Dr Lyons, who had replaced Dr Pennington on the Governing Body. He was, if anything, even more critical of Dunstan Stoate’s management than was Dr Pennington. “There is no way that we can do the same with him that you tried with Cooke, Dunstan. The case will be thrown out of court at once. I don’t think that a judge would even waste his time on it. Perhaps you should have considered the legal implications of your actions before you started on Cooke, Dunstan.”

“He was a damned little runt who couldn’t teach. I don’t want passengers here,” Stoate snapped in reply.

“That’s not what the judge said.”

“What does she know about teaching? She is abusing the law so that she can do a bit of bleeding-heart do-gooding.”

“The important thing,” said Blance, “is that she has ordered an investigation into previous cases. She has declared them to be illegal. It’s there in the judgement. If they claim the money off us, we are finished. This compensation order for Cooke is going to be enough of a burden. There’s going to be Booth. And what about Proudlock? He’s still after us for his daughter.”

“Carter-Barr has been keeping the Red Rev at bay,” replied Stoate, who paused before adding, “so far. We have got to keep Carter-Barr on board; otherwise, Proudlock will be open to squeeze us dry. We are going to have to have a contingency for when it does eventually come to court.”

“With what?” snapped Dr Lyons. “Where are we going to get that kind of money from? How can we keep that to one side? You are living in a fantasy, Dunstan. You got us into this mess, and you can damned well pull us out of it.”

“I’ll get Lartington onto it,” Stoate replied trying hard not to lose his temper.

“Why isn’t Lartington here?” Lyons demanded.

“He doesn’t work here on a Thursday. He goes back to London on Wednesday to attend to his business down there.”

“What?” said Lyons who had not been on the Governing Body when Lartington’s remuneration package had been negotiated, “He should be here. There are desperate financial circumstances that we need to discuss with him.”

The meeting ended in a bad-tempered failure to conclude anything, although conviviality was restored somewhat by an excellent luncheon in the Old Dining Room, washed down by a superb *Cabinet Sauvignon* from the cellars of The Hermitage.

Most of the governors drifted away after lunch, but Donald Blance remained in Stoate’s office. They were just settling down to liqueurs when a large van drew up and presently Eileen was introducing Linda Caswell of Caswell Productions. Several large men were unloading expensive and professional video equipment from the van and were setting it up in Stoate’s office. Blance and Stoate settled down to make themselves comfortable for what they imagined was the preview of the promotional video for Tanswold School.

An hour later neither was comfortable. Despite his repeated furious demands to turn the infernal machine off, Stoate was exposed to every second of the appalling revelations in the programme *Very Public Scandals*. As the final credits were rolling Stoate shouted, “I shall be getting our solicitors on to this. I shall obtain an injunction stopping you broadcasting it!”

“I wouldn’t bother,” replied Ms Caswell, “our legal team have been through this with a fine toothcomb. You haven’t a chance in court. I really wouldn’t bother; you would end up wasting a lot of money on

legal fees. You have already just lost a case where you have pursued a member of staff in what appears to be an illegal contract scam.”

“That is none of your business. I will have you for slander!”

“Those are not my words; they are the words of the judge, Dame Judith Lowson. I want now to record an interview with you now concerning the allegations of systematic bullying, racism, negligence, mismanagement, and corruption that have been the theme of the programme.”

Stoate had wondered why it had been necessary to set up a large camera in his office with bright television lights. Now he knew, but it did not prevent him from making a racist and sexist remark that was calculated to be deeply offensive to Dame Judith Lowson, the highest-ranking judge from an ethnic minority.

“There is no need for that kind of filthy talk, Mr Stoate,” snapped Ms Caswell. “It is my proposal to interview you now about the issues raised in the film you have just seen.”

“And it is my proposal to throw you out of my office, physically if need be.”

“I wouldn’t try that Mr Stoate. It would not be very good publicity.”

Stoate glared at the two cameramen, the sound engineer, and the producer. They all looked very big. Although Ms Caswell cut a diminutive figure against them, Stoate had a feeling that she would only have to snap her fingers and all four of them would give him a hiding that he would never forget. Even if she did not, the sight of him pushing and shoving his way out of the office would aggravate the bad publicity. What was up with Donald Blance, who seemed to be sitting there like a pudding? Where was his fighting spirit?

“Mr Stoate, there are many allegations made in this film. Would you care to comment on them?”

“It’s my school. I founded it and I shall manage it the way I like, without anyone telling me what I can or cannot do. It has been my life’s work.”

“Does that include making up complete fabrications about your staff, like you did about Andrew McEwan? You are aware that he and his family had to go into hiding for a while?”

“He was guilty of gross professional misconduct. He falsified examination entries and had no qualification.”

“Now you know as well as I do that Mr McEwan had excellent qualifications and did not falsify any examination material. You saw for yourself what the Northern Examination Board said. There was your statement about how a sixth-former with a grudge made the tale up. What was it that happened?”

“A sixth former did make it up.”

“You said that Mr McEwan was guilty of gross professional misconduct. The police were involved, weren’t they? On the word of a sixth former?”

“No comment.”

“How did you find out the sixth former responsible?”

“By careful investigation. It was found on the computer network under his name. So obviously I expelled him instantly.”

“How do you square that up with what two boys told us? Although we did not include that sequence on the film, I do have their conversation with me. Would you like me to play it? They tell us quite openly and candidly that you got them to move the incriminating material from your computer to that of Richard Thorndale. You chose him because his mother is a widow and could scarcely send her son to your school. Is that correct?”

“You can’t prove that.”

“We can. I will play the clip. As I said, we had to edit it out as we only have a fifty-minute slot. Barry, could you put clip VPS 99-39 on the video player?”

Stoate stared lividly as he saw two of what he thought were his most trusted pupils confessing to what he had told them to do. They commented on how bad they had felt that such a nice lad had had to carry the can. It was not right what had happened. “No comment,” was Stoate’s reply.

“Are you not going to admit that your actions were wrong and morally indefensible?”

“No comment.”

“Do you have anything to say to Richard Thorndale and his mother?”

“No, I have no further comment to make.”

“Not even an apology?”

“No, Miss Caswell, in case you did not understand me, I have no further comment to make.”

“Shall we move on to the food poisoning outbreak last summer in which a student died? What have you got to say about that?”

“No comment.”

“Is that all? I am sure that our viewers, some of whom have children at this school, would want to hear your version of events. After all the school was fined very heavily and your caterer was given five years for manslaughter. Was there not a failure in supervision?”

“That side was not my responsibility. The bursar looked after that.”

“Not your responsibility? Young people in your care were taken seriously ill, and one died. Is that not part of your responsibility?”

“It was a damned lot of fuss about nothing. A dose of the squitters never did anyone any harm. It certainly never did me any harm.”

“A damned lot of fuss over nothing? Do you call the death of a seventeen-year-old girl a damned lot of fuss over nothing? That girl had everything to live for. Witnesses say that as she was lying there you shouted at her for ruining the flowerbed, and you did nothing for a good long time. Is that fulfilling a duty of care to your pupils? What would you say to her family?”

“No comment.”

“The investigation showed that the kitchens in the school were using meat that was not fit for human consumption. Why were you not aware of this? Could you not have tasted that there was something wrong in the food?”

“I didn’t eat there. Anyway, I have told you that it was the Bursar’s responsibility to ensure that everything was OK. I am a schoolmaster, not a damned administrator!”

“I know you didn’t eat there. You and your senior staff eat sumptuously in your own dining room here. As long as you were fed and watered in the luxury that you had come accustomed to, it didn’t matter.”

“No comment.”

“Do you know what was going on at the Canterill Meat Processing Company?”

“Of course not! I am the Headmaster of a successful school, not a bloody butcher’s boy!”

“Did it matter to you that substandard food was coming into the school kitchen?”

“I was not concerned about that; I paid other people to do that.”

“A bursar with his fingers in the till? How long did it take you to realise that your bursar had defrauded the school of the Draycott Foundation?”

“I took action as soon as we realised what had happened.”

“Are you not aware that it had been going on for several years beforehand?”

“I am a Headmaster, not a bank clerk!”

“You keep repeating that you are a headmaster, but surely such a post brings with it all sorts of other responsibilities?”

“I take my responsibilities very seriously. That is why I have set up such a successful school.”

“You are wrong there. Mr Kent set up the school. You came in under the patronage of Sir Kenneth Rounce.”

“No comment.”

“You say that the school is a highly successful academic institution. How come the local comprehensive school, Goyder’s, has achieved higher A-level and GCSE results than you?”

“I have spoken severely to the staff, and we have put in place all sorts of monitoring, performance management, and quality assurance

procedures, with regular appraisals. Under-performing staff are warned and should their performance not improve, they are dismissed.”

“Do you know what appraisal is about?”

“It’s about making sure that people damned well pull their socks up.”

“What about telling them that they are doing a good job?”

“Good job is not good enough. If they only want to do a good job, they go to Goyder’s. I damned well expect them to do an excellent job here and that’s what I pay them to do. If they don’t, they are out.”

“You seem to have a very cavalier approach to your staff. Is that why you try to fine your staff massively through the courts if they don’t live up to your expectations?”

“We have to get someone in to do their work. It costs the Trust £150 a day to hire someone until we find someone else. The cost of advertising in the quality broadsheets is horrendous.”

“Is it necessary to charge them £400 a day?”

“We have to cover our costs.”

“Do you have any knowledge of employment law?”

“We have a very good solicitor in Mr Alistair Carter-Barr.”

“So good that he was fined for contempt of court on at least two occasions when representing you?”

“No comment.”

“Let me turn to the allegations made in the film that you poached pupils away from other schools. Is this very ethical?”

“No comment.”

“There are several complaints that we have seen already. You went around spreading false rumours among parents. What do you say to those allegations?”

“No comment.”

“Your fabricated rumours caused a collapse in confidence at Great Daxford School. There is an admission to that effect on the film.

Are you aware that a good number of people lost their jobs as a result of your actions?"

"No comment."

"You seem to be rather reluctant to say anything, Mr Stoate. What do you have to say to the parents, pupils, and staff at Great Daxford School? You brought these rumours about to expand the numbers in your own school."

"No comment."

"Have you nothing to say on what is really very unethical behaviour, Mr Stoate?"

"No comment."

"Yours is a very expensive school, amongst the most expensive schools in the country. Can you explain to the parents why there is such an atmosphere of antagonism and bullying which leads to daily fights as well as more systematic physical and emotional abuse? Can you explain why there is such a bad atmosphere in lessons that teaching and learning are adversely affected? Not my words, but the report of a recent inspection by Alan Crompton-Barclay."

"Boys will be boys. It's all part of growing up and becoming a man. There are too many fairies and pouffes in the world. It's time we had real men. A bit of rough play never did me any harm."

"I see. Is that not a rather archaic message at the end of the twentieth century?"

"This school stands for tradition, discipline, and responsibility. You had that fairy Proudlock on your programme. The boy was an absolute drip and deserved everything he got. It's people like him and his father who undermine the fabric of our society. He's a threat to the values of English civilisation."

"If you really want to know, Mr Stoate, I found him a very pleasant young man, very polite, gracious, and thoughtful. He bears no grudge, even though he was very close to his sister. By the way, his present headmaster is very pleased to have him in his school. He happens also to be one of the brightest pupils in the school as well."

"Bully for him!"

“You seem to bear a lot of grudges. Samuel Proudlock summed everything up when he said that you have a problem. I tend to agree.”

“No comment.”

“Are you really a fit person to be a Headmaster when you have a conviction for assault against one of your ex-pupils and his girlfriend?”

“No comment.”

“Would you care to comment on the relationship that Tanswold School had with the bankrupt Sir Kenneth Rounce?”

“No comment.”

The rest of the interview with Stoate was similarly unproductive, and Stoate’s answers became increasingly aggressive, straying well beyond what was courteous. For an experienced journalist like Ms Caswell, it was like water off a duck’s back. She paid no attention either to the infantile and unpleasant sounds that Stoate’s computer was making. Nobody had yet removed the lavatory noises from his settings.

Linda Caswell turned to Donald Blance, who had kept silent throughout Stoate’s interview. Blance proved to be a rather tougher opponent than Stoate. He had had much more experience in dealing with controversial issues, and the style of his answers were entirely the opposite of Stoate’s. He was unfailingly courteous and managed to convey the impression that he was giving a deeply considered response, while not answering the question at all. At the same time, he managed to distance himself from anything that seemed squalid, in the same way that Stoate did not.

It was late in the afternoon by the time the Caswell Productions van pulled away up the drive, to take its place in the diminishing queue of parents’ cars at the end of the school day. Stoate helped himself to a medicinal brandy, wondering what to do next. It was obvious. Carter-Barr would have to get an injunction, but that would be a miracle after his previous form in front of a neutral judge. Legal success had only come to the flimsy cases brought by the Tanswold School Trust when they were heard by judiciary who were warm friends of the school. Stoate could not act alone as he had done in the past. The legal fiasco brought about by Carter-Barr had led the Governors to order Stoate not to

institute legal proceedings of any kind without full approval of the Governing Body.

Another miracle would have to be worked by Lartington to obtain funds to settle all the legal claims that were gathering around the school like vultures.

That weekend Dunstan Stoate decided to give himself a little pleasure to get away from all the stresses and strains of his job. On the Saturday he drove to Quarmby aerodrome for a little spin in his plane. Although an accomplished aviator, he had not had a flight for several months. This was a shame, as he had just bought for himself a brand-new aeroplane, a little Canadian two-seater, called a *Diamond Katana*. Little bigger than a motor car and weighing considerably less (Stoate increased its weight by 15 % as he squeezed his bulk into it), it was a wonderful little machine which Stoate could fly all over the place. It used less petrol than his big *Volvo*, and he never got stuck in traffic jams, although flying around in a holding pattern could be tedious. Although much less sophisticated than the machines that he had flown in the past, it was a polite little plane to fly. All he had to do was to get it in trim and it would happily fly comfortably and steadily while he gazed out at the countryside below. Although the machine was very manoeuvrable, it would not do aerobatics, but Stoate felt too old to be playing about like that. Also, the machine had cost him a fortune, and he certainly didn't want to break it with a Dunstan roll.

With the intention of lifting his spirits to a higher plain, Stoate taxied to the runway, lined the little machine up, got clearance and pushed the throttle forward. He flew over Alverston, and would have enjoyed buzzing The Rectory, as he did his university hall of residence all those years ago. That kind of thing did not do for a man of his age. He flew over to Carlsborough, back over the hills and along the High Pennines. It was a wonderfully clear day, almost spring like, and perfect for flying. Stoate could see a long way in all directions. For the first time he felt his spirits rise, but soon it was time to head the little aeroplane back towards Quarmby. Stoate flew over Tanswold and decided to circle The Hermitage, so that he could look at his life's

achievement. There he could see the old house in its lovely grounds, with the classrooms in the stable block behind. There were the new classrooms, the Science and Technology Block with its distinctive quadrangle. It was enough to make him feel proud, and ready to protect it to the last, whatever it took.

Stoate noticed the daffodils that were growing on the grass bank on the other side of The Hermitage. Last summer, when things had taken a sudden turn for the worse, he had noticed a gardener, about to be made redundant, planting them, and there seemed to be a pattern in his work. He had thought recently that there was a pattern to the plants as they came through. Now the pattern was obvious. The bulbs had been planted to form large letters, STOATE YOU BASTARD.

Stoate did not remember much about the rest of the flight, not even that he made something of a hash of the landing, and the little plane bounced twice before trundling to a rest on the runway. The way he felt, he would not have cared if he were at the bottom of a stinking crater. Stoate drove home in his Volvo like a lunatic, ordering everyone out of the way with prolonged blaring of the horn. He would tell Lartington in no uncertain terms to get the damned daffodils cut down, and the bank returned.

“No can do, Headmaster,” was Lartington’s reply to Stoate’s demand on Monday morning. “There isn’t the dosh. Every spare penny is going to have to go to clear up the legal mess that you have got the Trust into.”

“What?” shouted Stoate. “Order the groundsman and his men to do the job. It will take ten minutes.”

“No Headmaster, there aren’t any groundsmen from the end of this month. We have to cut back further. Your teaching staff will have to maintain the grounds and big jobs be done by contractors.”

“Is the groundsman still here?”

“Yes, until the end of the week.”

“Well tell him to do it!”

Lartington sighed. It was highly unlikely that the groundsman would get round to doing the job before he left. He was not only highly miffed at the suddenness of his redundancy, but he had a pile of work to do before the end of the week. Besides, he disliked destroying perfectly good plants and within a couple of weeks they would look their best.

Stoate stomped into his office and started to prepare for the emergency Governors' meeting to consider the action to be taken in response to *Very Public Scandals*.

The meeting took place in the Old Library as usual, but after elevenses rather than luncheon, as it was deemed that everyone should have a clear head not befuddled by a good stiff Hock. There were several items on the agenda that centred on the deepening financial crisis and the legal liabilities that the school was now facing. There was also the small trouble of the forthcoming *Panorama*.

“That damned woman has got to be stopped!” said Stoate as he opened the meeting. “The publicity will be the end of us. And I am bitterly disappointed that an ex-member of this Governing Body should have spoken to the production company. There has been passed to him information about the proceedings of our meetings by a currently serving member. It is going to be a major action to limit the damage. My first proposal is that we should call on Mrs Sanderson to resign.”

There followed a robust and bad-tempered exchange between Stoate and Mrs Sanderson, which spread to other members of the Governing Body, side-tracking them from the more important business on their agenda. As was usual in such circumstances, there was little that was constructive, and the meeting degenerated to a pantomime of back biting and personal abuse. Eventually Stoate's proposal was rejected by a clear majority. Gonall sat through the proceedings looking totally inscrutable. Nobody could see that he was bringing forward his plot to get rid of the old fart...

The meeting started to consider the legal morass that the school had landed in. Carter-Barr had joined the meeting now and all eyes were turned on him as he laid out the position as he saw it. He started, “The result from last week was quite unprecedented. There have been quite a few changes at the County Court in Carlsborough, and I am bound to say

that they are not in our favour. Since Sir Thomas has got Detective Commander Smithells breathing down his neck, several others have taken sudden retirement and Dame Judith Lowson has come in as something of a new broom, so to speak. No case that we bring is a foregone conclusion. What's more she has got the Lord Chancellor's Department looking into our previous cases. I cannot guarantee anything."

"So, what would you advise?" said the Chairman.

"I would advise you to settle out of court with Stephen Booth, and the Proudlock family."

"What?" shouted Stoate.

"If you instruct me, I will take up these cases. The evidence in Booth's case is even flimsier than in Cooke's. With Dame Judith, there is the small problem of proving things beyond all reasonable doubt. Now as soon as Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax's story comes out, the case will be laughed out of her court."

D'Arcy-Fairfax shuffled uneasily. He knew that he could be facing several charges of perjury very soon if the real story did get out.

"The thing you need to take into account," continued Carter-Barr, "is the level of my fees and those of Booth's and Proudlock's solicitors. Now if you want me to, I will continue to push the truth to the bottom of a very deep well. As long as I am paid of course, and that I can see that my investment of time is safe. At the moment, as I see things, the Tanswold School Trust is looking very rocky indeed."

"You don't have to tell us that," muttered several of the governors.

"So, as I see it," said Blance, "we are caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea. We are going to settle up with money we haven't got, or we are going to face a desperate rearguard legal action that will cost hundreds of thousands of pounds without any guarantee of winning."

"In a nutshell," replied Carter-Barr, "yes. You can always appeal, but it will cost you. My fees for appeal cases are double what they are for the first-time round. You are also into getting QCs and that will cost you dear. You can say bye-bye to half a million if you were to take Cooke's case to the House of Lords."

“You seem remarkably calm and level-headed for a man who has cost us several hundred thousand already and placed the Trust into an investigation for what would seem serious irregularities in legal procedures,” remarked Dr Lyons.

“I was simply following your legal instructions and representing your legal position to the best of my ability. It was to our advantage in the past that the cases had been heard before Sir Thomas Handley who was such a warm friend of the school,” replied Carter-Barr defensively. “I acted on the wishes of the Headmaster, who asked me to pursue these matters to the best of my ability. Should we have won Cooke’s case, no doubt we would be celebrating in the usual way.”

“So where are we going to find these vast legal sums?” said Sir Ronald Wiseman. “Presumably, Doberman and Pinscher have to carry the risk of bad debt?”

“Not necessarily,” replied Blance who had come across this kind of case before. “They can reclaim the money they have paid us, although they would have to prove it in court.”

“Which going by the form that we have had would result in a judgement in their favour,” said Dr Lyons.

“We need to set up a fighting fund,” Stoate added his pennyworth to the discussion.

“That’s rather impertinent of you, Dunstan,” said Dr Lyons, “since it was your actions that have got us in this position anyway.”

“It’s not my actions,” snapped Stoate, “It’s cretins like Cooke who think that the independent sector is a rest home for the feeble hearted!”

“What’s more pertinent and important, where are we going to get the money?” Sir Ronald asked. “We don’t have that sort of money available. In fact, we are up to our eyeballs in debt. In effect, we are bankrupt and we face having to sell The Hermitage. Is that not true, Crispin?”

“It is, indeed, Sir Ronald,” replied Lartington. He got out his laptop and connected it to a projector. “This is the financial position we are in now.” Lartington went through the financial position that the Trust was in. There was no money in the bank to pay the bills, and they were

struggling to pay the loan on Stoate Hall. If they were to survive at all, there would have to be massive cutbacks throughout the school.

“Is there nothing we can do?” asked Sir Ronald.

“Find about one hundred to two hundred thousand each,” said Lartington. “Or declare ourselves bankrupt. There is an alternative that I have been exploring. I have been having discussions with, surprisingly, Dobermann and Pinscher in London. They are prepared to finance us through the present situation. They won’t refinance Stoate Hall, but they are aware of the legal liabilities we face. I will be seeing them on Wednesday, with a view that we settle all our legal liabilities. I shall return to Tanswold on Thursday with a cheque. I must warn you that the interest rates are those of capital venture, about 20 percent. I now have figures that show the financial implications of this for the next five years.”

Lartington tapped his laptop, and more graphs and pie-charts came up. “The upshot is, though, that there would have to be a major hike in fees. Some parents might rebel, so we are going to have to (a) attract more pupils, and (b) make ourselves to be the top school in the area. There is also a precondition, as well, a string attached. Dunstan you will have to retire as Director of Learning and Teaching as soon as a new man can be found.”

“What?” shouted Stoate. “How dare they? I shall retire when I damned well like!”

“You already announced your retirement to us last term.”

“Yes, circumstances were different. I shall decide when I am ready to retire, not a finance company that shares a name with a vicious South African police dog.”

