

DOCTOR MERVEILLE

The fact that Doctor Merveille turned out to have no accredited knowledge of computers proved to be no serious impediment to his appointment to the post of ICT teacher at Bragwell College. He completely bemused the interview panel (which included the county advisor for ICT) with his charm and enthusiasm. It also went in his favour that a secret County Hall directive stipulated the need, above all other considerations, to bring ethnic minority teachers into Bragwell, where hardly anything other than a pasty face was to be seen on its mean streets. Doctor Merveille's face resembled a huge, shiny black plum in which one could almost see one's own reflected. It later became clear to me on checking up much, much later that he was not in fact a doctor of anything, but had a counterfeiter's knack of producing certificates from any first-rank university which took his fancy.

He had been in Britain a few months, he told me, when he saw our job advertised in The Times Ed. The school was an ill-designed, narrow-corridorred sixties effort, along which the much larger pupils of the present era fizzed in a perpetual ferment of excitement, like cheap sparkling wine in the neck of a bottle. It had had a bad reputation for as long as anyone could remember, and anyone who was anyone in the village and in its smaller satellites of Smockingford and Fairleigh Parva, drove their children the eight or so miles in their 4x4s to a much posher establishment in Fairleigh Magna.

An Ofsted inspection was looming on the horizon and we expected to fall into the hell of Special Measures. Our new Head had had two years in post and for some of the previous year he had been on stress leave. In a special staff meeting, after one particularly harrowing week, Danny Stirk, our PE teacher had jokingly asked our RE teacher, a serious, devout woman who was given the run-around by the pupils, to say a prayer for us all. And much to our surprise and Danny's amusement she actually did and we even bowed our heads.

The large village of Bragwell was in the orbit of Earlstone, a dying star of textiles manufacturing in the East Midlands. The pupils at the college did no more than reflect the village's core values. They were generally rude, wilfully ignorant, unambitious and, like their in-bred and in-breeding parents, ferociously inward-looking and narrow-minded. They were the only people convinced that there was nothing wrong with Bragwell. Even Earlstone people - who had remarkably little room to sneer at anyone or anywhere - sneered at Bragwell and its denizens. The exploits of its feral youths regularly made the front page of The Earlstone Gazette, a weekly paper which consisted mainly of reports of fund-raising events for sick children in the community. A new youth club in the village had been razed to the ground after a matter of weeks and provided a spectacular, if only short-lived diversion for those very youngsters whose much mentioned boredom had led to its erection in the first place, by a council renowned for its meanness. "The Earlstone rate-payers would close the schools if they could," had chuntered the only Labour councillor on our board of governors.

Like Earlstone, the village had formerly been a very prosperous and a busy place until its shoe industry was eradicated by cheap, plasticky imports from the Far East. This had given its instinctive xenophobia and racism an even harder shell to crack. One parent had gone as far as to question why her idle, lanky daughter should have to do French on the grounds that she had "no intention" of ever visiting France. I had showed the letter to Davis, the burnt-out and disconsolate Head of MFL. He wondered why she had only left it at that. Had she thought about it a little longer she could have also requested her disapplication from Music (she would never -

apart from her own trumpet - ever play an instrument); and from History (for what had already happened too obviously bore no relevance to her daughter's futile existence) and from RE - as the silly, sinful girl would never go to heaven.

People in Bragwell genuinely thought like this - or rather held the view - that if it did not bring in a few bob it was not worth doing. When that lanky girl missed a period shortly before her fourteenth birthday the mother bitterly complained that the school had "let her down" by not starting sex education earlier; that it would have been better for her to have done sex education rather than French. To this the Head of Year diplomatically replied that sex education had been on the time-table on Tuesdays all through Years 7 and 8 and consoled with the parent that, as the record showed, her unfortunate Tracey had mostly been ill for the first part of the school week throughout those years. To this the mother had, uncharacteristically, no answer and her daughter duly swelled and gave issue to a baby daughter with whom, in her own words, she would be still young enough, at twenty-eight, to go disco-dancing when the child had reached the age of fourteen or fifteen. She had unwittingly become another statistic in a village which boasted the highest pre-sixteen pregnancy rate in the whole of the European Union.

I was Deputy Head at Bragwell College when Doctor Merveille was appointed. The Head had got to his feet at a staff meeting one hot July afternoon and was almost beside himself with excitement to announce what a trophy he had secured for the school. He had managed to recruit a graduate with a Summa Cum Laude from a top continental university who could speak six languages fluently; who also had a degree in Botany, who had played soccer for his native Ivory Coast, could solve the Mephisto crossword in ten minutes, wrote epic poetry in French and English about slavery, had run a sub-four-minute mile and was a computer wizard. The staff chuckled, thinking they were being wound up.

"When did he last climb Everest?" muttered someone with a smirk. Jones - that was the Head's name - flicked through his briefing notes and said that he had in fact climbed Kilimanjaro. There was an embarrassed silence. Had our overstressed headmaster finally lost all his grip on reality? Eventually someone said "And does he see Bragwell as more of a challenge than K2?"

Before going any further, perhaps I should tell you a little about Richard Warner Kelly, 54 years old. Me. What were my career objectives at that time? In a nutshell to retire at the earliest opportunity, as my own favourite expression had it - "as soon as the dust settles." Only the dust never did. The school seemed ever in the grip of a whirlwind of pressures, internal and external. The external ones consisted mainly of initiatives from central government, largely to do with target-setting over a variety of areas, ranging from exclusion-rates to the quality and uptake of school dinners; from local government there came from time to time advice on "strategic planning" and prescriptions for Curriculum Review with page upon page of flow-charts cleverly thought up by ex science and maths teachers who had had nervous breakdowns and had been withdrawn from the fray to the remote safety of airless cubes deep within County Hall.

I consigned every new document to a special cupboard in my office, onto the top of a pile which, akin to strata in sedimentary rock, expressed perfectly the futility of the present. It was also a metaphor of my career. I had begun with a passion for English and its power to free the captive mind of the working class child, and was finishing with History, having been persuaded five years before to fill, in extremis, the boots of a Mr Watts who had flung himself in drunken despair upon the Earlstone to Leicester railway line.

Had I been bothered enough to prove my point, I could have indeed dug down to the earliest

levels of that compressed heap of initiatives to find convincing proof of what I always said in private: that progress in education was just old wine in new bottles with flashy labels.

The internal pressures in that whirlwind were of a different kind. The old nostrums of obedience, conformity and respect had given way - in a train of events which no-one had ever intended or could recall - to a New Age of Individualism where parents condoned and even encouraged poor behaviour in their children. Obedience had been replaced by a nonchalant "Oh, that's how (s)he *is!*"; conformity was seen as shabby and old-fashioned and respect had to be "earned". The direct results of the latter two being abandoned were, firstly, a lurch into foul and abusive language - and plenty of it - and secondly, a default setting of aggressive rudeness.

Yes. I was disillusioned. The world was descending into a moral chaos and I could do nothing about it. I simply wanted out, to seek escape and seclusion in our cottage - address: Miles From Anywhere, Brittany.

Over that summer I did not give Doctor Merveille another thought. A baking hot July mellowed into August. I spent three weeks with my wife Anne in that idyllic cottage. The days drew in and by the time our Training Day came around I was already scraping dew from the windows of the car. I pulled onto the deserted car-park (I always got there early to acclimatise myself) and, as I hesitated in the corridor, he was the first person I encountered. He seemed to emerge from the shadows. He wore a long black coat - a cloak almost - and carried a large black briefcase which was almost as shiny and bulging as his cheeks. He was truly the blackest person I had ever clapped eyes on. He removed his black hat and bowed, took my hand in his pink palms and shook it as if he was determined to remove it from my wrist.

"Good morning Sir!" he almost shouted, in a voice as dark as ebony, "I am Baptiste Hippolyte Merveille at your service! I am delighted to meet you! And may I enquire.....who, my good Sir, you might be?"

"Oh I'm..." and I was so dumbfounded that for a split second I confess that I could not recall who I was.

"I'm...er... Richard Kelly, Deputy Head. History is my subject." I stuttered, finally regaining my composure - and my hand.

"Ah! My favourite! If I am free I could talk to your history students about slavery in Africa."

I thanked him and began, with a bow, to retreat to my office which was a little further down the corridor. A few moments later I heard him greet another colleague in the same manner.

"Well, I'm Danny Stirk, PE," replied the latter, bewildered.