“Dunstan, you are a liability,” said Dr Lyons, starting a long discourse on all Dunstan Stoate’s many management failings. Stoate was getting angrier by the minute as Lyons continued his peroration. Before Stoate could commit murder, Blance called for a vote on whether they should accept the finance from Doberman and Pinscher. The motion was carried overwhelmingly, with one vote against. Stoate stormed out of the meeting. Blance decided to adjourn the meeting until Lartington returned on Thursday.

Gonall's mind was in overdrive, as far as that was possible for a man with the diminutive intellect of Pooh Bear. Stoate was finished and was going to have to retire as soon as they found his replacement. No bother about advertising and interviews. There was the man ideal for the job, John Brian Gonall. They would surely take him as Headmaster, and he would make Tanswold School an academic hot house with tens of pupils going to Oxford and Cambridge. Indeed, it would be the exception not to attempt Oxbridge. Gonall would bide his time to get rid of the Old DOLT and do it good and proper.

Chapter 10

Dunstan Stoate found little cheer that week. His life's work, or what he thought of as his life's work, seemed to be in the hands of a finance company in London that sounded like a South African police dog. And no doubt it would have the same charm and manners. There was the news. Every time a government minister came on, it seemed more than usual to get up his nose. Dunstan Stoate was a die-hard Tory, and the fact that the Labour party had been elected by a landslide in 1997 was an utter anathema, even though the Prime Minister was a product of a famous independent school in Edinburgh.

More locally there had been a rather unpleasant little story about a young man who had gone with some friends to a pub. Some of his friends had some Ecstasy and tried to persuade their friend to take some. He had refused, and while he had gone out to the gents, one of his so-called friends had slipped some E and some other shit into his drink. Within fifteen minutes, the young man was deeply unconscious and died later in hospital. Four young men were assisting police with their enquiries. With friends like that, who needed enemies?

Who needed enemies with some of the people on the Governing Body, who seemed to be becoming ever more critical of Stoate's management? Even those whom Stoate had trusted for unfailing support seemed to be wavering. Now with his failure to have Mrs Sanderson removed, who had blown the cover off his cover-up of the bad inspection report, it would be ever harder to get his way with the Governors.

Stoate's gloom increased further when he heard that at least one of the boys who were with the police was one of his pupils. No doubt The Hermitage would be alive with policemen at some stage, and this was confirmed to him soon after nine o'clock when DI Mallinson paid a visit to inform him who the suspects were. Although it was small relief that the boy who had died was in the sixth form at Goyder's, Stoate felt an intense sense of shock that three of his sixth form had been involved. Stoate knew little about the drugs scene; it was alien to him, only happening in places like Canterill Farm. It did not occur to him that it could happen even in large mansions and the fact that it had happened with "nice" children only served to appal him even more. A couple of

years ago he would have expelled the boys concerned without a second thought, especially as they were in police custody. Now he could not even do that, although if they did return, he would make sure that they were aware of his displeasure. Especially as he did not like DI Mallinson in his office, as it brought back memories of when she was last there. Stoate felt that the inevitable publicity that such cases brought about would be yet another straw weighing down on the camel's back.

The Governor's meeting, adjourned from Monday afternoon, resumed. No mention was made of Stoate's outrageous behaviour when he had stormed out from the previous meeting. Instead Lartington gave a report about his most constructive meeting with Doberman and Pinscher. A bank transfer had been made for two and a half million pounds, payable at twenty percent annual interest over a period of five years. This would mean a period of intense austerity over the loan period. Doberman and Pinscher had realised that the compensation awards made against previous sacked employees had had a very tenuous legal basis. They had consulted their solicitors and had paid back what had been paid to them by the ex-employees. This was being taken into account in the loan calculations. There were further conditions, other than the retirement of the Director of Learning and Teaching. The loan was to be secured on The Hermitage in case of default, and the loan could be recalled if there were any occurrence that might prejudice the good name of Doberman and Pinscher. No further legal actions of any kind could be instituted by the Trust without the prior permission of Doberman and Pinscher. A representative of Doberman and Pinscher would be appointed to the Governing Body and would participate in the selection of a new Director of Learning and Teaching.

"Does that mean that we cannot instruct Carter-Barr to have an injunction on that awful programme they're going to put out?" asked Stoate in a resigned tone of voice.

"No," replied Lartington. "It is highly unlikely that Carter-Barr would win the case. The BBC has a bevy of legal eagles who will have picked out anything that could be deemed as untrue or slanderous."

"What do you mean?" snapped Stoate. "The whole bloody programme is a slander! We should be able to have them for multiple libels. How did they get in, in the first place?"

“That’s not my problem.”

“There were a lot of people going about filming. They said they had your permission. So presumably they had found out about you, or you had given them permission. Which is it?”

“I gave permission to Chisel Productions of Winchester to film the promotional video. It was to depict the year at Tanswold. Unfortunately, they have to do a retake of Speech Day as it ended up such a farce last year. We are going to have to wait until the summer. I have seen what they have done so far. It’s an excellent job, but we will need every copy we can get.”

As had become the norm at meetings of the Governors of Tanswold School, emotions began to run at increasingly high levels as the meeting progressed. There was considerable and acrimonious debate about expanding the school by taking in girls immediately, whether or not Stoate had retired. Although it had been debated at length before, Stoate fought his rearguard action with ferocity. Without the girls, the fees would have to go up to eight thousand pounds per annum. With them, the rise would be slightly less, to seven and a quarter thousand pounds per annum. There would have to be an intense marketing exercise conducted by the staff, as they had done the previous year. There would also be several open days. Gonall was instructed to communicate the decision to the staff.

Lartington was about to outline his ideas for the marketing strategy, and the meeting went quiet as he set up his laptop computer. The sound of raised voices in the Old Library was replaced by the sound of raised and panicked voices from down in the cellar. Everyone listened, as there was no right for there to be raised youthful voices in the cellar; it was strictly out of bounds. What was more was that the owners of the raised youthful voices should have been in lessons. There was a scurrying up the cellar stairs, and the cellar door slammed, the sound echoing about the old house. Just as Stoate and Gonall were standing up to go and see what the hell was going on, there was a dull heavy thud from below that made the room shake, followed at once by tinkling glass. The fire alarm sounded.

The Mid Yorkshire Fire Brigade was on the scene quickly. It was a very small fire, which scorched the paint in the room in the cellar and badly damaged a rickety old table. There was a butane cylinder under the table, which, if it had exploded, would have seriously damaged, if not destroyed the west side of The Hermitage, but the fire had been rapidly brought under control. Within half an hour of the first alert the fire brigade was clearing up and allowing the police to have a look at the cause.

Although the fire had been just a routine “shout” for the fire brigade, the cause was of extreme interest to the police and soon the investigation was under the command of DI Lisa Mallinson of Mid Yorkshire CID. The cause of the fire was quickly established as an explosion in a one-litre round-bottomed flask, which was being used to make Ecstasy. A number of tablets were found which were taken away for forensic analysis. Meanwhile forensic teams made a thorough search of the cellars of The Hermitage, making their presence obvious by parking several large police vans on the drive outside.

Dunstan Stoate wished that he had gone into retirement at the end of the previous term. He certainly did not want to be spending any more time with this strong-willed practitioner of police interrogation, although at least the conversation took place in the comfort of his office, not Tanswold Police Station. Stoate could not come to terms with the fact that there was allegedly an illegal drugs plant if not under his nose, certainly under his feet. The least thing that he could expect would be some more bad publicity, and that would not do. The best thing would be to fend this woman off and persuade her that it had all been a ghastly mistake. He started with some easy small talk, but DI Mallinson cut him short, “Mr Stoate, I am sure that you are aware of the seriousness of this situation.”

“Yes, there was a fire in the basement.”

“Well spotted. Do you know what caused the fire?”

“It seems that some boys were playing about down there.”

“Do you know what they were doing?”

“Of course not. They must have had an accident of some sort.”

“You’re right,” said Mallinson, “they did have an accident. A potentially lethal accident. They were doing some chemistry. Do you know what they were making?”

“Gun powder for fireworks, I used to make it when I was a boy. I made bangers and rockets. It was a good wheeze.”

“A good wheeze is what you get out of this stuff that they were making. Especially when the wheeze is the noise you make when the paramedics are trying chest compression.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s called Ecstasy; it’s a class A drug belonging to the amphetamine family. It can explode during preparation; it is quite a dangerous reaction. As regards a good wheeze as you call it, Jason Forbes had a good wheeze before he died and it’s your students who popped the pill, so to speak.”

Mallinson’s mobile rang, and she answered. After a brief conversation she turned to Stoate and said, “The sixth formers from your school have confessed to obtaining their supplies from the basement of The Hermitage. They have named several boys who were making the stuff?”

“Do you know which boys?”

“I said we had names. We shall be looking for them and picking them up.”

“I don’t think that would be necessary, Miss Mallinson. I would have hoped that you would be more discreet. It won’t do our reputation any good when the parents see the large police vans out there with the police tape. They will be coming in half an hour to pick their sons up at the end of school. I’ll send for them and you can talk to them here.”

Mallinson’s eyes flashed with rage and she shouted, “Reputation, Mr Stoate? Are you aware that a serious criminal offence has been taking place under your nose and you have done nothing to stop it? Those boys have been bunking off class, and nobody has said a thing to you?”

“Bunking off class is a serious disciplinary offence in this school, which I deal with severely, but I would hardly describe in as criminal.”

“DRUGS, Mr Stoate, DRUGS! I will spell it out in words of one syllable so that even you can understand it. It is against the law to manufacture or distribute classified substances. It is criminal. I don’t like drug buggers, no, not one little bit. I have seen what they do to kids. I have seen mothers and fathers dissolving in inconsolable tears when we have had to go round to tell them that their child has died in hospital. Jason Forbes, for example. He didn’t want anything to do with drugs, but his so-called friends popped in a couple while he was at the gents. Some friends, eh? Is that the kind of thing you want your school to be known by? Are you also aware that it is a criminal offence to permit your premises to be used for such purposes? If you don’t want to go down as an accessory to a crime, I expect your total and unstinting co-operation.”

Stoate looked out of the window to see his worst fears confirmed. On the other side of the police line, a camera team was filming while a TV journalist presented her report. There was a knock on the door, and a uniformed constable came in. “Ma’am, could you come down to the basement?”

Now that Mallinson had gone, Stoate sat in his office wondering what more could possibly go wrong in his beleaguered school. Lartington came into the office and said, “Headmaster, what are we going to do with the seven pupils who are involved with the police?”

“I thought it would be fairly obvious. Expel them and say that we have dealt with the matter firmly and effectively.”

“No Headmaster, we cannot do that. Do you realise that expelling them will cost us nearly fifty thousand pounds a year? If you expel them, you will have to make at least two staff redundant.”

“Knowing some of the dead legs we have on the staff, that seems quite an attractive proposition.”

“No, Headmaster, you cannot do that. If you throw those seven pupils out, it is more bad publicity. You know what Doberman and Pinscher would have to say about it. You keep the pupils on roll. Don’t admit anything. Yes, it will be on the news tonight, but you must put up a smokescreen.”

“There is a pretty adequate screen at the moment with all those police vans parked outside.”

“It’s up to you Headmaster, how you cover it up, but you must cover it up, else Tanswold School is finished.”

Stoate sighed. Although he had obfuscation down to a fine art, this one would need all the skills he could bring, as it was going to be in the public domain that a Class A drug had been manufactured on the premises, literally under his feet. Stoate was hard put to it to compose a press release that would distance the school sufficiently from the scandal that was breaking below him, while retaining seven pupils who were about to face charges varying from manslaughter, through causing grievous bodily harm, to manufacturing a Class A drug with intent to supply.

While Stoate was mulling over his composition upstairs, in the basement, Lisa Mallinson was looking into the growing extent of the case emerging there. The sniffer dogs had unearthed a small stash of Ecstasy within the room where the fire had been and now were working over the entire basement. “Are you certain about the cause of the fire?” Mallinson asked one of the forensic team.

“Yes, Ma’am. Making E is a pretty dangerous process. The reaction ran out of control, and they had to leg it before the flask blew up. No wonder, looking at what they were using.”

The forensic scientist showed Mallinson the scorched camping stove that had been used to heat the flask. He added, “If this cylinder had got hot and gone up, it would have taken this side of the building with it.”

Mallinson thought that it might have been a good idea if the pompous toad upstairs had gone with the explosion, but her sense of professionalism prevented her from voicing this thought. Instead, she said, “It looks like the work of kids, messing with something they knew nothing about. They had nicked the stuff from the chemistry lab, so it seems. However, that isn’t much help to Jason Forbes.”

A uniformed constable came in said, “Sorry to butt in, Ma’am, but the sniffer dogs have found some dope in a cupboard.”

“Thanks. I want the whole school searching, every square centimetre. This is obviously going to be bigger than we thought.”

Mallinson trotted upstairs. She was looking forward to telling the pompous old fart that she was going to turn the school upside down and that the school would be closed for at least the weekend. Predictably, Stoate did not share her sense of pleasure at this development. “You can’t do that,” shouted Stoate. “I will ring the school’s solicitors.”

“I can and I will,” replied Mallinson. “You are entirely at liberty to ring your solicitor, but I am sure that he would agree that it is against the law to obstruct the work of the police.”

“I have never closed the school before,” said Stoate. “What kind of message is that sending to our parents?”

“That the manufacture of drugs is a serious criminal offence as is to allow the manufacture of drugs on the premises. Now Mr Stoate, are you going to allow us to search the premises, or will I have to apply for a warrant from Tanswold Magistrates? I will have the warrant in the hour, but I would far prefer that we don’t have to force entry, which would cause a lot of damage. We will be working all tomorrow and over the weekend. Please arrange for someone to come round with a set of keys. Meanwhile I want the site cleared and nobody to come back on the premises until our search is complete.”

“How are we going to tell the parents?”

“That, Mr Stoate, is your problem.”

There were multiple troubles for Stoate. Lartington was furious; the TV people were delighted. As Stoate left The Hermitage, he saw a police sniffer dog cocking his leg on one of the pillars that held up the porch. The dog’s handler smirked at him, while Stoate glared back. He trod full square in the offering that another sniffer dog had left on the drive.

On the following Tuesday, the school reopened after the police had done a meticulous search. Stoate had spent the weekend fielding the wrath of parents who were not only disgruntled at the bad publicity, but also that they had had to keep their little darlings at home, and somebody had had to take an unplanned day off work. Now Stoate was plodding wearily to The Hermitage to face it in person. The press-release that Stoate had planned over the weekend seemed very lame. So lame, in

fact, that even Stoate thought twice about whether to release it. By the time he had finished with a dozen angry parents and read at least two dozen more angry letters, Stoate was, yet again, in a thoroughly bad temper. He had not thought yet as to what action he should take against the culprits, action that was legal and would not end him up in prison with them. So, when they arrived (all but one who had been remanded into secure local authority accommodation), chastened after their time in the police cells, all he could manage was to shout at them and send them back to their lessons.

Gonall too had had to face angry parents who confided in him that it really was time for Stoate to go. While his professionalism just prevented him from agreeing, it was all grist to the mill, and when the last parent left, he considered his plot to remove Stoate, by force if necessary.

Stoate did release the press briefing after much vacillation, hoping that it would show that he had the situation under control. It read:

A most unfortunate incident has occurred at the school in which a small quantity of drugs was manufactured on the premises. The school takes the matter very seriously and the boys responsible have been dealt with severely under the school's disciplinary code.

There will be no recurrence in the future and boys have been warned of the consequences of taking drugs.

The Headmaster has the fullest support of the parents, staff, and Governors in his actions and in releasing this statement.

If Stoate thought that his press release would deflect the interest and speculation, he was mistaken. All that week parents were queuing up to berate him for allowing “druggies” to stay. After repeated questioning as to whether he could organise a drunken binge in a brewery, Stoate’s temper was decidedly frayed. He did not hear from the police until Thursday when DI Mallinson came trotting into his office rather like a gundog about to offer her master the freshly shot pheasant. Unlike the gundog, Lisa Mallinson was not in the least bit obsequious. “We have finished our enquiry, Mr Stoate,” she started. “We have found

a small amount of Ecstasy in the basement of The Hermitage. Forensic have confirmed that it was identical to the material that was being manufactured by your boys. They have also confirmed that it is identical in every way to the Ecstasy that was used to spike Jason Forbes' drink. Not a very good advertisement for your school, is it? We also found several stashes of dope. We think that it wasn't intended for supply. You seem to have a bit of a drugs problem here."

Mallinson showed Stoaate a newspaper article about the death of Jason Forbes. Juxtaposed was Stoaate's statement about the resolute action he had taken.

"So, they're still on your books, eh?" Mallinson continued. "I can't say that your action has been particularly resolute. Are the boys in school at the moment?"

"I don't know. We will have to look at the registers."

"I've already done that. They are registered as being in. That said, Mr Stoaate, I think you should win the Booker Prize for Fiction."

"Are you trying to be funny, Miss Mallinson?" Stoaate snapped.

"Not in the least bit, Mr Stoaate. The point I am trying to make is that your registers are complete works of fiction that bear no resemblance to which pupils are in the school and which are not. None of the boys that we are interested in are in, but six of the seven have been registered as in. Do you have a truancy problem Mr Stoaate?"

"Not at all. The attendance at my school is quite outstanding. If boys want to truant, they can get out and go elsewhere."

Mallinson took a deep breath and concluded that she was dealing with either a complete idiot or that Stoaate was suffering the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. "That's what they seem to be doing. They have gone elsewhere, Mr Stoaate, and I want to talk to them further about their role in a serious criminal offence. There is another serious criminal offence that I want to talk to you about."

"I don't know what you mean," Stoaate spluttered. Although his handling of the latest crisis had been erratic to say the least, it certainly had not been criminal. Mallinson passed him a magazine, which contained images that made him recoil with disgust. This was way beyond the pale and he felt sick.

“Hard-core gay porn, Mr Stoate. Do you remember when you asked whether Gay-Porn was a pupil? You certainly made a name for yourself down at police headquarters. We loved it; it makes us laugh a bit at some of the less pleasant parts of our job. Violent pornographic material of a homosexual nature is no laughing matter. And there is rather a lot of it in the basement. Can you explain its presence there?”

“Probably some of the workmen,” replied Stoate. He had a long-cherished prejudice against the working classes and their deplorable habits. “They bring in all sorts of rubbish and filth. And you ought to hear the way they speak!”

Mallinson was still debating with herself whether Stoate was feeble-minded, a moron, an imbecile, or an idiot. “I speak with an accent, and I will not allow the likes of you to patronise me,” she snapped. “For your information, we are not looking for the purveyors of hard-core gay porn in the high-rise flats of Canterill Farm.” And with a parody of a high-class voice, she added, “It’s a little closer to home, Mr Stoate, in the rather pleasant grounds of The Hermitage.”

“Are you suggesting that my boys are into that kind of filth? I have strict rules about this kind of thing.”

“They are into drugs, Mr Stoate, and your rules don’t seem to have much bite. But no, Mr Stoate, this isn’t the work of a couple of mixed-up teenagers. This is the collection of one of your staff.”

“What? I’ll sack him on the spot. I have a number of young men here who I have always considered rather irresponsible. They don’t have the breeding.”

“No, Mr Stoate, like a lot of us. Actually, this one does have quite a lot of breeding, I would say. Quite a nob, if you would pardon the pun. How about your Chaplain, Piers Algernon d’Arcy-Fairfax?”

“Rubbish!” shouted Stoate. “He is an example of up-standing Christianity. He believes in tradition, discipline, and responsibility. He has only just preached in his Lenten series on the consequences of that kind of behaviour. He is a stalwart of the Church, and the young of today need examples like him.”

“To show them how to access obscene websites? Here, let me show you what the Reverend d’Arcy-Fairfax has on his computer. We’ll use your machine to look at what is in his.”

The computer on Stoate’s desk farted into life, and after a series of lavatory flushes had accompanied Mallinson’s keystrokes, a disgusting image appeared on the monitor screen. “Charming noises you have on your computer, Mr Stoate,” she said with more than a hint of irony.

“Some boys put them on. I have asked for them to be removed, but nobody has done it yet,” Stoate replied grumpily. “Good God, where’s that filth come from?”

“Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax’s computer, Mr Stoate. He has accessed several sites in Thailand, and there is enough there for him to get at least three years. Would you be kind enough to send for him? Unlike our druggies, he is on the premises.”

“I do not believe that Piers would do something like this,” Stoate squawked. “You have made a dreadful mistake.”

“We don’t accuse people of things like this lightly. Now we can do it discretely. Send for d’Arcy-Fairfax now and we will take him away quietly. Or we can go in high profile. Now which is it to be Mr Stoate?”

“This is outrageous. I am not going to be black...”

Mallinson cut him short by speaking into a two-way radio, “Mallinson here, go in and pick up the target. Over.”

“Understood, Ma’am. Over and out.”

A couple of seconds later, two squad cars raced up the drive and pulled outside the English Block, and several policemen threw themselves out of the cars and into the building. Two minutes later, they came out with d’Arcy-Fairfax squawking like a captured pheasant, “There has been a terrible mistake. I haven’t finished my elevenses!”

“That’s the least of your problems,” said one of the policemen. “As regards terrible mistakes, looking at Thai websites is one of them. Get into the car.”

Stoate turned back and said, “You could have been more discreet about it.”

“It was your choice. You had to argue. Besides Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax could have been a little more discreet about some of his less desirable tastes. I suggest you sack him, because I don’t think he will be coming back. We will be charging him with possession of indecent material likely to corrupt. If found guilty, he could get up to five years and will go on the Sex Offenders’ Register. Even if he is out on bail before the trial, he will be ordered not to come within ten kilometres of Tanswold.”

“The publicity won’t do us any good,” Stoate complained.

“The kind of filth that we found will not do anyone any good. So, you have a problem that you have to solve yourself, Mr Stoate. Meanwhile I need to get back to the station to solve what we’re going to do with Mr d’Arcy-Fairfax.”

Stoate was relieved to see the car disappear up the drive but could not get to grips with the enormity of what had happened. He tried to think but could not do so. One of his most loyal staff had been caught in possession of material that Stoate found alien and repulsive, almost to the same extent as drugs. Both had reared their ugly heads and defiled the beauty of what he had created. Things like that happened elsewhere. It had not been the first time that it happened. For one to happen at one time could be regarded as unfortunate, but for both to happen in the space of a week was decidedly careless. Should it have been a junior member of staff, Stoate would have sacked him instantly for gross misconduct. But it was his trusted friend, Piers. And Piers was a fellow Forester, so there were certain obligations that Stoate had to uphold. He would have to stand by his friend. The phone rang. It was the *Northern Echo*. Would he care to comment on the latest scandal that seemed to be breaking at Tanswold School? Would he be resigning?