"PE! PE! My favourite subject! Do you know - if I am free - if you agree - I would be so happy to take on some of your lesser lights and coach them in football, Mr Stirk. I would love to! Make something of them!"

A while later, as I studied the timetable, I heard him shout to another

"Ah! Français! Ma matière favorite!"

Then my heart froze as I recalled the experiences of our black French assistant, a lovely man from Cameroon, called Benoit. The pupils had called him Ben Hur and subjected him to a barrage of racist insults and graffiti. After the Christmas holiday he had not returned and we never saw him again. Bill Davis had been speechless with rage and swore he would resign from our "benighted" school at the earliest opportunity. Would Dr Merveille go the same way as Benoit?

Like a whirlwind he unsettled us all that day. He knew all our names off by heart by the time we went home. Who could resist him? He had a deep rumbling chuckle and, when he was really amused it would erupt into an explosion of delight and his whole frame would shake. He seemed to have not a shred of self-doubt but neither was he vain or conceited. He was genuinely a man who relished life and the company of people. And he would show us all that he loved and saw the very best - and brought out the very best - in children.

Within a few days there was a change in the air.

To the joy and relief of Clive, the harassed Music teacher, the doctor soon took away his most disaffected year nine pupils and had them playing bongos on the huge empty plastic water dispensers from the staffroom. Over the next few weeks the school rang and echoed to strange rhythms which produced an almost trance-like effect on whoever heard them. Sometimes he would play them at break, causing the children to walk in a slower, syncopated manner along the corridors. They played in assembly to great applause and he took his group out to local Junior Schools to entertain and they even played on local radio. (One lad would go on later to join a famous orchestra as its principle percussionist.)

Jane Halfpenny, who had been promoted to Head of French (*faute de mieux*) after the disconsolate Davis's departure, and who had regularly run out of her lessons in floods of tears - and had once spent the whole night locked in her stock cupboard - gladly accepted his offer to visit her classroom. She sat mesmerized at the back as he did a wonderful PowerPoint presentation of slides of The Ivory Coast, talking in non-stop French. To her amazement the children sat and listened calmly and intently and to her double-amazement seemed to understand. Then to her utter stupefaction they began to put up their hands and answer his questions in near flawless French. She rarely had another disciplinary problem after that and still mainly using the tatty textbook upon which generations of pupils had scrawled their Bragwellian scorn and contempt, she turned out linguists of such a high calibre, with such high Key Stage 3 levels in the Easter term of that academic year that she became the envy of her counterparts in other local High Schools. Would she tell them her secret? No, she could not. Could they come and observe her? She did not mind. And they came away scratching their heads. Truth to tell, Miss Halfpenny, a gaunt spinster who dressed in grey woollens, and who seemed to be either recovering from or just catching a cold, was entirely uninspiring. Yet the children seemed to be under her spell.

On his own initiative Baptiste had gone down to the kitchen and by the end of the first week on the menu there were delicious fish and rice dishes with piquant sauces, chicken kebabs with spicy aubergines and peppers, and lamb with apricots, peas, almonds and lemon couscous. The Bragwell children at first hesitated, sniffed the air and then, picking up the delicious blend of aromas, gave up their burgers and croquettes in droves. At break there began to be flatbreads with delicious sauces and fillings. Within a fortnight complexions were clearer and smoother, hair more lustrous and eyes keener and shinier. Parents began to write in to ask for recipes and he persuaded Mrs Stoker the cook to hold an evening session for everyone to see how the food was prepared and to sample it. Tickets for the event - profits went to Oxfam - sold out in a few hours. Another evening was organized and more tickets printed and again there was a sell-out. His African recipes became a staple of the Domestic Science syllabus.

These innovations were initiated and brought about, astonishingly, in the good doctor's non-contact time. His teaching style in his own area of ICT had the children buzzing with excitement. A Computer Club at lunchtime had to be extended to four days a week so great was the demand from those who wanted to do his ingenious searches and exercises.

He came to my classroom and recited excerpts from his epic poem *The Slave*. His passion and the power of his words reduced many to tears - some I would never have expected to see express any sympathy for anybody but themselves, were sobbing. He gave me a copy of one canto.

A SLAVE'S PRAYER TO MEET AGAIN A LOVED ONE

Lord! Who can tell or bear this pain,
The agony of being torn
From love's embrace for slavers' gain?
Lord, I sit in chains and mourn.
Her name to all the mocking stars
The cold night long I breathe or cry.
They roll beyond the porthole bars
And wander free and roam the sky.
Yet I, a soul with star-like hopes
To be the most content of men,
Am bound and lashed about with ropes
And never shall be free again,
Till in Your arms I freely fall
As all my callous chains you sever!
Then may at last her sweet voice call
And capture me with love for ever?

Within a matter of weeks the office was reporting extraordinary news. There had been enquiries from some of those who had exiled themselves - or rather their offspring - to Farleigh Magna. Could they come on a tour? Could they bring their children? Other parents from our competitor High Schools were making appointments too. It fell to me one afternoon to show a number of them around. As we progressed from one studious beehive of a room to another their eyes swelled with astonishment and mine with pride to discover teacher after teacher on top form, clearly enjoying working with their responsive class. The highlight was Baptiste's room where pupils were working on their top-notch PowerPoint presentations with a wealth of colour and animation schemes.

Even Terry, our out-and-out misanthrope of a caretaker permitted himself a wan smile as the litter around the site (litter mainly due to junk-food packing) became negligible.

In the Spring term the prospective numbers for our new autumn intake arrived from our feeder primary schools. They were a record! Almost no-one was prepared now to vote with their feet - or rather their BMWs and 4x4s. An excited Simon Jones discussed with me the necessity of extending the teacher complement, as almost two new classes - eight instead of our usual six - would have to be formed.

It dawned on us that fixed-term and permanent exclusions - a field in which Bragwell nearly

always topped the table - had fallen. During the early months of the New Year they dwindled away to almost nothing. The Head lost his hunted wild animal look and walked along the calmer corridors with a confident spring to his step. I showed him the figures for absenteeism amongst pupils - and staff. Our pupil attendance had leapt from a worrying 90.6 - one of the grimmest in the county - to 98.3%. The staff cover-sheets which I had to pin, with a heavy heart, to the notice-board became the exception rather than the rule. Colleagues began to smile at me rather than scowl when I entered the staffroom first thing in the morning, no longer the bearer of ill tidings. Parents evenings were better attended; the atmosphere of truculence and reluctance in the hall as they shuffled forward to talk to their children's teachers changed to one of jovial anticipation. And I swear everyone just looked trimmer and fitter and yes, smarter. Furthermore, picking up The Earlstone Gazette one Friday morning it suddenly occurred to me that the exploits of Bragwell Yoof had not made the front page for a number of editions.

But Doctor Merveille kept his best trick that year a close secret. In late January the football team of fatties and bandy-legged no-hopers he had been coaching on the quiet began to put up posters challenging the First XI to a friendly. This caused general hilarity amongst their more muscular peers. Finally, stung by a cartoon showing them, beautifully caricatured and wearing cowardly-custard yellow shirts, they agreed to play. Almost the whole school turned out that chilly lunchtime to watch. As the Merveille Eleven ran - or rather - trundled out there was a chorus of whistles and catcalls. Baptiste gathered them round him and seemed to clasp each one around the shoulder. In a low voice he murmured what sounded like an incantation and with a sudden clap of his hands sent them to their starting positions. We could not believe it. As soon as the whistle went they began to outjuggle and outpace Danny Stirk's team - his finest in years. Had they had more pace they might have forced a draw, losing only 1 - 0 to a speculative volley in the last minute which Jayce Bradshaw the fattest boy in the school, and hence the goalie, just missed saving by a fingertip. From then on Baptiste attended every training session of the first team and - with two of his own fine-passing slow midfielders playing - they won the County Cup that Easter, thrashing their perennial and bitter rivals and current county champions Humberstone High 7 - 1 at the Walkers Stadium in front of the whole wildly cheering school. Scouts from Leicester City and Coventry City paid visits to several Bragwell homes that April to invite boys for trials at their training grounds.

We watched the weeks pass and the long holidays approach but that grim clinging-on-by-the-fingertips mentality which usually characterized June and early July had gone. We felt relaxed. The pupils were relaxed and co-operative. Our ninth years, with whom there was normally an uneasy, fragile truce, guaranteed only by the threat of exclusion from the Leavers' Ball, were genuinely sorry to be leaving us.

Baptiste suggested that we organize a barbecue one early July afternoon after school for them. We could leave it to him. Everyone agreed that it was a wonderful idea. The day arrived. It was overcast and damp. I went to him and asked if we should postpone it.