Stoate yelled “No comment!” to all the questions that seemed to get more insolent as they went along. Finally, with several expletives, Stoate slammed the phone down, and went over to his drinks cabinet for a medicinal brandy. True to form, the scandal-ridden school had received another dose of bad publicity brought about by the arrest of Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax. All that afternoon and evening, Stoate received a number of angry phone calls from parents and several Governors.

The next morning, Stoate received another unwelcome visit, this time from John Gonall. Without being invited in, Gonall, whose manners were, at best, oafish, made himself comfortable in Stoate's armchair. "How can I help you, John?" said Stoate with more than a hint of sarcasm.

It was lost on Gonall. He came straight to the point without ceremony, "Dunstan, you have got to go. You are a liability and with the latest nonsense, we are finished. There needs to be resolute action, and you are not the one to take it."

"WHAT?" yelled Stoate. "I am going to take resolute action. You're fired!"

Gonall was a man who was as arrogant as he was insensitive. He made himself more comfortable. "No Dunstan, I don't think so. The parents say you are a liability, and many of the Governors do as well. The staff have no confidence in you. You have had your day. For the sake of Tanswold School, you have to go."

Stoate sat at his desk in a state of near lunacy as he listened to this fellow Forester telling him things about himself that he thought he would never hear. As for loyalty, Gonall was too absorbed in his own self-importance to know what loyalty was concerned about. Nor did it ever penetrate his little brain that he, Gonall, had instituted many of the dismissals that had led to the dire financial crisis that the school found itself in. Finally, leaving Stoate ranting and raving, Gonall got up and walked out, just as if he had been in a routine planning meeting with his boss.

John Gonall was pleased with himself as he walked up the passage to his office. He had told the Old Fart straight that he was a liability. True, the Old Fart had not taken kindly to Gonall's message, but that was only to be expected. There were not too many people who relished being called dead beats and lame ducks, let alone being told that they were losing their marbles. Now that Stoate was not going to go without a fuss, Gonall would get the Governors to turf him out at the next meeting, which was at the end of the following week. He would get Dr Lyons to propose a vote of no confidence, and a second proposal to nominate him as Headmaster.

The national news carried the story of the arrest of Piers d’Arcy-Fairfax. It also carried a report that he had a rather murky past. All those years ago, when Stoate had appointed him, d’Arcy-Fairfax had come with impeccable references, and the strong backing of Sir Kenneth Rounce, who had known his father. The truth about the ex-Chaplain’s past was left at the bottom of a very deep well, where the mud of ages had quietly buried it. Now the waters had been stirred, several skeletons had been discovered, and there was a lot of journalistic interest in Tanswold School for all the wrong reasons. It also emerged that d’Arcy-Fairfax had been defrocked because of some of his less savoury activities. The point was also made that this scandal came close on the heels of a drugs scandal. The news item, accompanied by library pictures of The Hermitage, also carried Stoate’s furious interview with the *Northern Echo*. The final words were, “You can see more about Tanswold School in Sunday’s Panorama, *Very Public Scandals*.”

If Stoate’s ears were burning as he watched the national news that Friday evening, they were positively incandescent by the time Lartington had rung him up from London. Stoate held the phone away from his ear as Lartington shouted, “Headmaster! What the hell are you playing at? Why have you allowed another scandal to take place? First the legal cases, next the drugs, and now this! And this program as well? What are Doberman and Pinscher going to say? They have warned about their support for us being conditional on no further public scandals, and here we have some very public scandals. They seem to be growing by the day! What are you going to do about it?”

“I shall put an injunction stopping any further reporting,” Stoate replied feebly.

“Balderdash!” yelled Lartington. “Absolute balderdash! Can’t you see that you are closing the stable door after the horse has bolted?”

Stoate thought of something else that he wanted to close.

“Well, I could tell the parents that the allegations are quite untrue.”

“WHAT? Release one of your press statements? Fat lot of good that would do. You have cost us a bloody fortune. If Doberman and Pinscher call back their debt, we will be wound up.”

“Just give them the money back.”

“I have lodged a considerable amount of money with the County Court to pay off Cooke, and with the Proudlocks’ solicitors so that we can settle out of court. Doberman and Pinscher will bankrupt us with this. I have already had them on to me and I have virtually had to grovel to allow us to continue. You are going to have to go, Headmaster, if there is the merest squeak of another scandal, and I shall see to it that you do as well!”

“And a happy Easter to you!” snapped Stoate as he put the phone down. The local news was coming on now. It was entirely coincidental that the story about Tanswold School was followed immediately by another story of educational interest. Stoate bridled at the juxtaposition of his school with its fine tradition of rearing gentlemen with an institution that was the preparatory school to Canterill Prison. A teacher had been severely assaulted at the Phoenix Community College, and the report showed the Principal giving her views. Ms Karen Purslove gave a statement that was tantamount to saying that the member of staff had brought it on himself, as this kind of thing was entirely a matter of the quality of teaching and learning. She would be doing a competence assessment on him when he came back. Predictably, Purslove’s interview was followed straightaway by a furious union official who stated that the entire staff would be meeting with a view to industrial action.

Stoate longed to have some sympathetic company. Somehow Donald Blance had become rather cold to him. If this had happened a couple of years back, he would be in the Blances’ drawing room starting his aperitif, while delicious smells wafted from May’s kitchen. Now Blance had said little to him other than the most pressing business of the Tanswold School Trust. Stoate fell into a deep gloom that was not helped by further calls from angry parents. As regarded the imminent screening of *Very Public Scandals*, Stoate just hoped that since *Panorama* was a programme that responded to current events, something else would knock it off.

It was a vain hope. No politician caused a scandal of more import to the public interest, nor was a president assassinated, nor was there a

coup d'état in any banana republic. Instead Stoate braced himself for the worst when the title music to *Panorama* came on.

It was worse.

The programme contained so many issues that were in the public interest that it had been extended from fifty minutes to seventy. Exposed were the many scams that had led to the wealth of the school, along with its bad reputation for mismanagement, corruption, and failure to pay its bills. Not only were there scenes that he had seen in his private preview, but there were also further scenes added showing the serious extent of bullying, intimidation, and straight forward bad discipline in the school. It was summed up by a long lens shot of five sixth formers, who were clearly drunk, urinating under Tanswold Viaduct. There was Stoate's interview with Ms Caswell, edited so that his only answer seemed to be "No comment". It portrayed him as a hectoring bully, oblivious to the range of unpleasant circumstances going on around him. It also produced a number of trails that linked the school to some very unsavoury people. Ominously it said that the ex-Chairman of Governors, Sir Kenneth Rounce, was under investigation for allegations of corruption, fraud, tax evasion, and a host of other nefarious dealings. It was only that the program was broadcast late on a Sunday evening that prevented the telephone from exploding in his ear the whole of that night. Stoate knew that the following day was going to be terrible.

It was worse. When he got into The Hermitage, a number of parents were demanding an emergency parents' meeting for that evening. It was at this point that Stoate made a fatal error of judgement; he told Gonall to organise it. In the meantime, Stoate had his own series of rather unpleasant interviews with angry parents, angry Governors, and probing journalists, not to mention Lartington who was incandescent. To illustrate the problems that were besetting the school, there was a terrible fight at lunchtime in which the Head Boy was attacked and badly beaten up. It required a good number of staff to break the fight up, and the services of the casualty department at the Dominican.

Stoate did not emerge from his office except to take luncheon in the Old Dining Room. Even there nobody talked to him, or even took any notice of him, except once to berate him about how many more own

goals he was going to score. Even an excellent Pinot Noir did not relieve the gloom as he remained under siege in his office, with only his farting computer for company. Carter-Barr rang. Just to hear a voice that was not shouting, or whining was a relief. “I’m afraid that you have lost the services of Piers, Dunstan. He has been charged with several offences and has just appeared before Tanswold Magistrates. They have decided that there is a case to answer, and he has been committed to trial. He is out on bail, but one of the conditions is that he does not come within twenty kilometres of Tanswold St Mary, nor should he talk to anyone at Tanswold School.”

“When’s the trial going to be?”

“No date set at the moment.”

“Where’s Piers at the moment?”

“He’s been released on bail. He’s on a train heading towards London. He’s going back to the family pile in Berkshire.”

“Who’s putting up the bail?”

“The Tanswold School Trust, as his employer.”

“What? How much is it?”

“Fifty thousand pounds. I have paid fifty thousand into the court, and I need the Tanswold School Trust to reimburse me as soon as possible. Could you ask Lartington to deposit it in my office as soon as he can?”

“Do you mean to tell me that you have taken out bail on our behalf without consulting us?”

“We’ve always done it like that before,” said Carter-Barr defensively. Stoaate thought back to when this had happened before. It had been some years when the school was awash with money, so it did not matter. In those days the Tanswold School Trust was almost certainly bound to win its cases.

“Where do you think we are going to get that money from?” Stoaate spluttered. “If you think that I am going to Lartington and ask him for a cheque for fifty thousand pounds, you can think again.”

“I shall be charging the trust interest at one percent a day,” said Carter-Barr with the arrogance of a man assured of getting his money by

fair means or foul. “One percent of fifty thousand is five hundred pounds. I would suggest that if you want me to continue working for you, that you deposit the money in my office. If not, I shall move to have the debt realised from the assets of The Tanswold School Trust.”

“I will transfer you to Lartington and I don’t guarantee anything,” Stoate sighed. He felt like a very large rat in a very tiny corner, but like a rat he would fight his way out by fair means or foul. Stoate had had some experience in fighting dirty, very dirty indeed. To help things along, Stoate helped himself to yet another brandy, strictly for medicinal purposes.

While Stoate was taking his medicine, Gonall was contemplating how he could give the Old Fart a taste of his own medicine. From his office, he could hear Lartington shouting down the phone telling the caller that there was no way that fifty thousand pounds could be found that day. There was a pause before Lartington could be heard coming out with terms like “usury”, “loan shark”, and “rip-off”. A door slammed, and a few moments later another door slammed and Lartington’s voice could be heard again. This time Gonall could hear a voice responding, that of the Old DOLT, who was giving as good as he got.

While Gonall was waiting for the playground pugilists to come up to be chastened, he gave more thought about how to get rid of the Old Fart. If the pugilists heard Stoate and Lartington discussing the import of Carter-Barr’s telephone call, they would be forgiven for thinking that their elders and betters were doing the same as they had done an hour before. Although he felt he could rely on Lartington’s support, as Lartington had complained vociferously that Stoate was a major liability, that support did not seem to be so forthcoming from the majority of the Governing Body. Gonall had canvassed opinion by phone that weekend and had been disappointed to find out that although they considered Stoate’s handling of the current crisis was highly erratic; he still retained the qualified support of the majority. If Gonall were going to get rid of the Old Fart, the means would have to be foul.

Gonall’s plan started to crystallise more during the emergency parents’ meeting that evening. It was a bad-tempered affair, with Stoate

starting off with a rather intemperate statement, “As you will be aware, Tanswold School is going through a crisis unparalleled in its history. I shall outline the *causas belli*...”

John Gonall sat wondering what his boss meant by cow’s arse belly. Gonall had heard about the printed material, but surely not even the rotund Stoate was going to give the parents a lecture about the filth found in the basement of the Hermitage? Stoate continued, “There have been a number of unfortunate incidents that have resulted in unparalleled bad publicity, which has done the school no favours. I am, to say the least, disappointed and not a little angry that so many people have seen fit to go to the press to wash our dirty linen in public. As things settle down, I shall investigate where the weaknesses lie and take resolute action, whether it is against staff, boys, or parents.”

A discontented murmur rippled across the hall, but Stoate continued, “Yes. I do not consider that some parents have any conception of loyalty. At one time I could count on it that parents should back the school whatever the difficulties there may be, and I still consider that support to be mandatory. What kind of example are you setting when we are trying to support the norms of tradition, discipline, and responsibility?”

“Why don’t you resign?” yelled a voice from the back.

“I have no intention of resigning. I shall continue to be Headmaster, regardless of the difficulties the school faces. I founded this school and I do not intend to be hounded out of my school by the actions of whining malcontents and the gutter press.”

“Rubbish! The school was founded by Mr Kent,” yelled another voice. “You were put in there by Sir Kenneth Rounce and his cronies. Now they are being investigated for all sorts of sleaze. And you represent that sleaze. You should go!”

“Why do we have to pay extra, a thousand pounds extra, to cover your incompetence, Mr Stoate?” shouted another voice. Stoate was not handling the meeting well. Just like his response to the crises of the previous couple of weeks, he lashed out randomly. “You pay us a pittance to run this school,” he shouted.

A gasp, a belch, of outrage rose from the audience. “Yes,” shouted Stoate, “a mere pittance! You have been getting good value from us.”

“Like drugs and pornography?” shouted another voice, “Not to mention food poisoning that killed one of the pupils?”

“Can we have some leadership in this crisis, not just passing the buck?” shouted another voice.

“What the hell do you think?” shouted Stoate. “I am providing particularly resolute leadership, the kind that is needed. No one else is capable, certainly not on my staff!”

“You don’t sound particularly resolute,” shouted another voice. “You let those druggies back in. You just told them not to be naughty boys. That doesn’t sound like firm action to me. I’m not having my child mixing with them!”

“Get him out of here,” shouted Stoate. “The school will be better off without him!”

“It would be better without you, mate,” yelled another voice. “You’re not even *compos mentis*. You’re not fit to lead a knacker’s yard!”

“I am totally *compos mentis*,” Stoate shouted back. “You’re the one who’s mental.”

As the meeting degenerated further into infantile accusation and counteraccusation, Gonall sat impassively, working out what compost mental was. He agreed with Stoate. The Old Fart’s mental had certainly composted several years ago, and the support from parents was evaporating like so much steam from the compost heap. He decided immediately that he would seize control of the school. The CCF was due to go on exercise that Thursday. Gonall was having difficulty in hiring buses to take them on a field day; the school was known to be financially rocky, and the behaviour of the boys had given Tanswold School a bad name in the community. Also, Stoate’s secretary, the redoubtable Eileen was off work, recovering from an operation. The coincidence of signs led Gonall to suppose that his plan would come off, and he basked in the glow of imagining himself as Headmaster of the academic hothouse of Mid Yorkshire.

Chapter 11

Dunstan Stoate was not the only one to feel besieged in his office. Although his sense of self-importance would have prevented him from saying so, Stoate actually shared a great deal in common with Karen Purslove, Principal of the Phoenix Community College on the Canterill Farm Estate in Carlsborough. After a serious assault on a member of her staff, she had gone on public record as stating that, like many other miserable incidents that had happened in her school, this one was brought about by bad teaching. No, it was against college policy to expel the pupils concerned. The member of staff would be assessed for his competence. It was all brought about by a failure to understand the position of the students, and that the teacher concerned had not followed college policy in dealing with disciplinary situations with sympathetic understanding.

The response to this and other bullying mismanagement had led to such bad feeling in the staffroom in the Phoenix Community College that at break on Monday, a unanimous vote of no confidence in Karen Purslove had been taken and that the staff would take immediate strike action. The pupils were turned out of the school before they razed it to the ground, and a noisy demonstration took place in the front of the school. Purslove's response was to barricade herself in *The Lubyanka* and to write individualised letters of dismissal to every member of staff, whether on strike or not.

The problems caused by Purslove's subsequent actions led to extensive coverage in the local and national news. The Secretary of State for Education was livid when he heard the story and ordered the instant closure of the school for ten school days. Intense pressure was placed on Ms Purslove to resign, which she initially refused to do. Indeed, she refused entry to the inspectors until they eventually forced their way in. They tore apart the management of the school with a savagery that was breath-taking, recommending the instant dismissal of Karen Purslove and her senior staff. Purslove jumped before she was pushed.

The many articles published about Purslove's problems did not pass by unnoticed by the staff at Tanswold School. In the staffroom in The Hermitage, there was talk of doing the same to get rid of Stoate. Now that d'Arsehole was well out of the way, staff could talk freely without the Gestapo picking up tittle-tattle and passing it on to the Director of Learning and Teaching. These conversations stopped when Gonall entered the room; it was like a blast from a February gale, and he would glare at them before going back to his office. It had occurred even to Gonall's limited sensitivity that if the staff did get rid of Stoate, they would not exactly welcome him as Headmaster. So, as he planned the overthrow of Dunstan Stoate, he would also get rid of a good number of staff that he considered dead legs.

On the Wednesday, having excused his force from lessons, Gonall ordered the CCF to parade. Unlike his predecessors, Gonall had converted the CCF into a body that vaguely resembled soldiers on parade and with a fair semblance to military unison as they marched. After an hour's square bashing, Gonall marched his force to the lecture theatre to brief them on the next day's field day activities.

"In tomorrow's exercise, we are going to do a task that is based on The Hermitage. You are going to assume that The Hermitage is the Headquarters of the Enemy. Your brief is to capture the enemy general. You are to seize him from his office and hold him under guard. Mr Stoate has agreed to act as the enemy general. Several of the general's most faithful lieutenants will be around the enemy's headquarters and you will also pick them up at various times in the day. You will detain the enemy general in the broom cupboard next to the rear entrance to The Hermitage, and his staff you will detain in the cellars. I have arranged that you have access to the cellars and each patrol leader will have a key, which I shall issue.

"To make the exercise more realistic, The Hermitage will be defended by the RAF section and the Sea Cadets. You will be issued with paintball weapons as will the RAF section and Sea Cadets. If you are hit by a paintball, you are out, injured or dead, depending on where you are hit. If you are hit in the heart or the head, you are assumed to have been shot dead. (It ran through several heads that this was not necessarily the case. A bullet through Gonad's head would make no

difference as there was nothing up there. Nor would a bullet in his heart, as he did not have one.)

“You will set off from the other side of the river, and you will have to cross using the canoes under fire. You will have to return the fire to ensure the success of the operation. You have the advantage that there are many more of you than the RAF section and the Sea Cadets. You will storm The Hermitage and capture the house and the enemy general from his office. Do not be surprised that he does not come quietly. Mr Stoate is a big man, and he will need some subduing. Therefore, the orders of Bravo Patrol are to seize Mr Stoate. I have given them the job as they are physically large, but the rest of you are to back them up.

“Next, you are to pick up the rest of the general’s staff. I will give a list of names to each patrol leader. Once all the opposition has been mopped up, you will take Mr Stoate out to the school gates. There will be defensive fire, and you must prevent him from being hit. The enemy general is more use alive than dead. You will finally hand him over to Foxtrot Patrol who will take him away in the Land Rover and that is the end of the exercise.”

There was a buzz of excitement in the room as never before had the CCF been issued with weapons of any sort and this sounded like fun. Some wags suggested that Gonall would have liked to use live ammunition to make the exercise more realistic, but did not fancy the results, which would have been multiple murder charges. Gonall certainly would have liked to use real weapons with blanks, but the army was now rather prickly about that sort of thing, and there might well have been objections from the neighbours. It was a good substitute to use paintball weapons, loaned by a Tanswold Old Boy who ran a paintball park for corporate team building, although it had occurred to nobody about how to clear up the mess afterwards. Gonall swore his force to secrecy.

The involvement of Stoate as the enemy general was such a well-kept secret that even Stoate did not know about it. He knew that there was going to be a field day in the grounds of The Hermitage. It made a change and was the perfect antidote to all the trouble that had beset him in the previous weeks and months. It was good clean stuff, getting boys

to grow up to be real men. The paintball guns seemed a jolly good wheeze as well. As a result, he thought there was nothing strange as he saw cadets taking field radios on their backs and rather wished that he could share in their adventure. Hopefully, they would trample all those damned daffodils that had not been cut down despite his orders; being in flower, they were advertising his birth out of wedlock to every passing aeroplane.

Once Stoate was in his office, he was rudely reminded why he longed for adventure outside. Phone calls from whinging parents and journalists put him into a thoroughly bad temper and in need of a good brandy. As the brandy got to work, he imagined himself being with the boys on the exercise, but at no time did he realise that within the hour, his participation would be for real. He would get an adventure, but not quite the one he was expecting.

The exercise began on the dot at ten hundred hours. Each patrol called in with its call sign. Fortunately, the contents of the messages were not being broadcast as the call signs had not changed since the farce of Speech Day. Not that Gonall cared a jot. “Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo to Tango Whiskey Alpha Tango. Over?”

“Come in Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo. Over.”

“In position ready to go. Over.”

“Roger. Over and Out.”

Up in the attic the main radio crackled out, “Charlie Uniform November Tango to control. Zombies on other side of river. Send reinforcements!”

“Roger, over and out”

A klaxon sounded and the defenders rushed to the bushes along the riverbank as the attack commenced. There were several machinegun nests each equipped with a rapid-fire paintball gun that could get through a litre of acrylic paint in two minutes. The battle opened with a mortar barrage that lobbed balloons full of paint across the river. Several boys were splattered with yellow paint, rendering them, according to the rules, *hors de combat*. The trees above the riverbank were dripping yellow paint when the first canoeists crossed the river, paint-guns blazing.

Unfortunately, the artillery had not done a particularly good softening up job, and the defensive fire was heavy. The sluggish waters became stained bright green, sparking off a pollution scare downstream.

Hand-to-hand combat was engaged on the riverbank with a ferocity that would have made Brigadier Gunston-Bunn proud to be British. Several defenders ended up in the river, while the others were so splattered in yellow paint that their uniforms were ruined. The “dead” and “injured” were no longer part of the game and retreated to enjoy some cans of lager and alcopop that had been stored under the boundary hedge. The rest of the defenders, heavily outnumbered gave a braver fight than Gonall had intended. They retreated firing across the parade ground behind the Science and Technology block, which became the scene of some intense urban warfare. A number of paint grenades were hurled through the windows, with the result that pristine science laboratories were ruined. Peter Brett’s office was commandeered, and he looked quite fetching with his bald head covered in green and yellow spots.

Almost as rapidly as it had started, the battle of the Science and Technology Block ended with the defenders falling back in an organised retreat towards The Hermitage. Collateral damage and casualties occurred in the form of several wrecked school uniforms belonging to non-combatants. A desperate battle was joined centred on Stoate’s Volvo. Stoate was alerted to the battle when several shots hit his window, the yellow paint streaming in runnels down the glass. He noticed a psychedelic looking car parked on the drive. His first reaction was to think who the hell had parked that ghastly looking contraption in his reserved spot. It had a familiar shape and the personalised number DS 22... The car had certainly not been painted with psychedelic green and yellow spots when he had parked it there, but sombre silver. He lunged out of his office, forgetting his status and dignity as Headmaster, yelling “Stop that! That’s my fucking car! I’ll murder you!”