"You will see, mon ami, what an afternoon we shall have!"

During lunchtime I saw a line of children like ants each scurrying with a brick from the car park across the field.

"What on earth do you think you are doing?" I yelled to them out of the window. One came over and told me they were building "Doc's" barbecue. I went out and saw a large brick range being constructed under his supervision. Grills were lying on the grass ready to be placed on the top

and five or six bags of charcoal had been scattered within.

“Ah, Richard!” he shouted as soon as he saw me strolling over. “You may have the honour of lighting the fire as soon as the bell goes.”

I realized then that my balding head was hot. I looked up and glimpsed a great yolk of a sun shimmering in a flawless blue sky. To every horizon the clouds had rolled back like curtains on a huge stage. He saw me staring up and laughed that amazing laugh of his.

“Did I not tell you, mon vieux, that the afternoon would be just GLORIOUS!”

“But the meteorological centre in Nottingham said it would rain,” I replied. He leant back and let out his loudest crack of laughter yet, pointing in the direction of Leicester.

“They were not wrong!” he shouted. And there on the far dark purple rim of the sky it looked as if a gigantic watering can rose was drenching the city.

At three thirty we met on the field. Where was the food? Where was Doc?

The coals were glowing so hot that it was almost impossible to go within five feet of the range. The pupils were milling about. Many had gone without lunch to save room for the barbecue and were hungry and impatient. In the heat they were also thirsty. Where was he? Suddenly from the direction of the kitchen there came the sound of a fanfare. One cook after another emerged carrying fruit juice and lemonade and great trays of food: kebabs, pork steaks in bags of lemon and mustard marinade with onions; and trout, tuna kebabs, mackerel, herrings, and “merguez” sausages, made from spicy minced lamb, on skewers, and garlic bread to toast. The music changed to rock and the pupils cheered and went wild, dancing with delight in the bright sunshine. I worried that it would take too long to grill everything and I could see in the faces of other staff that the same thought had struck them. But we need not have worried. In a red apron Baptiste strode over to the range, brushed the grills with oil and within seconds had filled every space with food. It was so hot that within a minute or two he had turned everything over with his tongs and soon a long queue had formed, drawn by the delicious aromas, to collect the sizzling dishes, grilled to perfection. There was just enough to feed everyone.

The atmosphere of sheer joy was tangible. I saw to my amazement staff fondly embrace staff and pupils, with whom they had had seemingly irreconcilable differences. Catching the mood many pupils began to seek out staff and other pupils. No-one turned their former enemy away. A gangly lad called Stynes whom I had kept in regularly for various mischiefs came across to me and offered his hand, which I did not hesitate to take. I wished him luck and he told me that he would be trying his best from that point on.

At five thirty the pupils were drifting away. Then Jones sprang his surprise. From the school he brought out a case of champagne and we toasted and cheered Baptiste. Jones made a speech (I could tell from the slight slur in his voice that he had been sampling the champers or something stronger in his office) and told us all what a wonderful year it had been, what a wonderful staff we were and what a wonderful school. Danny Stirk - he had been supping lager on the quiet since the bell - called for three cheers for the Doc and we all obliged. He hung his head modestly and conducted us with his glass of orange juice.

“SPEECH!” chorused many voices. For a moment he shook his head until the cries rang out again and he felt unable to resist.

“Dear colleagues, revered Headmaster, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the great opportunity and the generous welcome you have granted me this year. I love you all! I wish you all a very relaxing summer and look forward to another exciting year in your delightful

company in September!”

The next morning I strode out onto the field. Not a morsel of food, not a ticket of litter, not a bottle, not a brick, not a piece of charcoal remained.

And it suddenly began to absolutely pour with rain.

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Another summer flared and faded. We had been back at school a week and settling in nicely. The next Monday Baptiste did not turn up. There was no phone call, no phone message. By ten we were really worried. Had he had an accident? I asked the office for his number. It was a dialling code I did not recognize. It had never occurred to me to ask him where he lived.

“Hello? Baptiste? Are you alright?” I heard my voice echo as I spoke. There was a long silence followed by a low groan.

“Richard...I am in pain,” he whispered.

“Have you been to the doctor’s?”