Stoate did not get much further than the front door, when a blob of yellow paint caught him full square in the chest. (Gonall would not have been very pleased, as that would have suggested the death of the enemy general. Useful intelligence was not easy to get out of dead enemy generals.) At the same time the defenders retreated into the front door, knocking him flat and slamming the door behind them. Immediately

Stoate was leapt on by Bravo Patrol who trussed him up like a chicken, but not without a fight, for Stoate was a big man, and landed three of the first fifteen forwards a punch that they would never forget. They had been briefed that Stoate would come reasonably quietly and had not expected this response.

The defenders had retreated into the hall and had taken up strategic positions. The attackers kicked down the front door, bursting in dragging their quarry like a heavy sack of potatoes, and with as much ceremony. Immediately, all hell broke loose with paint balls flying all over the place, splattering the walls to give them a psychedelic make-over in the same way as had happened to the Headmaster's Volvo. A portrait of Arthur Draycott was not enhanced by a similar treatment. The Financial Director, Mr Lartington, came out of his office to see what the commotion was and was immediately caught in the crossfire. He would have been riddled with bullets, but instead retreated into his office, the air blue with oaths, and his previously blue suit taking on the psychedelic yellow and green. Every metre of the hall was fought for. Eventually the defenders were overcome by sheer firepower and retreated from the rear entrance. With as little compunction as a sack of potatoes, Dunstan Stoate, Founding Headmaster of Tanswold School, was dumped in the broom cupboard by the rear entrance and Bravo Patrol reported the target captured.

Gonall who was in his CCF uniform, trotted upstairs to the gents, immediately got changed into his more customary trousers and sports blazer, before making his way downstairs. He went outside and set off a thunder-flash that signified the end of the morning's exercise. The battle, fought with enthusiasm and not a little ferocity, ceased immediately and the paint splattered boys joined the queue for lunch in Stoate Hall. Gonall went into The Hermitage and installed himself as Headmaster. His first action was to call Lartington to his office. After a while, Gonall was annoyed by Lartington's nonappearance and rang again, "Mr Lartington, why are you not at my office?"

"I was, Mr Gonall, but you were not in. I have better things to do than go on wild goose chases."

"I want you in the Headmaster's office," snapped Gonall whose knowledge of elementary good manners was restricted.

Presently, Lartington was in the Headmaster's Office looking puzzled. He was still wiping the paint from his face and jacket. "Why are you seeing me here, Mr Gonall?" he asked. "Can't you see the mess my suit's in, caused by your CCF drumheads? And look at the state of the hall. It will have to be completely redecorated."

"I am now the Headmaster," Gonall replied contemptuously, brushing aside Lartington's objections and annoyed that somebody should have asked such a daft question.

"Nobody told me that. As far as I am concerned, Mr Stoate is Director of Learning and Teaching until his replacement has been found."

"His replacement has been found. I am his replacement," replied Gonall full of his own self-importance. "I am the Headmaster, not that stupid title that you gave to Mr Stoate. Now I want you to institute Mr Stoate's pension and adjust my salary to the appropriate points. I also want you to release a press statement explaining that I am now Headmaster, and that Mr Stoate has taken retirement. And you are to send a circular to the parents to the same effect. I have here a list of staff whose contracts I want you to terminate at the end of the academic year. I shall be seeing the staff concerned later in the day. Do you understand?"

"No, I do not understand, Mr Gonall. Have you been formally appointed? Have the Governors approved your appointment?"

Gonall started to get angry. "Mr Lartington, I am not asking you to understand my instructions, I am telling you to do them. Now I shall repeat my instructions in words of one syllable, and I will expect you to carry them out instantly and to the letter. If you wish to continue working here, you will have done them completely and with no further question. Do you wish me to repeat my instruction?"

"You realise that if you push me out as you suggest, Doberman and Pinscher will pull the plug out on you, and I will institute liquidation proceedings. Before I do or do not do anything, I am going home to have a bath and get changed."

"You will do no such thing," snapped Gonall who hated having his instructions challenged in such a way. Gonall went out of his office and found four air cadets gawping at the smashed front door. "Fall in!"

he shouted in his best parade ground style, “Attention! You are to escort Mr Lartington to his office and keep him there. Understood?”

The four boys understood and marched Lartington back to his office. Two stood in the doorway, paintball guns at the ready, while the other two, with commendable initiative, went round to the back of The Hermitage and stood guard by the bow window of Lartington’s office to ensure that he did not bail out that way.

Inside the office, Lartington was beside himself with rage, and his immediate reaction was to call the police. He decided against that, but he would ring Doberman and Pinscher instead, only to find that his plan was thwarted by Gonall who had typed in some codes to cut off his telephone. To his disgust, the batteries on his mobile had gone flat.

Putting on his gown, Gonall swaggered over to the staff room. Earlier in the day, Gonall had ordered the staff to attend an emergency staff meeting at lunchtime, and they were there waiting with little expectation. Like a parody of Napoleon, Gonall stood up and addressed the staff, “I have called you here to make an important announcement to you. I am now the Headmaster, and Mr Stoate is taking immediate retirement. There are going to be changes as a result of my taking up of this position. Mr Stoate has allowed things to become slack, and I am going to change that. There is going to be tight discipline to start with, and it begins with you. There are still too many staff who cannot maintain effective discipline in lessons and such staff will be weeded out. I am not going to tolerate passengers in this school, and I shall be starting a review of which staff I shall be retaining, and those that I shall not. I shall be sending for staff at various points in the afternoon.

“This school is going to become an academic institution of the stature of Leeds Grammar School, and to achieve that, I shall be appointing excellent teaching staff instead of the dead-legs that I shall be weeding out. Advertisements will be appearing in the educational press in the next few weeks. I shall be placing you all on short term contracts so that when you lose your efficiency, you will move out of the way for somebody else. None of you are indispensable, and the school can get on just as well without you...”

Gonall continued his insulting peroration for another twenty minutes. A total lack of sensitivity, humanity, or humour were a few of

Gonall's many failings and the growing outrage in the staff room flowed over him unnoticed.

A growing sense of outrage was Dunstan Stoate's predominant emotion as he remained captive in the broom cupboard. He had been dumped there without the respect due to a Headmaster, and his nose was rather too close to a mop that had not been cleaned out properly. Although he had longed for adventure, he had not expected adventure in this form. If it had happened to someone else, it would have been a jolly good rippin' yarn. But it had happened to him and by Jove he would make everyone responsible suffer. Although he had been tied up, he felt the rope give a little. The tying of knots had never been a strong point of Bravo Patrol and with a little effort, Stoate managed to release his hands. Soon he was unpicking the other knots; or rather they unpicked themselves for him. The hardest part was unpicking the knot around his ankles, which took him twenty minutes. He looked for a way to get out. As he did so he heard two boys walking past, and one said, "Do you know that Gonad's Headmaster? He turned Stoate the DOLT out of his office."

"Christ! You can't be serious!"

"I am. He's telling the teachers to bow down and worship him."

"If Gonad's Headmaster, I'm going to leave. Biggles is bad enough, but Gonad will be unbearable."

Picking locks was something Stoate had never tried. For all his many faults, Stoate had never been a thief. His attempts at unlocking the door were futile. Stoate was determined to get control back on what was rightly his, and this would require desperate action. This part of The Hermitage was not built to quite the quality of the main part of the house. It had been the servants' quarters and had been fitted out to a lower specification. The broom cupboard door was pitch pine and Stoate calculated that a couple of hearty kicks would break the lock.

It took a good number of hearty kicks and finally the door burst open in a crash of splintering wood. The commotion had given the two cadets who had been detailed to guard the door plenty of time to radio the alarm, "Tango Uniform Romeo Delta to Control, target is escaping! Come in Control! Come in Control! Do you read me? Over? Come in

Control! Target is escaping! Where the bloody hell are you?" As the situation got more desperate the more the radio discipline broke down.

As Stoate emerged from the shattered door, the two boys confronted him with their paintball guns only to be chopped down ferociously so that they lay on the floor like stranded fish. Stoate lunged up the corridor, into the hall, ignoring the boys detailed to guard Lartington. He could hear Gonall haranguing the staff and he lunged towards the staff room door to find it locked. Furiously he started to bang loudly on the door, shouting, "Gonall! You mutinous little turd! Open the fucking door! You come out and fight me for this!"

Gonall ploughed on heedless of the row from outside. He could see Bravo Patrol assembling outside on the drive. He opened the window and yelled at them, "What the hell are you nancy boys up to? The target has escaped. Go and get him! MOVE!"

There was a scuffle in the hall as all ten of Bravo Patrol overpowered Stoate. He fought back ferociously and matched the shiners that the prop forwards had got earlier. Suddenly he went limp, and the smallest of the patrol removed a pad of a strong-smelling fluid from Stoate's face.

"What's that, Morrell? It smells like rocket fuel!"

"I got it from the Chemistry Department," Morrell replied. He produced a syringe and with surprising skill he injected its contents into Stoate's arm.

"What have you done now?"

"My dad's a vet. It's an anaesthetic that he uses on cattle. I've scaled down the dose, of course. I don't think we'll get any more trouble out of Biggles today. I saw it on telly a couple of nights ago. They got the enemy general, just like we're meant to be doing, and drugged him. I thought it would be more realistic."

Stoate lay motionless on the floor, and Bravo Patrol, taking a belt and braces approach to the matter started to tie him up. Charles Burke, whose father ran a chain of butcher's shops, tied him up skilfully like a joint ready to go in the oven. They dragged the limp form to the Staff Room and left him by the door, not thinking that people might trip up over the recumbent heap. The thunder-flash signalling the end of lunch

sounded, and all cadets who were not *hors de combat* were expected to parade to be given their Part Two orders.

Those who were *hors de combat* had retired to the boundary hedge where they had enjoyed a good amount of lager and alcopop. The party supplies had run out and there had been no miracle in which water had been turned into more lager. Instead, the more sober in the group came rapidly to a collective decision that they would have some more fun and rejoin the battle as reinforcements for the defenders. Parked on the parade ground behind the Science and Technology Block was a small trailer in which they found replenishment for their paint and gas cartridges.

The less sober remained *hors de combat*, as Gonall had intended.

As he paraded his troops in front of The Hermitage, Gonall gave his Part Two orders. He gave each patrol leader one targeted member of staff, and their orders to store the captured staff in the cellars. The enemy general would be carried out to the gates where Foxtrot Patrol would be waiting in the Land Rover. There would be a certain amount of defensive fire. He sounded a second thunder-flash to restart the exercise.

Gonall did not reckon on a counterattack that was being planned by the reinforcements to the defending force. It was an initiative of which any British Army officer would have been proud. Or even would have won the VC. Nor did he reckon on his ex-boss having been drugged with veterinary grade anaesthetic. Bravo Patrol slipped back into the staff room to collect their load. Unlike the previous occasion their burden had not moved, let alone broken down a door and escaped. In fact, it looked like a neatly wrapped parcel dumped by a careless deliveryman. The patrol went up to the heap and realised that it hadn't moved at all. "Morrell, what did you inject into him?" asked Charles Burke.

"I told you Charlie, some stuff I borrowed off my dad."

"You know what you've done? You've killed him."

"No, I haven't. I have put him to sleep."

"You've put him down, you prat!"

"Oh shit!" replied Morrell as he considered the legal implications of having put down his Headmaster. The immediate implications seemed to be that Mr Gonall would not be very pleased, as he had explained that

dead enemy generals were not much use to intelligence. His father would also not be too pleased as he had helped himself to some Nembutal without permission. There was also the faint possibility intruding into his mind that he might be detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure for the manslaughter of Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate. He put his head to Stoate's chest and was somewhat relieved that there was still a heartbeat and evidence of respiration. "There is a heartbeat there, Burke, and it seems steady."

"I didn't think that Biggles ever had a heart, let alone one that beats," chipped in another member of Bravo Patrol.

"He's got more of a heart than Gonad, and certainly more brain."

"That's not difficult. Gonad's double thick; he's brain dead."

"You ought to have heard Biggles this morning. He was shouting blue murder at Gonad. I think it was something to do with this exercise. Teachers shouldn't use language like that."

"Would you have liked to have been tied up and thrown in the broom cupboard?"

"He was meant to know about it. Didn't Gonad tell him?"

"From the fight he put up I don't think so. I don't think he wanted to play. I certainly don't think he wanted you to put him down, Morrell!"

"I didn't put him down. He's just asleep. Sleep on little Dunstan! Come on, shift your fat carcass!"

"That's not very respectful to the Headmaster."

"He's out cold. He won't hear a thing. He's too thick to remember anyhow. Makko said he had the intellect of a pheasant. Pheasants are the birdbrains of the bird world."

"We'd better get him out to the Land Rover."

Stoate was a big man, and since the initial attempts to shift him were discoordinated, they resulted in Stoate being dropped onto the floor like a sack of flour. Another member of the patrol who was a rower chipped in, "Pick it up like we used to pick up the boat. Spread yourselves round... Hands on... All together... Lift!"

"Turn it over towards the river," chipped in another, who was well versed in the drill to handle a racing shell.

“We need to be covered. How can we shoot when we’re carrying this lump of useless dead-weight? It weighs a tonne!”

“Tango Whiskey Alpha Tango to Charlie Uniform November Tango. Over?”

“Come in Tango Whiskey Alpha Tango. Over”

“We are taking the target to Foxtrot. We need covering fire. We will have to go the front way. Over”

“Why not the back? Over.”

“The target is anaesthetised. We have one hundred and twenty kilos of useless dead-weight. It won’t come on its own. Rendezvous at the staff room. Over.”

“Roger. Over and out.”

Charlie Patrol were as good as their word. After a brief fire fight, in which Lartington’s Mercedes ended up with several paint splats on its bonnet, Charlie Patrol made their rendezvous with Bravo Patrol. They covered Bravo Patrol as they carried Stoate out through the wrecked front door. It seemed suspiciously quiet as they rounded the side of The Hermitage and onto the drive. There were a couple of pot-shots which were wild and merely marked the drive. Quickly they hustled their load up the drive until they came to the bushes near the gates. Neither they nor Gonall had considered the possibility of the counterattack from the reinforcements. Without warning they were in the middle of an ambush, and they dived for cover, their load ending up in the brambles.

The firefight was like the ones in the morning, brief and ferocious, and the counter-attackers fell back to regroup. They dragged Stoate quickly from the bushes. With his head held high, and his feet even higher, Dunstan Stoate, Founding Headmaster of Tanswold School, was bundled over the closed wrought-iron gates and into the waiting Land Rover. Foxtrot Patrol drove him off to Quarmby Aerodrome, radioing Gonall as they did so.

Although Gonall was satisfied at the successful conclusion of the first part of the Exercise, it could not be said that the second half was going to plan. It had been intended that the capture of the lieutenants (the dead leg staff Gonall wanted to get rid of) would be an operation of surgical precision. It ended up as butchery. Firstly, the defenders had

not been mopped up as effectively as they should have been. Secondly, there was the counterattack that was initially most effective. Gonall's squad had to fall back to defensive positions and there were firefights along the corridors of all the classroom blocks. The mopping up operation was going to be more literal, requiring the services of an army of professional cleaners and decorators. The counterattack was repulsed by sheer weight of numbers but took at least an hour. The capture of the lieutenants took place. The lust for battle had overcome the greater sensibilities of many of the combatants, and in several cases, the attackers burst into lessons firing indiscriminately at their targets and their pupils. Like the Headmaster, the enemy lieutenants had not been briefed to come quietly, and many of them, not surprisingly, objected vociferously to being covered in bright paint, and being bundled down to the cellars. They went even less on being locked in the cellars that contained the school's wine supply. There were padlocked doors protecting it.

Dunstan Stoate did not go a great deal on his participation in the adventure. Simon Morrell was wrong in his assertion that Stoate would not hear a thing. As Stoate was a big man, he was quite difficult to anaesthetise, a fact that his doctors had found out some years before when he had had a minor operation. Although unable to move, Stoate had heard everything that had been said. He agreed with the notion that Gonall was double thick; nobody could dispute that. He resented having his intellect compared to a pheasant, therefore being classified with Gonall. As for fat carcasses, he did not like being called one hundred and twenty kilograms of useless deadweight or being carried like a boat. He could feel the bruises where he had been dropped, and the prickles from the brambles. When he got out of this mess, he would murder Bravo Patrol with his bare hands, especially that little prat Morrell with his veterinary anaesthetic. As for the author of his unwelcome adventure, John Gonall, he would tear the little turd limb from limb.

He was starting to come round as the Land Rover pulled into Quarmby aerodrome. Gonall had arranged with the staff at the aerodrome that Stoate should be deposited by his aeroplane, and an armchair had been arranged. Foxtrot Patrol had been led to expect that the Headmaster would be loaded into the Land Rover more willingly.

They had been genuinely surprised that it appeared that he had been sedated and was delivered to them in such an undignified manner. With more intelligence than the rest of the entire CCF put together, they realised that the waking Stoate would associate them with his discomfort. One of them had seen a wildlife programme in which a bear had been sedated to be moved to a new territory. It had woken up prematurely and was not exactly grateful to its handlers. The waking Headmaster would be a bear with a very sore head. They raced to the hangar, placed him in the armchair that had been positioned next to the little plane, and cut the string that tied him together. As soon as they had done this, they abandoned Stoate like a dangerous animal and drove off.

Stoate found that he could move his legs and was gradually regaining his faculties. He felt sick, battered, and had a headache that reminded him of the hangover that he had had after his twenty-fifth birthday party in the Officers' Mess at RAF Finningley. Within a couple of minutes, he recognised where he was. The little *Diamond Katana* was a welcome sight to his sore eyes. He would have enjoyed flying it to The Hermitage and bombing Gonall with unmentionable material. There were strict rules about flying in that state. Instead, he staggered over to the air traffic controller's office and asked Geoff to call the police.

In the ATC's office Geoff was quite shocked to see Dunstan's state and settled him into an armchair. Geoff and Dunstan were about the same age and had known each other from their RAF days. Geoff enjoyed his job among the planes and the aviators. He especially enjoyed Dunstan's company as the latter could tell a really good yarn or two, especially with a good stiff Hock inside him. The yarn that Dunstan was spinning now made Geoff shudder, and he was only too glad to have called the police. Dunstan clearly was shaken, and Geoff did his best to steady his friend's nerves.

Presently two policemen climbed up into the office and did not have to be convinced about the seriousness of Stoate's condition. They radioed the police station down in Tanswold to get along to see what was happening. An ambulance was on its way to take Stoate to the Dominican where his bruises were patched up and he was kept under observation overnight. The doctors were appalled to hear that he had been injected with veterinary grade Nembutal and told Stoate that he had

had a pretty close shave and that he should make a formal complaint to the police.

At Tanswold, a couple of officers made their way along to The Hermitage to see what was going on. They only got as far as the gate, which they found barred and heavily defended. The defenders had re-tanked on lager and alcopop and thought that the two men in uniform were part of the exercise and were going to join in the fun. Constables Oates and Apps saw little of what was going on as their windscreen got covered in a shower of paintballs, and soon their uniforms were covered from head to toe. Livid, they called reinforcements that were not only not *hors de combat*, but also well experienced in the kind of combat normally found on the Canterill Farm Estate. It occurred also to one or two befuddled minds that perhaps they should make themselves scarce and join battle elsewhere.

The battle was so intense and enjoyable that nobody noticed the sirens of two police minibuses full of constables in full riot gear as they sped down Tanswold High Street. A heavy-duty Land Rover was used to smash the gates down and the three vehicles sped up the drive to The Hermitage. It was unfortunate that a short skirmish took place just where the police vehicles had pulled up. Immediately the vans started to take on the psychedelic appearance of the other vehicles parked by The Hermitage and the officers in full riot gear piled out of the vans. Many of the paintball soldiers thought that these people had come to join in the fun. They became a legitimate target, although nobody was quite sure which side they were on. The use of plastic shields seemed a bit sissy though. The police uniforms adopted the colour scheme of the rest of the place, a livid yellow and green. The new people seemed to be getting out their paintball guns, except that these looked different. There was one warning shot aimed at an empty space. Instead of a splat of paint, a trail of white smoke drifted away from where the CS gas shell had landed.

A terrible silence descended as the combatants realised who the new people were. The sergeant spoke through his loudhailer, "This is the police. Stop what you are doing now. Put your weapons down. Do it now. Come down quietly. Do it now. Line up in front of the vans. Do it now."

Gonall had been so busy establishing himself as Headmaster that he had paid little attention to the exercise that had been rapidly going out of control outside. It was only when he looked at his watch that he realised that things had overrun. He went outside to detonate the thunder-flash to signal the end of the exercise. It all seemed rather quiet, and he noticed that all the boys were lined up, as if ready to go on parade. Instead of his cadet sergeant doing the job, it was a police sergeant, and Gonall went over to demand what the hell was going on, and how dare the sergeant undermine his authority. The sergeant demanded who was in charge; Gonall announced that he was now Headmaster. As the constables walked around the grounds of The Hermitage, they saw for themselves the fallout from the day's exercise, including a number of seriously drunken boys, and yet more evidence of drugs. As they were walking through The Hermitage, two constables heard the calls for help, and discovered the lieutenants imprisoned in the wine cellar. Gonall was initially interviewed in his office and was taken down under caution to Tanswold Police Station. There, after further investigation, he was charged with initiating a serious affray, common assault, assault with intent, criminal damage, and false imprisonment of Crispin Lartington, Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate and several others against their wills. The members of Bravo Patrol were charged with assault leading to actual bodily harm. Simon Morrell was charged with assaulting Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate with intent by recklessly injecting him with a noxious substance, namely five cubic centimetres of veterinary grade Nembutal. The boys were released on police bail while Gonall was remanded in police custody to appear at Tanswold Magistrates' Court the following Monday.

Since there was now no effective senior management at the school (Gonall being in custody, d'Arcy-Fairfax being on bail, and Stoate being in hospital) Lartington found himself in charge. He had not intended to be at the school at all at the end of that week, but he had had to stay at his desk to deal with the fallout from the previous crisis. Doberman and Pinscher had become very prickly, and he did not know what he would say to them about this latest fiasco.

Of more immediate worry was the state of the school, glistening as it was in splats of yellow and green acrylic paint. The front door to

The Hermitage was smashed, and that would take a specialist bespoke joiner to mend it. The hall was a disgrace, and would need complete redecoration, as would many of the corridors and rooms throughout the school. The defaced portrait of Arthur Draycott would need specialist restoration. Several priceless antiques would need stripping and French polishing. The white marble floors of the downstairs of The Hermitage, laid in the eighteenth century, would need careful restoration. As for the damage outside, The Hermitage would have to be completely repainted, and they would never get the mess off the brickwork of the classroom blocks or Stoate Hall. A good number of cars would have to be resprayed, including Lartington's own, notwithstanding the damage done to several vehicles belonging to the Mid Yorkshire Constabulary, and a considerable number of police uniforms. Lartington preferred not to think of the bills that would land on his desk.