“No. I know what is wrong. I will have to wait until it.....passes.” Then he howled like a dog in agony, an inhuman sound which terrified me.

“Baptiste! Let me call you an ambulance for God’s sake! What’s your address?”

He laughed weakly. “Your medicine cannot help this. It will pass. It always does. There is a bad doctor coming.”

“A bad doctor? Who? Which doctor?”

“Ah! Which doctor, you ask!” he chuckled and then moaned in pain again. “He may come. Soon.” The phone went dead. If I had not known him to be a tea-totaller I would have said he was drunk.

The next morning at Tuesday briefing the Head entered the staffroom triumphant. He swept back his shock of hair and, rocking backwards and forwards, began to speak.

“You will be glad to hear, colleagues, that Bragwell College will no longer be a dumping ground for the detritus of other Leicester and Earlstone schools! We are officially full, no, oversubscribed! We can no longer be forced to take in everyone’s dirty washing in from outside of catchment. Accordingly, yesterday, in consultation with Tim Hartley and other governors, we decided we will not accept under any circumstances a boy expelled from Grange High School and subsequently from Marston Manor - on grounds not only of Health and Safety - but also because we simply have been Auntie Sally for too long in this county!”

We cheered.

“You may well have heard, colleagues, of a knife incident involving a thirteen year old boy - “

He was interrupted by Sandy from ADT.

“It was my friend from Marston,” she said so solemnly that we all hushed. ““She has not worked since last March. He drew a Stanley knife on her - she had kept him in one lunchtime - and sliced into her handbag. Then he looked at her and said that that was what he would love to do.....to her tits.”

We gasped.

“Of course, he denied saying it. But he did.”

We all thought this over.

“This boy is a psychopath” the Head continued, shocking us all the more with this uncharacteristic frankness. “He will join us here over my dead body.”

To my great surprise, the very next day Baptiste returned looking as well as ever. “Did you change your doctor then?” I joked. He laughed but I noticed that his great white staring eyes did not. There was something else I wanted to ask him but try as I might to remember it just would not come to me.

County Hall huffed and puffed over the boy - his name was Carlo - but we stood our ground. And won. I had already decided to leak it to the local papers if we had not. The staff, reassured, got back into their rhythm and the school settled down quickly to work that September. There were so few staff absences and so few calls on me to intervene in disciplinary matters and so little need to speak to teachers about any lack of good judgment in dealing with difficult pupils that I realized one morning as I sat at my desk there was, apart from my nine lessons a week, I had virtually nothing to do. I took to strolling along corridors and showing my face in classrooms. Everywhere I looked I saw excellent quality and under my breath I challenged Ofsted to come in to try and find fault with us.

As I think I mentioned, Bragwell had an Exclusion Unit which was semi-detached from the school. It had a small team of specialists who worked on the behaviour and learning difficulties of no more than ten pupils at any time. They had their break and lunch hour at different times from the main school and there was little contact between them and other kids. Some had been drawn from Bragwell but in those days of which I write they mainly came from Earlstone. The normal stay in the unit was four weeks. Youngsters were then reintegrated into mainstream, occasionally with positive results. It was one of my tasks to intervene there if a major incident blew up so that I made it my business to show my face and get “on-side” with them as the jargon went.

One day I went looking for Baptiste. He was free but not in his room, nor the staffroom. I wanted to speak to him about a computer I intended to buy. As I walked past the door to the Exclusion Unit I heard gales of laughter coming from within. Intrigued I pushed open the door and stuck my head round. There were cheers coming from the next room along off the corridor. I looked through the window and saw to my amusement Baptiste walking around on his hands with his legs bent. Our seven or eight boys and girls - some of the hardest cases around - were whistling and clapping in delight.

“Ah Sir Richard!” he said, as soon as he saw me. “Now you try!”

Before I knew what had hit me he had somehow spun me over onto my hands and placed my soles against the wall. I could not help it. I shrieked with laughter like the rest. He jerked my legs away from the wall and suddenly - me, a chubby man in his fifties - feeling as light as a feather, I was being guided along by him and slapping down one palm in front of the other. Until I realised with a shock that he was opposite me and beckoning me on, not guiding me at all. I was walking around on my hands, perfectly balanced by my bent legs. My back pain had gone. My jacket was flapping around my head. The children were clapping rhythmically.

“Now on one hand!” he shouted, and without a conscious effort my left hand lifted itself from the floor and my arm straightened to the side. Without a wobble I was supporting my whole weight on my right palm! I looked around and all the misfits were racing around on the hands in

a swirl and Mrs Patel and Mrs Chamberlain, their sprightly but none too svelte support teachers were upside down and squealing with laughter too!

The break bell went. My clumsy weight suddenly returned and down I fell and rolled over, shaking with laughter. Everyone else was in a heap too. The kids helped me up and beamed at me with eyes which were normally sullen, suspicious and resentful.

I almost ran to the Head's room to tell him he would never believe what the Doc had been up to now! He stared at me blankly as I breathlessly told him the tale.

"What? Just now?" he finally asked.

"Yes. Before the bell!"

"This lesson?"

"Yes!"

"But I've just been talking to him. Not five minutes ago."

I left Jones's study convinced that he still wasn't really the ticket after all. But then a voice in my head was telling me something. I stopped in full stride. "Four frees," it kept saying.

Baptiste had just four frees a week. Like everyone else on main scale.

"So what?" I said out loud, making a passing pupil look round at me as if he thought I was telling him off.

I went back to my study and looked at the cover-record for the previous year. Once every fortnight, sometimes once a week in the depths of winter he had, like everyone else, been needed to cover a class. The thought suddenly struck me like an arrow. How had he managed to do all the extras he had undertaken? Had he left his cover classes to get on without him? Hadn't he turned up? Should I go and ask him? I looked at the duty roster and saw that he was on playground duty. A strange feeling told me he would not be there. I went out into the drizzle. But there he was, surrounded as usual by a gang of boys and girls. He was teasing them and making them laugh. "Oh Golly Gosh, Miss Molly just look at the size of them feet!" I heard him shout.

"Doctor Merveille! Can I have a quick word?" I called.

"Ooooh! I'm Doctor Merveille, Not the Doc today, you heard the Chief say, Now all you kiddies....just RUN AWAY!" he rapped. And he clapped his hands. Like a rabble of chickens they scattered. He took my arm and we walked on.

"I just love your British weather!" he said, pulling up the back of his collar.

"You're the weather expert, Doc. Why don't you make it stop?" I said deadpan. That voice in me just blurted it out. He scanned my face first seriously and then laughed.

"You think me a mighty wizard or a witch doctor, Mr Kelly-Bwana?" And he rolled his eyes as if in a trance and shook his shoulders in a tribal dance. Then he slapped me on the back and smiled his huge pearly grin.

"Baptiste...did you...see the Head last lesson?" I asked uneasily, knowing what a stupid question it would seem to him. At this he absolutely dissolved into loud whinnies of laughter.

"How could I, mon ami, when I was teaching you how to walk on your hands?"

You....did...just...GREAT!"

"No, I meant, before that...before you were in the Unit? The reason I ask is because the Head just told me you were with him last lesson"

"No-o-o-o!" He turned to stare towards the Head's office which looked onto the yard. Jones stood at his window gazing out at the field. Baptiste waved slowly and deliberately but the Head must have failed to spot him as he failed to wave back. "The Di-rec-tor of Studies got it wrong. It was yesterday when we talked. When I was free. We discussed a new ICT suite. Maybe in the

old Drama Studio”

After break I went back to see Jones. As soon as I came in he turned from the window and said “I was talking to Doctor Merveille about a new ICT suite in the old Drama Studio. What do you think, Richard?”

He turned away and stared back out at the near deserted field. In a far doorway stood Baptiste, shaking the wet off his black overcoat.

“Oh really? Sounds interesting. When did you decide that?”

“Yesterday. I meant to tell you first thing but it slipped my mind.”

That night I tried to get on my hands against the wall but collapsed every time into a pathetic heap.

*

It was a week later I think when the change set in. The Head came into the staffroom clearly bursting with exciting news.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen we seem to be going ever from the ridiculous to the sublime. Having defeated the bureaucrats from Allocations over Carlo, the Pupil From Hell, we now have a new applicant.”

We groaned. What monster lay in store for us now?

“Now, colleagues, you really must practice what you preach to our wonderful charges and LISTEN...MORE...ATTENTIVELY! I said “sublime!” Our new pupil will be an absolute STAR! Forget Farleigh Magna! They are a spent force. This family has moved into the area specifically so that their boy can come to Bragwell College! He hasn’t even been on a tour. The boy’s grades and prospects are first class. He is a pupil at a top Solihull private school. His father spoke to me on the phone yesterday - a surgeon who is transferring to the Royal Infirmary!”