Like every bit of bad publicity surrounding Tanswold School, the news of the Gonall *putsch* got out quickly. It was on the local radio news that evening, and the following day the national dailies had run the story under headlines such as *Coup d'ecole at Blunderhouse Hall*.

Stoate was expecting work to be difficult when he arrived back at The Hermitage on Monday morning. The first thing that he did was to do a tour of inspection of the school with Lartington and was appalled at what he found. The Front Door of The Hermitage had been secured, but Lartington informed him that it would cost twelve hundred pounds to repair. He had not been able to get office cleaners at such short notice, and the paint had now dried, so that it would be that much more difficult to remove. There was an awful lot of it around the place, and the brick classroom blocks, the design of which Stoate had used his talent as an amateur architect, were in a terrible state. Either they would have to be painted, which would ruin the design, or be covered with a rapidly growing climbing plant. Even if it were rapidly growing, the plant would take some time to cover the mess.

"This is all we need," Stoate grumbled. "How much will it cost to clean up?"

"I honestly don't know, but a lot more now that the paint has dried. We need to paint the outside of The Hermitage completely and

that will be at least one hundred thousand. Probably the same for redecorating the inside and getting the stuff off the floors. We will have to recover all the floors in the classroom blocks. I don't know where we will get the money. We can hardly afford office cleaners at the moment."

"We'll get the staff to do it after school this week. They can do the basic cleaning at least," replied Stoate. "What we will do about the decorating, I don't know. I think we should be able to claim some damages from Gonall. I'll get Carter-Barr onto it. After all there is a reasonable case."

When Stoate got back to his office, there were the usual complaints and angry phone calls from parents whinging about the latest tranche of bad publicity, or their son's uniform being wrecked, or their son coming home as high as a kite on Thursday evening. Why were the pupils made to work in such a mess on Friday? When was it all going to be cleaned up?

The school had indeed suffered more bad publicity in the local, regional, and national news, a fact that Doberman and Pinscher had not overlooked. A letter was lying for Stoate's attention:

Dear Mr Stoate

We write with some concern, having heard the news of the uprising that had occurred on Thursday. It is in the public domain, as is our association with you.

We hardly need to mention how much damage this risks to our reputation. Furthermore, it was part of the agreement for the loan that the school would garner no further bad publicity. Clearly the events of last week were in breach of this condition.

Therefore, we have no alternative other than to consider the Tanswold School Trust to be in breach of the agreement and we are recalling the loan made under that agreement. We would be obliged if you would make immediate arrangement for the repayment of two million six hundred thousand four hundred and sixty two pounds and thirty four pence, this being the sum payable on this account.

Stoate's blood ran cold. This would be the end, for the Midland and Great Northern Bank were rather more than niggly about the overdrafts on the school's bank accounts. This would have to be fought hard, and Stoate called Lartington to his office.

"Yes, Headmaster," replied Lartington loftily, "you're right. There is no way that the school can survive. You got us into the mess, and you must get us out, or preferably someone more competent than you."

Lartington left Stoate speechless. It did not matter to him what happened. He had arranged it so that he could get his cut. If the school were wound up, as it seemed very likely that it would, he simply preferred that the administration be carried out by Touche de Vere rather than Severs Clarke. He had had many dealings with Touche de Vere who were based in London, and these had always been very beneficial to him. Severs Clarke were a local outfit, and he did not think he would get very far with them.

Stoate had a more constructive discussion with Alistair Carter-Barr who felt that he had genuine legal grounds to stave off Doberman and Pinscher's demand. He would go down and see them for himself; he had some good contacts there. He would give them a ring first, and an hour later rang Stoate giving him the impression that he had made some progress. Stoate turned his mind to what he would do with Gonall that was legal and would not ensure a long stretch for assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. It would be the first item on the agenda of the emergency Governors' meeting that evening. It should, at least, be fairly non-controversial; Gonall was guilty of gross professional misconduct resulting from his gross insubordination and his criminal behaviour in causing an affray and massive damage to the fabric of the school. With his confidence boosted by that thought, Stoate called in Bravo Patrol who were waiting sheepishly outside his office and gave them the rounds of the cookhouse.

Stoate was wrong. The first item on the agenda was not carried through. Although it was non-controvertible that Gonall had staged an uprising against the legitimate Headmaster of the school, and had done immense damage to the school, both to its fabric and its reputation, the

whole situation had been brought about by the inept actions of the current Director of Learning and Teaching. The subsequent debate took on a familiar but unpleasant tone to it, with infantile and personal attacks being made from both sides. To Stoate's intense shock, the proposal that Gonall be instantly dismissed from the service of the Tanswold School Trust was rejected by an overwhelming majority. A counterproposal was carried that Stoate should take up his retirement immediately and that John Gonall should be recognised as the legitimate Headmaster of Tanswold School. Stoate was asked to leave the meeting and to vacate the premises.

It started to penetrate the Governors' none-too-quick minds that the Headmaster designate was not available to take up his duties as there was the small matter of charges of initiating a serious affray, common assault, assault with intent, criminal damage, and false imprisonment of Crispin Lartington, Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate, and several others against their wills. Furthermore, there was no other senior management since Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax was not allowed to come within a twenty-kilometre radius of the school. It was decided that the Chairman should use his influence to see what could be done about Gonall. It was also resolved to hurry through the co-option of the representative of Doberman and Pinscher. At this point the meeting was adjourned for a week.

Donald Blance still had friends in high places in the Mid Yorkshire Constabulary. Much to the chagrin of more junior ranks who had witnessed the previous week's events at The Hermitage, John Gonall was released with all charges dropped for lack of evidence. As Donald Blance picked him up from Tanswold Police Station, he formally offered Gonall the post of Headmaster of Tanswold School.

The next day, as Gonall was establishing himself in his new post, a fax had arrived from Doberman and Pinscher stating that they had reviewed the situation and that, in the light of recent developments at the school, they had reluctantly agreed to carry on with their support. Mr Diggory Dalton-Ogilvie would be joining the Governors for their next meeting. His fee would be eight hundred pounds for each hour attended, plus VAT. His first-class rail fare from London, taxis, hotel bills and other expenses would also be met by the Trust. Gonall had no interest in

money matters, so he sent for Lartington. This time Lartington came to the right office. Gonall was short on ceremony and came straight to the point, “Mr Lartington, now that I have been established in my post as the new Headmaster, I want to know if you have done the work that I asked you to do last Thursday.”

“No, I have not, because you were not officially Headmaster. I took my instructions from Mr Stoate.”

“Read my lips, Mr Lartington. I am Headmaster and I expect you to go away now and follow what I have told you to the letter. In case you cannot remember, I will repeat the instructions. Now I want you to institute Mr Stoate’s pension and adjust my salary to the appropriate points. I also want you to release a press statement explaining that I am now Headmaster, and that Mr Stoate has taken retirement. And you are to send a circular to the parents to the same effect. I have here a list of staff whose contracts I want you to terminate at the end of the academic year. I want the posts advertised in the quality press and the *Times Educational Supplement*. I shall be seeing the staff concerned later in the day. Do you understand?”

“With reluctance I do, headmaster,” replied Lartington. The tone of contempt for Gonall was completely lost on his audience.

“Also, Mr Lartington, I want the school tidied up. It looks a disgrace.”

“That is your handiwork, for your interest, Headmaster. You, or to be more precise, your little tin soldiers, made that mess and you will have to clear it up.”

“I have no intention of doing it. Get some office cleaners in. Why didn’t you do that before?”

“We haven’t the money,” replied Lartington who knew that he was dealing with a straightforward moron now, rather than a devious little sod.

“Why not? You are paid to look after the money.”

“You know well that we are in a financial crisis of unparalleled proportions. Doberman and Pinscher have only reluctantly let us continue. If they pulled the plug on us now, we would be finished. Shall I show you the figures?”

“I am not interested in that. I am Headmaster, and you are the Bursar. I pay you to look after the finances, which you clearly have not.”

“What I am trying to explain is that the mess that has been made around the school was caused by your CCF while you were playing soldiers last Thursday. Do you realise how much it is going to cost?”

“No. I just want it done by the end of tomorrow.”

“You can’t be serious. It will take months and hundreds of thousands of pounds. Do you know that the entire outside of The Hermitage needs repainting?”

“Get it done,” replied Gonall more firmly. “I don’t care how it’s done. Go to the bank manager and get a loan.”

“You don’t understand the position of the school. Our credit rating is very poor amongst tradespeople. They won’t come because they think they won’t get paid. They will, of course, subject our terms and conditions.”

Gonall wondered what credit ratings meant. He could not reconcile the little numbers at the end of examination questions with tradesmen. All this financial talk was well beyond him. What was Lartington making such a fuss about? Couldn’t he just walk into the bank and get some money? So Gonall said, “Get it done.”

“Headmaster...”

“That will be all, thank you very much.”

Having got rid of this doom monger who said there was no money, Gonall turned his mind to the staff he was going to get rid of. This time he would do it a little less confrontationally than locking them up in the wine cellar. He made a list with appointments and swaggered over to the staff room. On his return, Gonall thought further about the academic hot house he was going to set up at Tanswold School. He would give Leeds Grammar a good run for its money.

Although few of the staff were sorry to see Stoate go, they were not exactly overjoyed with his replacement. Gonall was heartily loathed by almost everybody, staff and pupil alike. Complaining parents were treated with an icy contempt. Gonall was a fundamentalist educational

zealot, but like many of his kind, he preferred other people to do the dirty work for him, while claiming the credit for doing it. Whilst Stoate was a bon viveur and entertaining raconteur, Gonall's tenure was notorious by its utter lack of joy. To go into Gonall's office on a warm June afternoon was like going into the coldest February dawn.

Although Gonall had given ten staff their notice, another ten gave in their resignations, telling Gonall in no uncertain terms that they had no desire to work for him. A more sensitive man would have been seriously concerned at such a turn-over, but not Gonall. It indicated to him that these people could not keep up his pace and so should make way for somebody else who could. Gonall's vision remained that the school should rival Leeds Grammar and it was only the ineptitude of his staff that was preventing him from achieving it. Gonall was also one of that breed of managers that believed that his effectiveness was measured by the number of memoranda sent out. Many of them were ineffective and his poor use of English obscured some of them to render them unintelligible.

Gonall, being a man of limited intellect, could hardly keep pace with the memoranda that he had sent out. He had little idea of which were the most important and which were irrelevant nit-picking. He ended up getting the staff to chase their tails over minutiae, while paying little attention to the most pressing matters. In a spate of dumb insolence, the staff entertained themselves by sending him memos in reply in which they deliberately distorted the rules of grammar and syntax to see if he noticed.

He did not. Gonall ignored anything that he could not understand, which was most of what was required to run a school. His vision, blinkered enough before, was focussed entirely on his sense of self-importance and he strutted about his new empire like a peacock. An appropriate metaphor, perhaps, except that he had no beauty about him at all.

Lartington was being driven to distraction by his new boss's inability to grasp even the most elementary financial concept. Stoate was bad enough, but even he could recognise a crisis when it occurred. Gonall ordered money to be spent with no thought for the morrow with the result that the Midland and Great Northern Bank started to get very scratchy indeed about the increasing overdrafts. Lartington found

himself fending off creditors. Attempts to explain the financial problems of the school fell on deaf ears; Gonall thought that a creditor was an animal that ate another animal, reinforced by his literal interpretation of the phrase “Wolf at the door”. No decorators were prepared to take on the job of repainting the school since they were not at all confident about getting paid.

Morale amongst his staff was rock bottom when Gonall took over as Headmaster. Nobody at all wanted to be considered for the vacant positions on the Senior Management Team. This suited Gonall, as he did not have to justify his decisions to anybody. It was also saving money. It would also give him time to look for management colleagues after his own heart, of which there seemed plenty around in teaching. Just when it could not possibly go any lower, morale suddenly did, and Gonall had an unfathomable mine of ill-will at his disposal. There was considerable staff bitterness because of the ten staff whose contracts had been terminated. Gonall countered this by increased pressure on the staff concerned, such that virtually every day they had an unpleasant memorandum from the Headmaster, which noticed one failing or another. That his perception of some of these failings was the result of either gossip, or misunderstanding, or plain malice, mattered not the least to Gonall. Despite all their sufferings at the hands of Stoate’s capricious mismanagement, the staff had managed to find something to laugh at, usually at the expense of their common enemies, Gonad and d’Arsehole. Now there was nothing capricious about Gonall’s mismanagement; it was entirely and predictably nasty. Under Gonall’s less than altruistic stewardship the school limped on to the end of the Spring Term, and when the Easter Holiday arrived, with a seasonal ten centimetres of snow, there was talk in the staff room of strike action the following term.

The strike happened at the start of the Summer Term 1999. It was precipitated by Gonall’s insistence that, to save money, the staff were to come into the school to clean up the appalling mess left at the end of the field day. On the first day, only a few staff arrived and found the job almost impossible without gouging holes in the plaster, and damage got done to the marble floors in The Hermitage. Far from thanking them for their efforts, Gonall berated them for doing further damage and threatened to stop their salary. Gonall had not lifted a finger

to help them himself, preferring to remain in his office amongst the trappings of a Headmaster of a top academic independent school, a delusion as the Modular A level results that were announced in March were very poor indeed.

The first Staff Meeting of the Summer Term was a thoroughly bad-tempered affair with Gonall giving the staff a severe lecture about the bad examination results, the disobedience to his instruction to clean the school during the holiday, and the general lack of loyalty there seemed to be. When Gonall instituted formal disciplinary proceedings against Ian Denham for raising a pertinent point about how the lack of resourcing was adversely affecting the quality of teaching and learning, the unions were called in and a strike ballot called. Like most things, this washed over Gonall's head, as a striker was a modern term for the centre forward of a football team. A ballot was something that came out of a gun.

Immediately prior to the strike ballot, the staff passed a unanimous vote of no confidence in the new Headmaster for mismanagement of the staff and a bullying approach. This washed over Gonall who announced that he cared not at all about the lack of confidence the staff had in him; he had every confidence in himself.

The strike took place on the second Wednesday of the Summer Term. Pickets were placed at both the entrances to The Hermitage. When Gonall drove in, there were hostile shouts of "Scab!" and an egg was thrown at his car. Gonall was livid and determined to track down the culprit. It had not occurred to him that he had rejected claims for the damage done to staff cars by yellow and green acrylic paint on the grounds that they parked at The Hermitage at their own risk.

The strike was accompanied by noisy demonstrations outside the school gates. There were large banners outlining the grievances that the staff were holding against Gonall. Leaflets explaining a long list of grievances were distributed to the parents who were becoming as resigned to temporary loss of service as many a weary commuter in the South of England. Yet again days off work had to be taken so that little Johnny could be looked after at home, and there came the strong risk that parents (usually mothers) would start to get to know their sons. The news media, as keen as ever to collect bad publicity for Tanswold School, were there in force.

In his office in The Hermitage, Gonall was not in the least bit put out by the strike. He knew what he would do. He would interview each member of staff in turn. They would explain their role in the vote of no confidence and the strike. He would get each one to undertake not to take any further action on pain of immediate termination of their contract. The ring leaders of the action would have their contracts terminated forthwith for gross insubordination; there were plenty of staff he could call on to replace them. Although besieged, Gonall did not have the insight to feel as such. Instead, he regarded this as part of the pains that the school would have to bear as it grew in stature to rival Leeds Grammar.

Now another pain arrived in Gonall's office. It was Lartington who, unlike his boss, had felt a distinct sense of being under siege ever since he had set foot in the damned place. He was not pleased, "Headmaster, what's going on now? Why are the staff out on strike? Do you know what the significance of the vote of no confidence is?"

"The significance of the vote of no confidence is that the staff are inept and not fit to work in this school. I shall be interviewing each member of staff in turn and reminding each and every one of the terms and conditions under which they work here. I have every confidence in my ability, and I am not a little annoyed that anybody should question that. I want you to put out a letter to that effect to the parents."

"Headmaster, I am not worried about the staff. You know what Doberman and Pinscher had to say about the last bit of bad publicity we had. They are only supporting us with reluctance. We are in the financial mire."

"Bursar," replied Gonall dismissively, "do I have to remind you that I pay you to look after the finances? You leave the teaching decisions to me, and you look after the finances."

It was at that point that Lartington decided to let the inevitable happen. Doberman and Pinscher would be bound to pull the plug now. As far as he was concerned, his main problem was to ensure that Touche de Vere were appointed as receivers, so that he would get his cut.

As for Gonall, the next call to rattle his cage was not from an angry parent or prying news reporter. It came from an entirely

unexpected source, Brigadier Maxwell of the Queen's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. "Are you the one in charge?" Maxwell barked.

"Of course I am," replied Gonall, "I am the Headmaster."

"I have your name as the master in charge of the CCF."

"Yes, that's right."

"And you organised the exercise last Thursday?"

Gonall smiled. He was sure that Maxwell was going to give him fulsome congratulations on the initiative shown by the boys. "Yes, I did. It went very well."

"That is not what I heard. I got a report from one of my warrant officers who came down to observe unannounced. He said it looked utter bedlam. He had never seen anything like it in his entire twenty-five years' service."

"It was a remarkable piece of planning," replied Gonall. "It achieved its objectives."

"Achieved its objectives?" Maxwell barked. "What do you mean it achieved its objectives? For you to use the CCF and army resources to overthrow the Headmaster you serve under? It's there in the newspapers and was on the television. *'Army cadets oust Headmaster at Blunderhouse Hall. A detachment of cadets from the Tanswold School CCF, who are aligned with the Queen's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry were duped into the overthrow of the standing Headmaster.'* What's the meaning of this?"

"It was an opportunity for the boys to..."

"...make a bloody mockery of our regiment? With all the farces we have had before, this is too much! The army is withdrawing support forthwith. There will be no further CCF activities whatever to be conducted by Tanswold School. We cannot afford this kind of mockery of our reputation and pride."

Nobody at Tanswold School would be well provided for if Gonall got his way. He interviewed each of his staff one by one, leading an inquisition into the strike and the vote of no confidence. Some staff were too scared in case they lost their jobs; others did lose their jobs and called

Gonall every name under the sun. Gonall learned new words and phrases that he had never come across even in the rugby scrum. He dismissed these as the mutterings of a few disgruntled people. He was able to say that the unrest had been stirred up by a few malcontents who had been dealt with firmly under the staff disciplinary code and were leaving the employ of the Tanswold School Trust. He wrote a letter to this effect to all the parents and released a press statement.

Gonall's actions did nothing to improve the atmosphere in the school, and there seemed a non-stop flood of parents giving formal notice of withdrawal of their children from the school. Phrases like "poor value for money" and "bad atmosphere not conducive to effective learning" were but a few contained in an ever-growing pile. Gonall regarded such missives with contempt. The boys concerned were generally ineffective types without which the school would do much better. Lartington disagreed; each one lost represented nearly seven thousand pounds per annum of lost income. Gonall merely shrugged his shoulders contemptuously and told Lartington that he was paid to make sure that ends met. As far as Lartington was concerned, Gonall went down in his estimation from being a moron to an imbecile.

Gonall's lack of intelligence was a continuing stumbling block to any attempts to get the school back onto an even financial keel. Cheques were now being returned unpaid. There was uproar in the staff room when the cheques to the examination boards for candidate entry fees bounced. Gonall was unmoved and told the staff that they would have to pay the candidates' fees from their own pockets or write begging letters to parents. The response of several parents was to go to the press, leading to headlines such as *Blunderhouse Hall's rubber cheques*.

The pig-ignorance and arrogance that were the hallmarks of Gonall's stewardship as Headmaster led to more public relations own goals than there ever were due to Storate's incompetence. Each one had the potential to end the school, financially precarious as it was, but somehow the school didn't go over the brink. They did make the Midland and Great Northern Bank ever more edgy, and Doberman and Pinscher were getting decidedly nasty.

One morning, when Gonall got into work, there were two letters waiting for him on his desk. They were important enough to have been sent by registered post. Their content was similarly terse:

We, Doberman and Pinscher, demand immediate repayment of two million, six hundred and twenty-five thousand three hundred and fifty three pounds and ninety six pence, this being the sum of money owing to the company. The loan is being recalled due to repeated breaches of the conditions under which it was granted.

If the money is not received in the form of a bankers' draft in these offices by the end of next week, legal proceedings will be taken to recover it. Finally, we must inform you that interest will be payable at one percent for every day that the loan is not repaid.

Gonall was not sure of the significance of these letters, so he called in Lartington, who replied, "I have been very patient with you Headmaster. I will also explain to you in terms of one syllable that the school is bankrupt. Our debts cannot be repaid, so we have to cease trading."

"What do you mean? The school has a great future as a top academic institution. I am getting ready to take a whole tranche of new staff to replace the lame ducks we have here."

"The school has no future, Headmaster, as an institution, academic or otherwise. The only hope is that a white knight will charge in and bail us out."

Gonall thought about whiskey adverts, and replied, "Why can't you go down to the bank and get some more money. You've got influence?"

"I have used every bit of my influence, Mr Gonall," replied Lartington who was becoming incandescent with rage. Gonall had gone down in value from an imbecile to an idiot. "And you have frittered it all away. I cannot think of any self-respecting financial institution that would come within a hundred kilometres of this place."

Lartington was wrong. A very self-respecting financial institution was coming rather closer to Tanswold School than one hundred kilometres. Indeed, it was now within one hundred metres, and the gap was closing all the time. Finally, Mr Galliford of the Inland Revenue got out of his car and reported to reception, asking to see the Headmaster and the Bursar of the school as a matter of urgency.

Chapter 12

Mr Galliford was finding the receptionist at Tanswold School less than helpful. "I am afraid that the Headmaster and Mr Lartington are in an important meeting."

"This is a matter of extreme urgency," replied Mr Galliford getting out his identification card. "I am on extremely important business from the Inland Revenue, and it is most important that I see the Headmaster and the Finance Manager immediately."

"Well can I make an appointment for you to see the Headmaster? Let's see. He's busy all this week and he's got a meeting next Monday. I think he could possibly see you next Wednesday afternoon, but it depends on how long you need. It will have to be a week on Monday if you need a longer meeting with him. You see he's a very busy man."

"I want to see him and Mr Lartington now."

"Oh, that does complicate things. You see Mr Lartington is a very busy man as well. Now I'll look in his diary. Now if you want to see them both together, it will be at the beginning of next month before we can find a slot."

"I don't think you understand the significance of what I want to see them about. If I cannot see them until the start of next month, there won't be a next month to see them. I want to see them now. It is extremely urgent and extremely important. So please show me to the Headmaster's office."

"I can't do that. He won't be very pleased."

"He won't be very pleased if I institute the action that I am entitled to do and close the place down. So please take me to his office now."

With the reluctance generated by her sense of more-than-my-job's-worth, the receptionist took Mr Galliford to the Headmaster's Office and showed him in.

"Can I help you?" said Gonall in that tone of voice that suggested that he did not want to help anybody.

"Are you Mr Stoate, the Headmaster?" replied Galliford.

“No, I am Mr Gonall, the Headmaster,” Gonall replied with an air of self-importance.

“I have a Mr Stoate as Headmaster here.”

“Well, I am Headmaster now,” replied Gonall puffing himself up more.

“Are you Mr Lartington?” Galliford asked, surprised that Gonall had not introduced his senior colleague. “Mr Gonall, you and Mr Lartington are trustees of the Tanswold School Trust along with Mr Donald Blance?”

“Yes,” replied Lartington. Mr Gonall was not so sure, “No, I am the Headmaster.”

“Mr Gonall, as Headmaster you are *de facto* an *ex officio* trustee of the Tanswold School Trust. I need to see the third trustee, Mr Blance. Is he around?”

“He is the Chairman of Governors,” replied Lartington. “He’s a retired businessman and will probably be at home.”

“Please ring him and tell him that he needs to be here as a matter of urgency.”

While Lartington was ringing Donald Blance, Gonall wondered what and who Mr Galliford was. He seemed to be some kind of technical person who used strange expressions as day fact oh. He wondered what an ex-office EO was, and it dawned on him that it must have applied to Stoate. As for trustee Gonall counted himself as being someone who could be trusted to the end of the Earth. That nobody else thought that was their problem. Lartington announced that Donald Blance would be there in twenty minutes, but there had better be a pretty good reason for calling him in.

“I assure you there is,” replied Mr Galliford, making himself comfortable.

Gonall had little idea of the general rules of hospitality, so ignored his guest. Lartington, being more versed in etiquette, rang to his office to ask for tea and biscuits. Gonall worked at his computer, which still periodically made lavatory flushes as he saved the memorandum that he was writing. Little conversation occurred between Lartington and his

guest, and the two of them sat drinking tea. Donald Blance could be seen drawing up in his Lexus outside on the drive.

Blance came in and with impeccable manners started to make the visitor welcome and suggested an aperitif, and that Mr Galliford should join them for luncheon. Mr Galliford declined and came to the point.

“I am from the Inland Revenue, and I have been investigating the tax affairs of Sir Kenneth Rounce, who, as you know, was Chairman of Governors at this school. His tax affairs have been, to say the least, in some disarray, and we are pressing charges of tax evasion. I have been checking through all his financial dealings. It is a complicated job, and I have been at it for the last year or so.”

“I am not interested in financial matters,” Gonall interrupted.

“You need to be interested in this, Mr Gonall, as this is a matter of grave importance to the Tanswold School Trust. You see, Sir Kenneth made a number of donations to the Tanswold School Trust.”

“If Sir Kenneth gave us a donation,” said Gonall with amazing insight, “it means that he gave us the money.”

“It’s not that simple. Sir Kenneth put money into the school, not as donations, but as interest free loans that he called recall at any time. He did this to squirrel money away in order to reduce his tax liability. In accountancy terms, as you will know, Mr Blance, these loans remain assets of the person or institutions that loan the money. Now I am realising Sir Kenneth’s assets to pay the tax due. The loans made to the Tanswold School Trust are Sir Kenneth’s assets and I am telling you now that the Inland Revenue will be realising these assets. We are looking to realise some two million, three hundred thousand pounds.”

“You can’t be serious,” Blance blurted out.

“I am serious. Deadly serious. You are going to have to find the money, or we will have to take action to realise the money owing.”

“You realise that this will put us in a very difficult position?” said Blance.

“That does not matter to me. If the Tanswold School Trust were a reliable company, I would be sure that we could come to an arrangement. However, I have been looking into the matter and found that you have run up massive debts with Doberman and Pinscher, as well as the

Midland and Great Northern Bank. There is also the matter of unpaid PAYE and staff pension contributions. We wish to recover those as well. I am a reasonable man, and I will give you until the end of the next calendar month to pay, otherwise we shall institute legal proceedings to cover the money owed.”

“Do you understand the implications, Mr Galliford? The school will have to close.”

“That, Mr Blance, is no concern of mine, other than that I hope that it is replaced by an organisation that has rather more transparency in its financial affairs. I will leave you with a copy of the demand.”

Mr Galliford left the room and drove off. The three men sat and looked at each other gormlessly. It was even impinging on Gonall’s brain that the situation was serious. Blance decided to call an emergency meeting of the Governors to discuss the grave financial situation.

For the first time in its history, the Governing Body of the Tanswold School Trust had a co-opted member from an outside institution. A few years ago, this would have been a welcome development, but after the letter received a couple of days before from Doberman and Pinscher, many of the Governors were decidedly wary. When Mr Dalton-Ogilvie arrived that evening, he was not welcomed with totally open arms. When Gonall was introduced to him, Mr Dalton-Ogilvie was somewhat taken aback by the rather brutish nature of the man, and his first exchanges with him confirmed his Londoner’s view of North Country peasants. It seemed to cap a difficult day; there had been some difficult problems to deal with in the office that morning. The stock market was jittery, and Dalton-Ogilvie was not overconfident in some of the investments he had made for the company. The train taking him north was held up by overhead power line problems. He had only got to the meeting just on time and he felt decidedly hassled.

The meeting got underway. Donald Blance started the meeting in his usual urbane manner, “We are gathered today to consider the implications of a grave financial crisis unprecedented in the entire history of the Tanswold School Trust. We have been fighting with financial crises ever since we were pulled down by the theft of the Draycott Foundation. We have been on our knees since. We now are faced with a

situation that is currently untenable. We have had demands for the recall of loans from Doberman and Pinscher who had bailed us out earlier in the year. We have also had a letter from the Midland and Great Northern Bank recalling the overdraft. This morning we had a particularly unwelcome visit from a Mr Galliford, Her Majesty's Inspector of Taxes. Apparently, the donations that Sir Kenneth so generously gave to the school were not donations at all. They were loans, and the Inland Revenue are regarding these as being assets of Sir Kenneth. Therefore, they have given us six weeks to pay them off. The stark choice is this. We go into voluntary liquidation, or we are forced into liquidation."

A gasp went up. Despite the dire warnings from Lartington with his laptop and projector, the terrible financial situation was news to many of the Governing Body. Mr Gonall summed up the situation from the depths of his superficiality, "There is no financial crisis in this school. The current situation can be overcome by getting more money from somewhere else. If Doberman and Pinscher are not willing to allow us to carry on, we need to find somewhere else that is. Mr Lartington, have you looked into other sources of money?"

"Yes, I have, but we do not have a good credit rating."

"Why is a credit rating needed?" asked Gonall who still thought that credit rating referred to the little numbers in brackets after questions in exams. The thought had also struck him that a credit rating was a package of software that allowed quick access to loans and other useful forms of finance. "Can't you get another one?"

"No Mr Gonall," replied Lartington in a patronising manner, "I am afraid we are stuck with the one we've got."

"Well get another one. I am sure we can fund the purchase of a new credit rating."

"No, we cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because of all the scandals we have had. We seem to be better at scoring own goals than Carlsborough Football Club. And you seem to be particularly adept at scoring own goals."

“What do you mean by that?” asked Gonall who had little idea of what own goals were. Own goals were not covered by the rules of the Rugby Football Union.

“Like your little escapade with your little tin soldiers a month ago,” replied Lartington with withering contempt. “And all the other things that you did with that old buffoon Stoate.”

“I took over from Stoate,” replied Gonall. Lartington’s contempt was lost on him. “I am the Headmaster now, and I am going to turn this school into an institution with the academic status of Leeds Grammar School. Parents will be flocking to get their children in here. There will be stiff examinations and equally stiff interviews. We will not have any fairies in this school...”

The other members of the Governors looked either quizzically at Gonall or approvingly, depending on which faction they were in. Neutral Governors merely looked bored at this irrelevant distraction and became increasingly irritated as Gonall’s speech carried on. Gonall was not an inspiring speaker, his voice being monotonous and totally devoid of any emotion. As he spoke, every word was by itself entirely understandable, but when his words were put together into a whole, nobody understood anything that Gonall was saying. Finally, Mr Dalton-Ogilvie from Doberman and Pinscher managed to get a word in edgeways, “Excuse me, Mr Gonall? Can you explain how you are going to get these parents to flock in to send their children to the school when at the moment they seem to be flocking to get them out?”

“I am getting rid of lame duck staff, in the first instant,” replied Gonall, irritated that he had been interrupted before he had finished.

“Who appointed these lame duck staff?”

“The Old Bug... Mr Stoate. He was a lame duck Headmaster.”

“You were a senior member of staff that used to regularly sit in on interview panels. Your opinion was also influential in the choice of staff, was it not?”

“Of course, it was. I was there to make sure that we didn’t get any fairies.”

“So how many of these lame duck staff were appointed by you? How come that they were so poor?”

“They couldn’t keep discipline. We got rid of one useless young man at the end of the Autumn Term.”

“And how do you keep discipline so effectively?”

“That is none of your business,” snapped Gonall who was not going to admit that assaults on pupils had been a regular part of his classroom management strategy.

“So how will you identify the cream of good staff?” asked Dalton-Ogilvie who had rapidly concluded that Gonall was a thug and was not fit to be in charge of anything more sophisticated than a rugby scrum. “And more importantly, how will you retain them?”

“I shall monitor their work closely. If they are not up to scratch, they will be out. They will all work on short-term contracts. I want the best here, nothing less,” Gonall replied, warming up to the theme.

“How are you going to reward good staff?” asked Dalton-Ogilvy, who was rather more *au fait* with modern management techniques than Gonall.

“What do you mean?” Gonall snapped. “I expect them to be good. There’s no question of rewards. I pay them to be good.”

Dalton-Ogilvie felt very relieved that Gonall was not his boss. He asked, “How do you propose to re-launch the school in the light of the current developments?”

“I expect the bursar to sort out the financial side, and that is what I pay him to do. Clearly, he has not done so, which is why we are having this meeting.”

“And how are you going to get the new pupils to flock in?”

“I am proposing a marketing campaign in which all my staff will be involved. They will be spending their weekends and holidays going to shopping malls and other public places to leaflet the public.”

“How are you going to pay off the large debts that the school has accrued?”

“I shall cut back on resources and staff pay. All staff will take a pay cut of twenty percent, and I shall be moving from one month in arrears to three months. That will give us a chance to get on top of the situation.”

“So, you mean to tell me that your staff will have to work unpaid for a term, and work hard for considerably less than the national rates?” Dalton-Ogilvie was becoming increasingly incredulous at what he was hearing. “How will they take that?”

“They will be expected to be professional, of course,” replied Gonall who was surprised that anybody should be asking such daft questions. Lartington joined in, “I should point out that at the moment, departmental budgets are virtually zero. Staff are having to pay for things out of their own pockets.”

“It’s part of being professional,” replied Gonall.

“And you are hoping to attract the highest quality staff?” said Dalton-Ogilvie. “You have a hope!”

The meeting started to degenerate, as seemed to be depressingly usual, into bickering factions accompanied by the trading of personal insults and accusations. More heat than light was generated, and Dalton-Ogilvie was convinced more than ever that the sooner the Tanswold School Trust was consigned to the dustbin of financial oblivion, the better.

Despite the bedlam, the meeting was actually coming to a consensus that the Tanswold School Trust should fight robustly against the financial demands that were being made against it, on the grounds that they had been made in the light of a spate of unfortunate incidents, rather than on genuine financial grounds. They deplored the action of the Inland Revenue in regarding the monies given to the Trust by Sir Kenneth Rounce as his assets rather than theirs.

Needless to say, Diggory Dalton-Ogilvie was against the motion. He was utterly convinced of the financial incompetence of the Trust. He expressed his opinion in emotive terms that suggested that they could not organise binge-drinking in a brewery. He was howled down savagely, confirming his view that the civilised world ended at Watford Gap. In the end, Carter-Barr, the school solicitor, was instructed to fight all the demands in the courts.

Dunstan Stoate, or Leslie as his fiancée (a fellow pilot based at Quarmby aerodrome) preferred to call him, was glad to be out of it. He

had heard through the grapevine of Gonall's appalling management, which had little about it that was relevant to the good of others, only to the benefit of him. As he thought about it, Stoate had come to realise that many of his motives were wrong, and he had misused and abused people to his own ends in a way that he had come to find quite repulsive. It was typical of the people with which he had been acquainted for the past quarter-century that they should have ditched him in such an unceremonious manner. Like many others he felt he owed a deep debt of ingratitude to the Tanswold School Trust in general, and John Gonall in particular.

Soon after he was so unceremoniously dumped by the Tanswold School Trust, Stoate found himself the subject of a certain amount of interest from Detective Commander Richard Smithells. The investigation had unearthed enough cans of worms to keep the Fraud Squad busy for many years. There was never enough evidence to charge Stoate with anything. He had been woefully negligent and incompetent, but that was not a criminal offence. He was a bit-player in something that was much bigger. Still, he had a fairly uncomfortable few weeks, a small taste of what he had so freely given with largesse to others.

As chickens came home to roost, Stoate came to feel that he had misused his so-called Christian religion to prop up the self-centred elitism and arrogance of Tanswold School. Underneath, Stoate was actually quite a sensitive man, and now his circumstances had stripped off the veneer of elitist arrogance that had propped him up for almost his entire life. He had come to know Marjorie, and his conversations with her had become very deep and challenging. He was thoroughly ashamed of his past behaviour, which made him feel wretched, and he decided that he had to make amends. He made a long list of people that he had mistreated in the past and wrote long hand-written letters expressing his remorse over his behaviour, hoping that they would see it to forgive him.

Many didn't reply; he didn't expect them to. His motives had been wrong, so it was little wonder that they would not want anything more to do with him. Some were hostile, which was no surprise to him. Stoate had an inner strength of character that told him that he deserved it, and Marjorie assured him that it was their problem now, not his. Nevertheless, others had a graciousness that made him feel very humble, and this was his overwhelming emotion when he met the Proudlock and

McEwan families, who were, entirely by coincidence, warm friends of Marjorie and her late husband, Paul. Such was the reconciliation that their wedding was conducted by The Reverend Canon John Proudlock.

Stoate felt liberated as he began to replace his religion with a true personal faith. Whereas before Stoate regarded theological sermons as a useful prop to his elitist views, now he regarded them as little more than a hollow distraction.

As a member of the general public, Stoate realised how civilised the world was outside schools and wondered what he had done over the last quarter-century and began to see how many of his actions were really those of an overgrown schoolboy. He was thankful to God that he had seen the light before it was too late. He also saw how rude and unpleasant the Black 'n Tans were in the streets of Tanswold.

He felt a major sense of liberation as he put up his penthouse apartment in Hermitage Court for sale. He and Marjorie had their sights on a large house in Quarmby with a very large garden, which they were going to buy off a lady who wanted to get back to London. Her name was Karen Purslove.

There was a certain amount of work to do on it, and they could get it done before the wedding in August. The two of them looked forward to entertaining new friends in their new house. There was unleashed a deeply romantic streak in Leslie Stoate that had been locked up for so many years. Leslie and Marjorie's romance was as intense as any teenage lovers, although befitting to people of their age, they were rather more discreet than Samuel Proudlock and Jessica McEwan. Their only regret was that they would not have children of their own as they were far too old. Marjorie's three children (who were young adults) had taken well to their stepfather, enjoying his many tales and adopting him as their own father.

Meanwhile Stoate was becoming as keen a gardener as he was an aviator. Marjorie had green fingers and Leslie used his artistic and architectural skills to design their new garden in Quarmby Grange. He had started to become a lot more active, and the fat melted away from him as he got fitter. He felt a power better too. Furthermore, the loss of his and his wife's weight allowed for enough petrol for at least an extra hour's flying time.

It was always said that Joseph Leslie Dunstan Stoate could fall into a compost heap and come out smelling of roses.

Smelling of roses was not a description of the antics of Carter-Barr who was instructed to use his legal prowess by the Tanswold School Trust as they attempted to stave off imminent bankruptcy. He had to travel to London to represent the Trust for several preliminary court hearings. He had planned a holiday and things such as the imminent liquidation of one of his most steadfast clients was not going to get in the way. Nor did he pass the matter to a colleague. As a result, during the three weeks that Carter-Barr was away, the cases came to court, and judgement was made in favour of the plaintiffs.

As soon as Lartington realised that there was nothing that he could do, he jumped ship, appointing Antony Scott in his place. He had never liked this aggressive little man, and if the sinking ship took down that particular rat, so much the better. Scott was in ignorance of the financial crisis. He knew things were difficult but was shocked to find out the truth. His initial pleasure at his promotion was soon tempered by the fact that he was guiding this particular ship nowhere. Nor was Gonall particularly helpful. He just pressured Scott to find some money to shut up these awkward people.

Gonall announced the suspension of staff pay, which went down like yet another lead balloon. He told them to be professional, for if they were not, he would jolly well make sure they were by getting somebody else. He disciplined one colleague who suggested that any teacher coming to work at Tanswold at the present time must be pretty bloody desperate. Such was the unfathomable mine of ill-will that there was an immediate threat of more strikes. That did not affect Gonall one little bit, and he strutted about the school showing that he was in charge.

Now that there was no Friday church service, Gonall moved the school inspection to that timetable slot. The Wednesday afternoon inspection was a rehearsal for Friday, as Gonall insisted that there should not be a hair out of place. Like many people with a diminished intellect but over-inflated ego, he loved the ceremonial, and would strut about in his gown, berating boys for not having highly polished shoes and their form tutors for not ensuring that shoes were highly polished. As a result

of their public humiliations at Gonall's hands, several staff just cleared their desks and walked out. On one occasion this was immediately after Gonall had interfered with a lesson. The teacher concerned literally closed her bag and told Gonall in no uncertain terms to look after the lesson himself and find somebody else. Gonall tried to restrain her using a certain amount of force, but she slapped him hard across the face before making her exit. A silent cheer rose from the group.

The atmosphere in the school was, by now, utterly dreadful, and serious breaches in discipline were becoming more of a regular occurrence. Gonall gave no support to his staff whatever; it was their problem, and he was not to be disturbed by such trivial things. Finally, there was a complete breakdown in order one afternoon, leading to a riot in which several staff were assaulted, and the police arrived in force.

The morning after the riot, Gonall drove to work as normal. He was going to interview all the staff and give them a hard time. He noticed that the traffic was heavier than normal, and it took him a good amount of time to get along the High Street. He noticed what was causing the delay. Parents were coming up in their cars as usual to the back entrance to The Hermitage and having to do three-point turns to go back. (Some cars were so large that they had to do five, seven, or even nine-point turns.) Gonall was somewhat cross that the gates had not been opened and resolved to have a stiff word with the security staff. He fumbled for his keys, before pulling over and going to the gates. He noticed that there was a very large bicycle type lock on the gates for which he did not have the keys. Gonall saw the laminated notice that gave a stark message, "Tanswold School is now closed until further notice. For information, please ring Severs Clarke, 0212 452 3038."

Initially Gonall thought that it was a practical joke. If it were, it would be in the worst possible taste, and when he found the perpetrators, he would have their guts for garters. Several parents accosted him, "Mr Gonall, what the devil is going on?"

"I don't know. I am trying to find out."

"Is it some kind of joke because I don't find it at all funny? I have got an important meeting to get to, and I am late as it is."

"I agree. I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

“I have got an important meeting too. What are you going to do about it?”

“I have paid my fees, and I am demanding that you educate my son, Mr Gonall, not allow him to take part in a riot. Your fees are astronomical as it is, and you have the cheek to put them up another thousand pounds.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Shame had never been a feeling that Gonall had associated himself with, and he was not going to now. Instead, he extracted himself from the growing melee of angry parents, striding back to the car. He drove round to the front gate and found that it too was barred, and another copy of the notice was posted there. He parked the car in the residential street next to the school. The buses were starting to arrive, and boys were wandering around not quite sure what to do and pushing other passers-by off the pavement into the road. The gate to the pedestrian entrance was closed, but not locked, and Gonall strode purposefully down the drive to The Hermitage. He found two men in grey suits looking about his office, and was quite abrupt with them, “What the hell are you doing in my office?”

“You must be Mr Gonall?” replied one of the men.

“Yes I am.”

“And why are you down here?”

“I am the Headmaster, and I want to know what is going on.”

“I am Peter Vincent, Senior Partner (Insolvency) from Severs Clarke, and this is Charles Severs, Senior Partner.”

“What do you mean insolvency? Solvents are kept in the workshops and the caretaker’s cupboard.”

Vincent sighed. He had been warned that it was going to be hard to get Gonall to understand even the most elementary points about finance and accountancy. “We are here to wind you up,” he said calmly.

“This is certainly a wind up, and I am telling you that I for one do not find it at all funny. Get somebody to open the gates,” Gonall snapped. He was now not in the mood for any pun.

“Insolvency is never funny, Mr Gonall,” replied Mr Severs.

“I know that. That is why we keep the solvents locked away. We take a very dim view of solvent abuse. I will expel any boy found abusing solvents. If there has been solvent abuse on these premises, I will look into it and get to the bottom of it. But it’s no excuse to close the school, and to padlock the gates.”

“Mr Gonall, I don’t know where you are getting ideas of solvent abuse from,” said Severs patiently. “If that’s a problem in your school, perhaps it’s a police matter. Let me explain it to you in simple terms. You are broke.”

“I am not broken. I am in perfect working order,” snapped Gonall. “Please use grammatical English in my office.”

“For someone who is notorious for his poor use of written English, that is a little rich, if you ask me,” replied Vincent who had seen some of the memoranda put out by Gonall to his staff. “It means that you have no money left.”

“I have plenty of money left.”

“I mean the school. You are Headmaster so, *de facto* a trustee of the Tanswold School Trust.”

Gonall was irritated by these accountancy terms. He had been told about day fact oh before and had still not worked out what it was. He thought for a while, before saying, “I can be trusted. I told that little clown Scott to go and get some money, and to sort it out. He has clearly not done so, and he will face the sack when I see him later.”

Mr Vincent had been told about Gonall’s robust management style and was grateful that this moron was not his boss. He said, “Sacking Scott won’t be necessary, nor will it be for any of your staff. You are all redundant from the end of June. The Tanswold School Trust is bankrupt. Its debts far outweigh its assets. We are here to put you into administration and liquidate your assets.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Gonall aggressively.

“It means, Mr Gonall, that Tanswold School will be closed after the students have completed their examinations. We are going to sell off the contents of the school, and The Hermitage to the highest bidder.”

“It belongs to the Tanswold School Trust. You cannot do that.”

“Yes, Mr Gonall, we can. The school and its grounds are going to be used to repay your creditors, namely Doberman and Pinscher, the Midland and Great Northern Bank, and the Inland Revenue. You are being given time so that all students who have examinations can sit them. After the examinations, you will be closed down completely, and you had better tell the parents that they will have to make alternative arrangements for their children. I’m told that there are some very good schools around here, Goyder’s, Rockwood, Alverston Grammar to name but a few. No doubt they will send representatives to the auction.”

“What action?” asked Gonall who imagined representatives of these schools fighting over the school grounds. There was plenty of evidence of previous action around the school grounds.

“Auction, Mr Gonall. A sale in which the price increases until the highest bid is reached. Everything in this school is going to be auctioned off to get the highest return possible for the creditors.”

“So, you are going to sell the school lock, stock and barrel?” asked Gonall who was just starting to get a flavour of the seriousness of the situation.

“Yes,” said Mr Vincent who was getting irritated by the conversation. Either Gonall was a complete idiot or was stonewalling. “That is very perceptive of you. We are putting up for auction every single item that is to be found in the school. Once the school is closed after the summer examinations, you, your staff, and the pupils may remove their personal effects, but they must make an appointment to do so. You need to provide us with a list of names and addresses. If they are not removed within ten days, we will auction them.”

“What right have you got to do this?”

“We got a judgement in the High Court in London.”

“We were defending the case. We instructed our solicitor to fight these demands.”

“It was like fighting a dead sheep, so our clients told us. Your solicitor never turned up. It was a walk over.”

“Can’t someone buy us out?”

“We’ve thought of that, but your situation is too bad for that. There is nobody who will touch you with a barge pole. So, liquidation is the only way forward.”

“Do you realise what this means?” said Gonall. “This school is being prevented from attaining the status of a top-line academic institution. It is my ambition that Tanswold School has a destiny to rival Leeds and Bradford Grammar Schools, until you came in to wreck it all.”

“No, Mr Gonall,” said Mr Severs, “it has been the poor management of the school that has wrecked it. Besides, from the short time that I have been talking to you, and from what I have heard, I would not consider you to be a fit person to lead a school.”

“Do you mean that I have no role here?” snapped Gonall.

“Yes. You are going to join the ranks of the unemployed after the examinations. Perhaps the auctioneers will employ you as a porter. You can hold up the items at the sale. As for being a Headmaster, you see Mr Gonall, you don’t have what it takes. It needs vision, skill, courage, and good leadership. You possess none of these qualities. Now you need to show some leadership and go and explain to the parents what is going to happen today. You will return for the Governor’s meeting that is starting at one o’clock sharp.”

“And what’s that?” demanded Gonall peevishly.

“The school will be closed today, and that only examination groups will be taught for the rest of term.”

Gonall snorted and walked out of the office in high dudgeon. If even half of the dead legs he had on his staff had done half their jobs properly, he would not be in this position. Perhaps he could persuade parents to set up another school which he would lead to become a top institution. He was disabused of this delusion by some more parents gathered by the gates.

“What’s going on?”

“I have paid the fees. I want my money back.”

“Give me my money back. I demand my rights.”

“I cannot possibly take my son to work with me. I pay you to look after him and possibly even teach him a thing or two.”

“My money. I want it back. What are you going to do about it?”

Gonall pushed his way through the scrum of parents to be confronted by a TV crew. “Mr Gonall, we are from the BBC. Can you comment on what has happened?”

“No comment.”

“Many of these parents have paid a lot of money for you to educate their children.”

“No comment.”

“Isn’t this the climax to a whole series of scandals?”

“No comment. This interview is now terminated.”

“Mr Gonall, wasn’t it the result of a court order for you?”

“I have an order for you. Get out of my bloody way!”

Gonall tried to push past the camera, only to find a microphone placed in his way. He grabbed the microphone and yanked it. “Leave the microphone alone, Mr Gonall!” shouted one of the film crew. Gonall continued to yank it until the wire came away and he hurled the microphone into the road, where it went under the wheels of a lorry. The camera crew tried to block his way. Gonall lost his temper and charged the camera crew as if pushing his way through a loose scrum to score a try. The camera crew were knocked flat, and the camera, worth thirty thousand pounds, hit the pavement. There was a tinkle of glass from the smashed lens and filters, and the sides had burst open, revealing the circuitry inside.

Mr and Mrs Jones had decided to take a walk in the spring sunshine to get their pensions at the Post Office in Tanswold High Street. They were glad of their decision not to take the car, because the main road was jammed. There was a cacophony of blaring car horns as busy parents were getting increasingly desperate to get to work. Cars were doing strange manoeuvres in the middle of the road, and the road was getting increasingly clogged up. Gradually Tanswold St Mary was becoming gridlocked.

The Joneses were to regret their walk as it took them past the Tanswold School buses as they were disgorging their cargo onto the pavement. The pupils seemed to have adopted the manners of their Headmaster and were pushing passers-by out of the way. It was like a loose rugby scrum without the order. Mr and Mrs Jones were subjected to the same treatment, only Mrs Jones was pushed out into the road, and tripped over.

She was more shaken than hurt. Mr Jones tried to remonstrate but was given a mouthful of abuse that he had not heard for a long time. Upset and angry at this arrogant insolence from so-called well-brought-up children from so-called good homes, he escorted his trembling wife away from the melee, and they decided to go to the Post Office via the police station. It seemed that the parents did not know much better either. Some of them were indulging in fisticuffs because cars were in the way and they had to get to their ever-so-important jobs with ever-so-important meetings. In the middle of the High Street was a police car with its blue lights flashing, trying to get through the scrummage of valuable top-of-the-range four-by-fours, estate cars, executive saloons, and hot hatchbacks. Finally, the Joneses managed to get to the police station and rang for service at Reception. Constable Ellis came out with a demeanour of somebody who rather resented the effort of having to get out of a comfortable chair and said, "May I help you?" in a tone that suggested that it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Yes," replied Mr Jones. "My wife and I were passing Tanswold School. The boys were getting out of their buses, and it was like a scrum. They were pushing people off the pavement and my wife ended flat on the middle of the road. Can you send someone up to do something?" Mr Jones was of that generation that would become meek and mild at the sight of a policeman. If he had been in mischief, the constable would give him a clip round the ear and told him that next time he would tell his dad.

"There isn't a lot we can do," replied PC Ellis.

"Can't you send someone to give them what for?"

"I am afraid not, sir. With that lot we would have to send in the riot squad. In fact, we did a couple of weeks back."

“Can’t you give them a clip round the ear like I got if I was up to no good?”

“No, no. We would end up being banged up ourselves.”

“Couldn’t you send someone up?”

“No, I’m afraid not, sir. All our officers are out trying to clear up the mess that’s going on out there already. We’re going to have real problems?”

“Why?”

“Because they aren’t letting anyone into the school. We’ve got about three to four hundred Black ’n Tans wandering about the town. We’ve got to get rid of them. We’ve called the buses back to try to get them home.”

“What’s happened down there?”

“It’s a long story, but the school has had to close in a hurry. All sorts of things have been going on down there, and finally the bank has pulled the plug out. Good riddance as far as I am concerned.”

“I’ll second that. Nothing but a bunch of spoiled rich brats.”

“If it’s any comfort to you, sir, they won’t be bothering you again.”

Chapter 13

The final act of the demise of the Tanswold School Trust came later that day. The Governors had been called in as a matter of urgency to meet the administrators. John Gonall had wandered out of The Hermitage. The early May sunshine was bringing forth the spring flowers and insects were murmuring lazily. Not that Gonall cared. He had little sense of the artistic, unless it was the sight of the ball being passed along the wingers before the break to score the try. And even so, it was only artistic if there was a successful conversion. Gonall had heard a lot of terms about liquidation but didn't understand any of them. Surely the governors would pull rank and send those two men away and they could get money out of the bank? There had been mention about administration. But that was what Scott and his team did anyway. That was what they were paid to do, so what were Severs and Vincent doing there? Surely, they were not there just to ensure that notes got out to parents?

“Oi, you!” was the call that interrupted Gonall’s musings. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

The security man was blocking Gonall’s path. Gonall was giving the man his cold and icy stare. It was not working. The security man repeated his question, “Who are you and what do you think you’re doing? You are on private land.”

“Who are you?” snapped Gonall. “You are on private land.”

“If I were you, I would hop it,” replied the security man.

“You can do the hopping.” Gonall was starting to get angry. “This is my land. I am Headmaster here, so get off my property.”

“It’s the property of Severs Clarke, and you are trespassing, so if you would hop it, sir, I would be most grateful.” The security man was attempting a parody of a high-class voice. “You don’t look like a headmaster. If you’re the Headmaster, I am the Prince of Wales. Any way the headmaster’s that bald fat old codger. It’s more than my job’s worth to allow you to remain on these premises. So, hop it before I throw you out!”

“This is my property,” replied Gonall in a threatening tone of voice. He was still under the impression that he was going to make Tanswold School the academic hot house of the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. It was going to send more students to Oxford and Cambridge than Leeds and Bradford Grammar Schools combined. And that this imposter was trying to order him off the site was too much.

For the security man, this tubby little man was defying his authority. Mr Severs told him that no one was allowed on the premises unless they were important. He had heard plenty in his usual duties keeping out hoodlums in Carlsborough. He went into bouncer mode. Throwing this tubby little man off the premises was going to be just part of the job.

He was wrong. John Gonall lived life with the rugby player’s adage, “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” As the security man lunged over to grasp him, Gonall charged at him, as if he were racing towards the try-line. For once, Gonall’s assessment of the situation was correct. The security man crumpled in a winded heap as Gonall made contact.

Mr Severs had the situation under more control than Gonall, which was not difficult. Two policemen had knocked on the door and explained to him and Mr Vincent that there were the makings of another riot, this time from angry parents. “I sent Mr Gonall to do that,” said Mr Severs in a decidedly peeved tone of voice.

“He’s damn close started a riot,” replied one of the constables. “He’s also landed you a bill for thirty grand for a smashed TV camera.”

“We told him to say that the school is closed today, and that those in examination groups will return tomorrow,” replied Mr Vincent.

“I don’t think your Mr Gonall has got the message.”

Gonall appeared. “What are these goons doing in my office?” he demanded peevishly. His mood had not improved even after his demonstration of nifty rugby skills on the security man. And it deteriorated more when PC Goode joined the assembly along with John McConnell, News Editor for BBC North East and father of Simon McConnell. Mr McConnell had written a strong letter a few weeks

before and Gonall was not going to relish any meeting with him. As for PC Goode, Gonall had regularly applied teaching techniques on him that strayed beyond what was considered professionally acceptable. In other words, he had given Goode a good hiding on several occasions.

“So, Mr Gonall,” demanded McConnell pointing to the remains of the TV camera, “what are you going to do about this?”

“Throw the bloody lot of you out of my office. This is my school.”

“It isn’t you know,” said Mr Vincent. “The Tanswold School Trust is in administration.”

“I know it is. I administer it properly, and I have work to do,” snapped Gonall. “And my administrative staff have administration to get on with. That’s what I pay them to do.”

Mr Vincent sighed. Earlier that morning he had found out the extent to which Gonall had a very simplistic and literal view of events, and that explanations concerning financial distress would require an uphill battle.

“What are you going to do about the parents waiting outside?” one of the other constables asked. “The traffic jam is almost up to Alverston.”

“It’s up to you,” replied Gonall. “As far as I am concerned, the boys should be in here to get on with their examination work.”

Mr Severs had come back into the room, and said, “Mr Gonall, could I remind you that, to put it in words you understand, the Tanswold School Trust has gone tits up? That is why it’s not business as usual.”

“Who said anything about tits? Girls are being admitted to the school in September.”

“That’s rather sexist, Mr Gonall. You don’t have to bring the conversation down to the level of the rugby scrum. Besides, there is going to be no September for Tanswold School. It is in administration until the examinations are over, and its assets will be liquidated over the summer. You will find out what the process is in the Governors’ meeting this afternoon. Now will you please go to the parents and explain what is going to happen? This time there is a written statement.”

A sheet of typed A4 was passed to Gonall, and he stomped out of the front door and up the back drive. There was quite a crowd of parents and Black 'n Tans. The shouting would not have been out of place in a demonstration of a far-right political party. The ranks of police had grown markedly, and the traffic queue had extended right through Rockwood and into Beckton-on-Sower. Gonall got up onto a ladder with an electronic megaphone and the typed script.

“Tanswold School is closed for today but will open again tomorrow for examination groups only. The school will close at the end of term. We regret any inconvenience, it has all gone tits-up, so you can bugger off.”

The last part of the script had been added by Anthony Scott, presumably as an attempt at a joke. It had not occurred to him that Gonall would be dim-witted enough to read it out in full to the audience. Besides, his employer had in reality gone tits-up, so he could ignore the consequences.

For the Middle Riding of Yorkshire Constabulary, the consequences of Gonall's signing off were not ones could be so readily ignored. For Gonall, it was immediate as an egg hit him full square in the face. Seeing red, he leapt down from his ladder and lunged at the culprit. Before he made contact, several parents bundled him to the ground and threw him back into the back entrance. Several Black 'n Tans started a chant of “Gonad! Gonad!” And a policeman suggested that if Mr Gonall were to try that again, he could find himself on a charge of common assault.

Many parents were getting furious. They had paid a considerable amount of money in their fees and suddenly they were not getting what they had paid for. In reality, for a long time they had not been getting what they had been paying for. Gonall went off script and announced that he was going to start a new school in The Hermitage that was going to rival Leeds Grammar School and Bradford Grammar School. It was hardly surprising that many in his audience were unconvinced. But it did not put him off one little bit, and the TV camera pointing at him made him decide that his cause would receive favourable publicity.

Favourable publicity was the last thing that John McConnell was ready to give to Gonall and the Tanswold School Trust. The TV van,

aided and abetted by several policemen, had gone round to the front gate, and gone down the drive the wrong way. Back in the Headmaster's office, McConnell had arranged for his most trenchant journalist to quiz Gonall on his recent performance. Mr Vincent and Mr Severs formed the audience sitting in comfort on the sofa. It all looked very much more homely than in a studio. McConnell had an axe to grind, and this interview would prove to be an excellent sharpening tool. And there was none better than Helen Williams to give Gonall a hard time.

Gonall was not pleased to see that the TV people were still in his office, but the lure of his being able to talk about his ideas for a new school was far too tempting...

Ms Williams started the conversation, "So, Mr Gonall, that was a particularly interesting point to make to the parents outside that there will be a new school in September. Could you tell us more about it?"

"Of course. My new school will prepare its students rigorously for all examinations. The best will go on to Oxford and Cambridge. Every student will get grades A in everything they will do. It will have rigorous army style discipline..."

"How will you succeed when the current Tanswold School seems to have failed?"

"My students will be subjected to severe academic rigour. If they cannot perform to our expectations, they will be thrown out. It is as simple as that. Same with staff. I will select carefully the staff that I need. I will expect them to work hard, and I will subject them to rigorous inspection. If there is found anything wanting, I will warn them. After that I will throw them out."

"How will you manage staff performance?"

"By managing their performance. If they are dead legs, they will be out, and I...I mean we... will sue them for breach of contract. We have raised a fair bit of revenue that way previously..."

"Yes, we have heard about it. Did you see *Panorama* in February?"

"Of course," said Gonall, quite untruthfully. The *Panorama* programme was intellectually far beyond him. *Saracens vs Wasps* was his outer limit. "It showed me in a very good light."

Ms Williams begged to differ. She had seen several scenes that the producers had edited out on the grounds that transmission could be prejudicial to a fair trial for assault with intent. She continued the interview, “Do you think that assaults on your colleagues and your students are good management techniques?”

“Yes. They have always worked with my rugby squads. It toughens them up and ensures good performance. It’s central to my... our quality assurance system. It’s part of rigorous management to make sure we don’t have any slackers.”

“I see. Why hasn’t the current Tanswold School achieved your ambition to get all its students into Oxford and Cambridge?”

“Because most of the current staff are dead legs. And most of the current students don’t have the guts to do the work that is required. That is why the new Tanswold School will select boys using rigorous academic standards.”

“So, what would your criteria be?”

“Rigorous academic standards. They will have to have learned it by the time they get here, or I will deal with them until they learn it...”

Gonall launched off into a diatribe that included a considerable amount of homophobic rhetoric before he named several colleagues, labelling them as runts, imbeciles, and cretins. Ms Williams sighed. She had not decided whether Gonall was being completely devious, like the most corrupt kind of politician, or whether he was a complete idiot. She was now sure that he was a psychopath. The interview would have to be heavily edited before broadcast, as it was due to go out before the watershed. She decided on another strategy. “Mr Gonall,” she said, “the Tanswold School Trust is in administration. How do you see yourself raising the money to start your proposed new academy?”

“Of course, the school is in administration. I am administering it and I pay administration staff to do the work. All schools need good administration.”

“Mr Severs and Mr Vincent have taken you into administration because you are insolvent.”

“I can administer it myself, thank you very much. I am perfectly solvent. I take a very dim view of solvent abuse and would expel any boy caught abusing solvents.”

“I didn’t ask you about solvent abuse. I said you are insolvent. It means you don’t have any money.”

“I have got some money. I am not rich, but I have some savings.”

“No, Mr Gonall. When I say ‘you’, I mean the Tanswold School Trust. It doesn’t have any money at all.”

“Rubbish. It’s got plenty of money. It’s the Bursar’s job to make sure that there is money. Our parents pay plenty into the school.”

“Would you say that it’s money well spent?”

“Of course. We provide a top rate education here, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Mr Gonall, are you aware that the Tanswold School Trust is ceasing to trade after the examinations in June?”

“This is a high-class establishment. We don’t trade. We are a leading independent school with...”

“...with a mountain of debt, about six and a half-million in all. Where are you going to get the money from in order to continue in business?”

“Mind your own business.”

“Mr Gonall, I am minding my business, which is to ask you about your proposed new school. It is obvious that you have little idea of what business is about, especially when it comes to administration. What are your qualifications?”

“I am very well qualified. It’s these dead legs that should be disqualified.”

“For the second time, I am asking you about your qualifications to run a multi-million-pound business. You seem rather ignorant about some of the simplest things about running businesses.”

“None of your business.” Gonall was not going to admit publicly that he only had one O-level in History. He had made up his CV and had never been to Oxford as he claimed. The headmaster at the previous

independent school at which he had worked had been delighted at how the First Fifteen had progressed. No-one had bothered to check his CV out. In the meantime, Gonall had forgotten which Oxford College he had been to. When he applied to Tanswold, he had stated that he had been to Porterhouse College in Oxford. That Porterhouse College was in Cambridge was neither here nor there. Sir Kenneth Rounce, an Old Porthusian, had not picked up on it. The First Fifteen at Tanswold was a force to be reckoned with, and for Stoate, that was all that mattered. With his tendency to use physical methods on his pupils to ‘persuade them to cooperate’, Gonall’s classes were a model of discipline that would have delighted a Trappist abbot. Therefore, Stoate had never worried that Gonall had the same intellectual insight into historical events as Pooh Bear, and his knowledge of the events themselves was similar to that of Piglet.

“I must press you on this, Mr Gonall,” continued Ms Williams.

“You press me, Miss Williams, and I’ll thump you.”

“Not exactly the language I would expect from a man who is setting himself up as the Headmaster of a leading independent school. Mind you I would not have told my audience of potential customers to ‘bugger off’. Are you a fit and proper man to do this?”

“And that is what I am telling you to do as well, Miss Williams,” Gonall said testily.

“Not so fast, Mr Gonall. I will repeat the question. Are you a fit and proper person to run a school?” Ms Williams was trying very hard to remain professional. She had concluded that Gonall was not a fit or proper person to run an industrial shredder.

“My fitness is none of your business. I exercise every day if you must know, so I am fit – very fit for a person of my age. As for being a proper person, I can run things good and proper.”

“That’s not what your potential customers say. We have spoken to a number of very angry parents outside.”

Ms Williams played a number of extracts that had been recorded.

“Their sons will not be accepted into my school,” Gonall retorted. He had not enjoyed being referred to as a tin-pot general, Napoleon, a numbskull, or a blockhead. Those were the ones that were accepted as

being fit for broadcast before the watershed. He continued, “They have no right to be angry. If they had done their jobs properly, their sons would have what it takes to get into Oxford or Cambridge. Instead, they...”

And Gonall singled out a number of boys by name, and described them in further homophobic, racist, and other derogatory terms. That bit would have to be edited out; otherwise, the BBC could have found itself liable to action at law for gross slander and defamation.

Ms Williams was trying hard to get a punch line to her interview, something that normally she found easy, even with the most obdurate politician. She had one more go. “Mr Gonall, what would you say to the parents of pupils who have had their education disrupted by the events of the last few weeks?”

“They can bugger off.”

“Is that all you can say? What about the staff you have mistreated and not paid?”

“They can bugger off. If they hadn’t been such dead-legs and done their jobs properly, they would not be in this position.”

“Who led them so that the school’s position was so poor?”

“Mr Stoate. You should be asking him these damn fool questions and not wasting my time. So, bugger off.”

“Mr Gonall, you have been a member of senior staff here for a number of years. And you took over as Headmaster. Should you not take responsibility?”

“Bugger off.”

“Can’t you say something more constructive?”

“Bugger off. This interview is terminated. Bugger off out of my office before I throw you out.”

Ms Williams and Mr McConnell did just that but were armed with a goodly amount of material that would make John Gonall look, at best, a complete prat.

The emergency meeting called by Severs, Clarke, & Co was not one that was well received by the Governors of the Tanswold School Trust. A lot of very important meetings (the practical alternatives to work) were being missed by very important people. Worse than that, there was no luncheon provided in the Old Dining Room. But the content of this meeting was to give its participants severe mental indigestion.

Grumpily the Governors went through to the Old Library. Even Donald Blance, normally a most genial host, was unsmiling as they went in. Their mood was not improved as Mr Vincent and Mr Severs sat down and got their lunchboxes out and started eating their sandwiches.

“Donald, what has happened to our luncheon?” Sir Ronald grumbled. He had not anticipated the non-appearance of a sumptuous buffet and had brought no sandwiches with him.

“Severs Clarke will not allow us to have a luncheon here. They consider it to be an unnecessary expense. May I suggest we postpone the start of the meeting so that you can go and get something to eat from the High Street?”

“No, Mr Blance,” said Mr Vincent, “we need to start this meeting promptly, as we need to get a result as quickly as possible.”

Blance glared at his guests. They were as welcome as a visit from the hangman. On the dining room table, there was a laptop computer and a digital projector. Mr Vincent was itching to get on with his presentation. Mr Gonall looked on impassively, devoid of any emotion. Donald Blance opened the meeting with great.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Normally it gives me great pleasure to welcome you as members of the Governing Body of the Tanswold School Trust to our meetings, which can be very congenial occasions. By contrast, we have to meet today in a meeting that cannot be described as in the least bit pleasurable, for we are considering the very existence of the Tanswold School Trust. We are in a meeting to see, what, if anything, can be retrieved. I must hand over to Mr Charles Severs and Mr Peter Vincent who will discuss the current position.”

“Thank you, Mr Blance,” said Mr Vincent. “There is very little to it. You are finished. Kaput. Let me show you.”

Mr Vincent started his presentation, which was full of graphs, spreadsheet extracts and had a lot of technical terms of commercial stress and insolvency. There were lots of large figures that were prefixed by pound-signs and were in red type. The liabilities of the Tanswold School Trust ran into about six and a half million pounds. There were slides on liquidation, Company Voluntary Arrangements, and administration. It had come to light that Graham Smith had secured a number of loans on the Draycott Foundation. His creative accounting had hidden this from the Governing Body and Lartington had not picked this up either. Other loans had been secured on The Hermitage. Recently loans had been taken out by Anthony Scott, the current Director of Finance. These, too, had been secured on The Hermitage.

Anthony Scott, the Director of Finance, should have been at the meeting. It was, after all, something to do with finance. Nobody had noticed his absence until Sir Ronald Wiseman made his observation, “Where is the bursar? Shouldn’t he have a say about this?”

“He needs to be getting on with his administration,” replied Gonall, who had found the whole presentation rather tiresome. “You told us we were in administration, so it would be natural for Scott to be administering, wouldn’t it? He would be in his office. Eileen, go and get him.”

Eileen went to get him. She tutted as she left the Old Dining Room. She could not stand Gonall. Stoate may have been something of a buffoon, but he had his charms and was always very good to her. Gonall was a charmless lout, ignorant of anything that resembled common courtesy. She did not rate Scott much and had her suspicion that he was up to something. He was not in his office, and the door was unlocked. His jacket was not there, and, when she looked out of the window, his car was no longer in its reserved parking place. And when she returned to the Old Library to report the Financial Director’s absence, Gonall’s response was entirely predictable. “Why isn’t he there? I told him to get on with the administration. These men tell us we are in administration and I told him to get on with it.”

Mr Vincent sighed heavily. His presentation was clearly not getting through to the headmaster. “Administration means that your business is about to be wound up.”

“This is the biggest wind up I have ever experienced, and I don’t find it in the least bit funny,” said Gonall. “In fact, I am beginning to get rather fed up with it.”

“I don’t know whether you are trying to wind us up, Mr Gonall,” said Mr Severs, “but we are starting to get really rather fed up with you. Especially when you told your clientele that they should bugger off.”

“It was there on that statement,” said Gonall peevishly.

“Could you not have the sense not to read it? Anyway, who wrote it?”

“Mr Scott did,” said Eileen. “He was always adding things like that. The number of times I had to remove swear-words from reports and minutes that he had written.”

“Did it not occur to you that you should have written the minutes?” snapped Gonall. “Why was Scott doing that? I was paying him to make sure that we had enough money. So now we have to listen to this claptrap about administration.”

“It’s not claptrap, Mr Gonall, it’s deadly serious,” Mr Vincent interrupted, before continuing with his presentation.

Gonall sat back. He was not aware of, nor did he give a damn about, the other Governors who were staring at him with emotions ranging from utter contempt to livid disbelief. He did not enhance his reputation by rummaging about in his bag and bringing out a very large baguette filled with spicy chicken. He curtly ordered Eileen to get him some coffee. It did not occur to him that to offer the others some coffee would be a hospitable thing to do.

When Eileen came back, he took the mug without thanks and placed it without a coaster on the antique table, making a ring on it that would require the services of an experienced restorer to remove. He tore into the baguette and bits of spicy chicken fell out onto the table. At least, while his mouth was chock-full, he could not make any of his asinine interjections, until Mr Vincent was talking about the extensive occurrences of misfeasance that had occurred under the watch of the Tanswold School Trust.

“What has Miss Pheasant got to do with it?” Gonall interrupted, spraying crumbs across the table.

“Misfeasance, Mr Gonall. It means breach of duty in the management of the finances, Mr Gonall.”

“I think you mean Miss Pleasance. She used to teach French here. She had nothing to do with the finances. I got rid of her because she was useless, like the rest of them.”

“I am sure she was not that displeased to be shot of your management style, Mr Gonall,” Mr Severs said with barely concealed contempt. “Misfeasance is what you as directors of the Tanswold School Trust are guilty of.”

“I am the headmaster here.”

“Yes, and as such, you are, *ex-officio*, the managing director of the Tanswold School Trust.”

“Stoate is *ex-officio*. I got rid of him. If you want money, you need to chase him. He’s got plenty of it.”

“Yes, we know all about how you got rid of Stoate, Mr Gonall,” said Mr Severs. “It was all over the papers – *Coup at Blunderhouse Hall*. You won’t get anything out of him; he no longer has anything whatever to do with the Tanswold School Trust.”

Gonall returned to his baguette. He looked totally disinterested as Mr Vincent finished his presentation, and concluded, “Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, the position is not good. You have liabilities of about six million pounds, and as such, the Tanswold School Trust is insolvent. If you are to continue trading, you are going to have to find that money, which will be a big task for you. Otherwise, it is liquidation. Your biggest asset is The Hermitage, which will sell for about two million. We had it valued, and it would probably be of interest to a large company to make it into its headquarters, or it will make a delightful country house hotel. Its value has been somewhat diminished by the large amount of paint that was splattered about by your tin soldiers, Mr Gonall.”

“How much are we as governors liable for?” asked Lady Summerscales.

“Since you are a charitable trust, you are each liable for one pound.”

A whip-round occurred and twenty pounds was gathered, not exactly enough to pay off the debts of the Tanswold School Trust, but

enough to pay for about five minutes' worth of time for Messrs Severs and Vincent. John Gonall eyed the whip-round with some disdain. He said, "Mr Severs and Mr Vincent, you have called this meeting at considerable inconvenience to me... I mean us. You have told us that you are putting us into administration even though I have perfectly good administrative staff. They should be as I damn well pay them to be. You have used a lot of terms like solvent and discussed a past and ineffective member of staff, Miss Pleasance. You talk about six million pounds. You are talking about charging us fees, so will you kindly get on with your jobs and get it for us. Besides, who told you that you could get a valuation on The Hermitage? I am headmaster, so it's my property."

Twenty-three mouths dropped in unison. Gonall stared back at them through his pig-like eyes that were one of the borders between the real world and his pig-ignorance. None of them seemed to share his vision of the academic hothouse that was to be the new Tanswold School. He was bored with all this financial claptrap. Liquidation was what his First Fifteen did to the opposition.

"Mr Gonall," said Mr Severs contemptuously, "do you have any idea of what we have been discussing at this meeting for last two hours or so? We are not here to give you money. We are here to pay your creditors a fraction of the money that the Tanswold School Trust owes. There is a long list. If you can raise six million by the end of this month, everything will be fine and dandy for the Trust."

"I don't give a damn about the Predators. We have never played them. I don't see why we should pay them either. It's your job to get the six million, not mine. You clearly haven't done that, and you are wasting my... I mean our time. I intend to make this school the best bloody institution in the whole of the North of England. Going to Oxford and Cambridge will be the norm rather than the exception. It will be a model of tough, rigorous discipline. There will be no place for fairies..."

Gonall launched into another long and well-rehearsed diatribe that plumbed the depths of his superficiality, ignorance, bigotry, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia, only stopping to slurp his coffee in a manner that was, at best, uncouth. Finally, Mr Severs could stand it no longer and shouted, "Mr Gonall, you are wasting my time, your time and everybody else's time. I need to understand you, in words that even

you will understand, that your organization, the Tanswold School Trust has gone tits-up.”

“Who said anything about tits?” replied Gonall. “I have just explained to you that I do not particularly want girls in this school in September. My school is about raising tough young leaders of men. You keep on going on about six million pounds being paid to the Predators. You are meant to be finding six million for us, which at the moment you are not doing. Instead of dribbling on with the claptrap you have been going on about, bloody well go and find it. There’s plenty in the bank.”

“There isn’t going to be a school in September!” yelled Mr Severs. “There is no money in the bank! We are trying to get as much money as we can, to pay off the vast sums that are owed by the Tanswold School Trust. As far as your scheme for a new school is concerned, you can go and find any number of like-minded parents and see if they will get the money for you to set up your own institution. As far as I am concerned, I wouldn’t want my son to attend your version of Dotheboys Hall. Wackford Squeers must have been modelled on you.”

“What do you mean by that?” said Gonall threateningly.

“I wouldn’t waste my time trying to explain Dickens to you.”

“What has Mr Dickens got to do with it? I want the money from you and the support of the Governors to start a new Tanswold School. Can’t you get that, Mr Severs, or are you so dim...”

“Dickens you dolt!” shouted Mr Severs. “He was a Victorian author.”

“Don’t you dare call me a dolt,” snarled Gonall. “I am the headmaster here, and I am demanding that you and the clown that is your sidekick get off my property. We will find the money elsewhere. Don’t you come back snivelling for our trade, and you can remove the fairy that is your son from my school at once. You will be, as usual, liable for next year’s fees.”

Mr Severs was losing his professional detachment. “I am already an unsecured creditor, as this ghastly institution you have appointed yourself as head, is bankrupt of money, and you are bankrupt of any form of morality, humility, and decency. Let me tell you now that you are hated by the pupils in this school, the teachers, and despised by the

parents. You have the stunted intellect of Pooh Bear combined with the empathy of a psychopath. In other words, if you had a brain, you would be dangerous.”

Gonall was furious by now and was only just managing not to take a swing at Mr Severs. The next broadside came, not from Mr Severs or Mr Vincent, but Mr Dickens, the Chairman elect of the Governing Body. “Mr Gonall,” he said, “I totally second what Mr Severs has said. As father of a pupil in this school, I can vouch for every word that has been said. I think the way you persecuted pupils and staff was appalling. I know that my son is no angel, but the way you have treated him was outrageous, and your hounding of Mr Cooke was a travesty. Now don’t you come out with your words like ‘runt’ and ‘fairies’. I have heard them all before. The vision of Tanswold School led by you is not one I would support. Indeed, I would move now that you are removed from your post as Headmaster forthwith.”

The Baroness Deborah Summerscales of Lees pitched into the debate. “I will second that, ladies and gentlemen. I am no liberal trendy as you all well know. I have been a member of the Conservative Party for my entire adult life. I have often wondered why we agreed that Mr Gonall should replace Mr Stoate, given the bad publicity that his coup gave to the Trust. This is a man who has a vision, but his intellect is so stunted that he has not the least ability to bring it to fruition.”

“This is out of order,” Gonall snapped.

Lionel Hyland added his support to Gonall. “John is right,” he said, “It is out of order. There needs to be a full investigation, and we need to have a formal disciplinary procedure. We have to allow him to have representation. After the facts have been established beyond all reasonable doubt, the motion will have to be debated fully and be adopted. The Chairman’s vote will count in the event of a hung decision.”

That younger staff were denied such a procedure and could be sacked on a whim had never occurred to Mr Hyland, who was never averse to gross hypocrisy, but was a stickler for correct committee procedure.

Mr Severs intervened. “I think I can help here. I totally agree that Mr Gonall is not a proper person to run this school. And I do not

want him anywhere near this place as we go through the process of administration and receivership. As insolvency practitioners, we will take on the duty of running and administering the school for the next three months while everything is wound up. Unlike Mr Gonall, we will ensure that staff are paid and looked after properly. Under the current circumstances, the Tanswold School Trust cannot be allowed to continue its trading unless there is an immediate payment of six million, three hundred thousand, nine hundred and thirty-four pounds and twenty eight pence.”

“This is out of order,” snapped Gonall. “Eileen, get me a coffee.”

“How many others would like a coffee?” Eileen asked, as she was more *au fait* with hospitality than her boss. Twenty-three hands went up.

“Just get the coffee for me,” Gonall snapped. “Otherwise, you will be ages faffing about. I... I mean we don’t have the time for you to muck about in the kitchen.”

“There are others, you know, John,” Eileen replied as she went to the kitchen.

Eileen returned a several minutes later with the ordered coffee, a plate of biscuits and a brown personnel folder on which was written *John Brian Gonall*. Gonall took the coffee and several biscuits more than were decent. He had put another couple of rings onto the surface of the antique table, despite being provided with a coaster. Mr Severs leafed through the folder.

“Mr Gonall, you claim on your curriculum vitae that you went to Oxford. Which college were you at?”

“Mind your own business.” Gonall snapped spraying crumbs from the biscuit in his mouth.

“I am doing just that. I am minding my business very carefully, which is why I am asking you what Oxford college you went to.”

“I went to college in Oxford. Can’t you read?”

It was true. Gonall had been to Oxford Technical College to do an OND in Sports Science. Somehow it sounded better to say that he had been to Porterhouse College in Oxford.

“Mr Gonall, it says you were at Porterhouse College in Oxford. When were you there?”

Gonall had to do some quick working out in his head. He was born in 1950, so he managed to add eighteen and come up with 1969.

“So, you will know all about what happened at Porterhouse College between 1969 and 1972.”

“Yes, we trounced the opposition every time.”

“Who was Master in your time?”

“There were plenty of masters.”

“What degree did you do?”

“History. There is no-one who has a more...”

“...superficial knowledge.”

“What do you mean by that, Mr Severs?” snapped Gonall.

“What I mean is this. For your information, there is no Porterhouse College in Oxford. It’s in Cambridge. At that time, there was a very bizarre scandal in which the Master, Sir Godber Evans, was found dying and nominated the Head Porter, James Skullion, as his successor. If you were at the college at that time, you would have known about it. I am satisfied that your CV is entirely made up.”

“That’s none of your bloody business,” Gonall snapped. “Your job is to keep us going, which you are not doing. So, bugger off.”

“You teach History, don’t you?”

“What I teach and don’t teach is none of your business, Mr Severs. I have already told you to bugger off.”

“Several times. And I am not going to, because you have obtained a job with the Tanswold School Trust by deception. That is a criminal offence. So, you need to bugger off, in your own words, or I will report it to the police. Do you fancy an eighteen month stretch inside?”

“You tell me to bugger off, and I will punch you,” snarled Gonall.

“That would add another six months for assault. You have one O level to your name, and that is not of a particularly good grade. You are a fraud, Mr Gonall, and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“No comment. Bugger off.”

Mr Vincent ushered in four large security men. With his head held high, and his feet even higher, John Gonall was ejected from the grounds of The Hermitage.

Chapter 14

The final few weeks of the Summer Term of 1999 was conducted quietly and efficiently at Tanswold School. The Governing Body had dissolved itself and the whole entity was run from the Bursar's Office by representatives of Severs Clarke. The headmaster's office ended up as a common room, and nobody complained. The computer on the desk still made lavatory noises as it went about its business. It all seemed entirely appropriate, considering how the Trust had gone down the pan. There seemed to be almost a holiday atmosphere in The Hermitage, with the odious Gonall no longer there. It was hardly surprising to many staff that Gonall's qualifications were faked. Nobody had ever reckoned much on his intellectual ability and insight. Members of staff were busy applying for other posts and going off to interviews. By the end of term, almost all of them had secured employment in other schools or industries. They had the satisfaction of knowing that any boss could not have been as ignorant as to their welfare as the Tanswold School Trust.

Above all, they were paid.

There was no speech day, but a quiet and dignified stand-down, followed by staff parties, after which holidays came for the staff. For the employees of Severs Clarke & Co, the chief job was to dispose of the assets of the Tanswold School Trust at as high a price as possible to secure the best return for the creditors. In reality there was not much of value to dispose of. Not many wanted an unreliable network of low-specification computers. Like vultures, senior staff from other schools descended on the carcass of Tanswold School to strip the equipment that could have some educational use. The rest ended up in the skip.

In August, the results for A-level and GCSE examinations were announced. They were truly abysmal, and so many students missed out on their university choice that the headmaster's office was used as a centre for clearing. Many joined local schools and colleges to re-sit their examinations. There they discovered many aspects of their subject syllabuses that they had never encountered before. It was too tempting for the local press. The headlines of *Blunderhouse Hall sent to the back of the class* and *Dunce's cap for Blunderhouse Hall* were prominent.

By September 1999, The Hermitage was empty and on the market. To maintain it in sellable condition, it required heating and maintenance, which cost the receivers a lot of money, so it ended up being sold at a knock-down price to a Mr and Mrs Campbell who owned a well-appointed and exquisitely run country house hotel in Scotland. There was a lot of work to do, and they spent almost as much money on the work as they had in buying The Hermitage. They razed Gonall Hall (it had been renamed from Stoate Hall when John Gonall had become headmaster) to the ground and used the area for a car park. The classrooms lent themselves very nicely for adaptation to guest rooms, while the science and technology block ended up as a first-rate conference venue. The first guests arrived in March 2000 and were thrilled by the chic homeliness of the place.

John Gonall had attempted to muster support for a new Tanswold School and hired a hall for the launch. Nobody came. His cause had not been helped by a headline in the local paper about *Blunder Head's fake CV*. It was just as well, as his presentation would have made an excellent manifesto for an extreme right-wing party. Like Stoate, Gonall's friends from the Byland Foresters deserted him. He was single, with neither sense of conscience, nor attachment to the area. He left one day in November and nobody heard from him again.

Piers Algernon d'Arcy Fairfax was charged with a number of offences that centred on abuse of his position of trust as far as teenage boys were concerned. He was found guilty and given twenty months. While he was serving his time, he was further charged with rape of a teenage boy. He got an extra seven years after being found guilty, and a concurrent three years for perjury after a ham-fisted attempt at framing Stoate. After his release in 2004, he was banned from working with children and placed on the Sex Offenders' Register for life. Piers d'Arcy-Fairfax lived in isolation in a cottage on the family estate, an embarrassment to his family. In 2012 he died an embittered clerical reject with the political views of the extreme right.

The reformed Leslie Stoate and his wife Marjorie enjoyed their life in retirement flying and working on their garden at Quarmby Manor.

In 2008 they opened it to the public, and many hundreds of people enjoyed its peace and tranquillity. The garden had made Mr and Mrs Stoate lose a prodigious amount of weight and made both the old people very fit for their age. Leslie Stoate even came back to The Hermitage to advise the Campbells on landscaping and other design aspects of the hotel.

Robert Cooke was true to his word. He had vowed that he would never darken the doors of a classroom again. He got a job as an engineer with a company in Derbyshire and was rapidly promoted to run a number of significant projects with which the company was involved. By 2010, he was the Director of Engineering, and the company bucked the trends caused by the banking crisis of 2008.

Andrew and Joan McEwan decided that they needed a new start and moved to the Scottish town of Corscadden in Buchananshire. In 2000, Andrew McEwan was appointed as Head of English at Strathcadden Academy, and in 2008 was appointed as Depute Headmaster. After a period as Acting Headmaster, he retired in 2026.

The events that occurred at The Hermitage were used by many advisers to independent schools as an object lesson on ensuring tight controls on finance and keeping the washing of dirty linen an entirely private matter. There were further very public scandals exposed, and the Byland Foresters Masonic lodge disbanded. The death of a number of very high-status individuals ensured that a lot of truth was left at the bottom of a very deep well.

Chapter 15

Epilogue

Although I have published this story, the real author is my late father, Ewan Walker. He was something of a hoarder all his life, and he had boxes full of interesting material in the attic of his beautiful house here in Corscadden. He accumulated all sorts of stuff from when he was very young. Although he wouldn't keep things that were useless, he tended to put stuff aside, "in case it comes in useful one day". It did not but we have been bequeathed a treasure trove of material that has been an extensive record of the life of a man in the Twenty-First Century. Some of the items are of very high value due to their rarity.

I found this detailed account written on a laptop computer that he had as a teenager in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century. Although it had the ancient operating system *Windows 7*, it still worked. I also had access to the extensive hand-written notes and have added one or two extra details. Ewan always had a beautiful hand, from the the time we have samples of his handwriting, to the day that he passed away last year. He loved poetry and literature, and his writing is, in my opinion, equal to the best in the English Language. After the death of his mother, when he was sixteen, he found much solace in literature and wrote an anthology of poems. He never rated them that highly and said that it was far better to write rubbish poetry than to take mind-altering drugs or getting drunk every night. As for the poetry, I disagree. It is gentle and sensitive, showing his early love for the English Language. He also wrote extensively in French and German.

Ewan wrote much throughout his life. He never got round to publishing it. We often said that he should, but he always maintained that nobody would want to read it.

He wrote the following at the end of his account:

I first came across this story not long after my mother, Mary Walker, passed away. We stayed with Dr Samuel Proudlock, who was a colleague of my father's at the University of Edinburgh. He told me

about the Tanswold School. By a total coincidence, his wife, Jessica, was the daughter of my English teacher, Mr Andrew McEwan, who was also Depute Headmaster of my school, Strathcadden Academy. Mr McEwan was therefore kind enough to tell me the story in detail from his perspective. Where he could not fill in details, he was kind enough to put me in touch with many other people, including Lucy Simpson and her father David, Robert Cooke, Peter Bromley, and Robert Hardcastle who gave me their stories.

Another coincidence that was that my half-brother, Christian, who was a teenager at the time, worked as a silver-service waiter at the Hermitage Country House Hotel at weekends and during the holidays. The owners, Mr and Mrs Campbell, owned the Glenclawe Hotel outside Buchanan.

When I went to see Mr J L D Stoate in July 2014, I was particularly nervous, because he was, in effect, the villain of the piece. Even so, he was a most kind and courteous commentator. Even though he was in his late seventies, he told his story to a shy sixteen-year-old with great candour. When I had written up the account, he was kind enough to read through it and made one or two corrections. He told me that he had mistreated people very badly, and he emphasised how much wanted to atone for this. Mr Donald Blance also told me a great deal about the Governors of the school. Again, he was very kind to me.

I feel it right that I do not publish this account while Mr and Mrs Stoate and Mr and Mrs Blance are alive. They are elderly and although Mr Stoate is fully prepared to support my publication, I think they should be allowed to live out the rest of their lives in peaceful dignity.

Sleeping dogs should lie.

Ewan Walker

Brewster House, Corscadden

Saturday 7th November 2015

I need not add any more.

Peter Walker

Brewster House, Corscadden

Sunday 28th June 2099