“A brain surgeon?” someone asked.

He consulted his notes “Er...I’m can’t say for sure...I think he said “Ear, Nose and Throat”...” Many sniggered. Jones had absolutely no sense of humour.

“So which year will our little genius be going into?”

“Er...year...Eight. He starts next Monday. Name of Stringfellow, Nathan Stringfellow.”

All of a sudden there was a dreadful gasp. It was Baptiste. His eyes rolled and his tongue lolled as he slumped down in his chair.

“Help...help me Lord...” he croaked as he loosened his tie. He clasped his hand to his breast as if he was having a heart attack. I was the first to react but Danny, a qualified first-aider pushed past me.

“Somebody ring for an ambulance!” he screamed.

Assembly was cancelled. News of Doctor Merveille’s seizure and of the arrival of an ambulance was soon around the school. Staff were so upset that many could not call their registers, never mind give lessons. Pupils were in tears and could or would not do any work. Girls hugged each other. Boys sat with their heads on their crossed arms on the tables, hiding their faces.

I told Jones that we ought to have a special assembly. More quietly than I had ever seen them, the school entered the hall and sat on their haunches. The silence was punctuated by sobs.

Jones stood. I would not have been him that morning for an enhanced pension.

“School, listen. Doctor Merveille - no the Doc - is NOT dead.” There were cheers and great sighs of relief. “He may well have had - and we will not be sure until later - a heart attack. If he has - you know what a heart attack is and how serious it can be - he could be away from Bragwell for a long, long time. But if he has had a heart attack, be assured that he will be in the care of one of the best hospitals in the country, if not the world. We will let you know as soon as we know how he is - because we all love Baptiste, our wonderful, brilliant Doc -“ Here he had to break off and he clapped his hand to his face. We all wept to a man, woman and child.

Mrs Bailey, our RE teacher, strode up onto the stage and helped Simon to a chair. She had a flat, matter-of-fact Yorkshire tone and manner which - and I was not sorry to sense it - served to earth the emotion in the air.

“Children, bow your heads. We’ll say a prayer for Baptiste. Lord, we pray that you tend to Baptiste this day...he is a very special teacher...and we all need him...but more than we need him, we love him. Keep him safe and bring him back to us fit and well...and smiling and laughing - and we all know how he loves to laugh and loves to make us laugh...bring him back to us - his old self - as soon as you can...Amen.”

This seemed to cheer and steady everyone.

I waited until eleven and then phoned the Infirmary. I said and spelt his name slowly and waited. And waited. The tension made me break out in a sweat. Eventually I was put through to the Coronary Unit.

A harassed female voice told me that he had been discharged.

“Discharged? But what was wrong with him?”

“Who is asking?”

I told her who I was.

“I’m sorry, I can only tell relatives. It’s privileged information.”

“B-but the whole school wants...has he...is he.....OK?”

“He’s been discharged - work it out for yourself.”

Discharged. I asked the office for his telephone number and address. The secretary had the number but could not locate his address. Suddenly it dawned on me what I had meant to ask him previously. Anyway, I dialled the number. Immediately I heard that dreadful continuous bleep. I phoned it again very carefully and this time that infuriating plummy female voice informed me the number had not been recognised. I pressed each digit with extra special care but it did not matter how often I tried, I could not get through. I phoned the operator and asked him to connect me. A few minutes later he came back to tell me that there was no such code. With rising irritation I phoned the office back. Had the secretary read the number properly? Had I heard her properly? Finally there could be no doubt, Baptiste’s number had somehow got confused. I tried the numbers in different combinations; tried their next-door neighbours.....and finally gave up. In the staffroom at lunch I asked if anyone had his number but no-one had. I phoned the hospital again and pretended to be a cousin. Another voice came back and said they had no record of such a person.

I drove over to the Earlstone ambulance station and enquired. Finally someone came out to tell me that there was a record of an emergency call-out to Bragwell College at 08:24. A patient had been driven to the Infirmary. I asked to speak to the crew but by then they had gone off-duty.

Could I have a home contact number? No I could not. And that was that.

Most of the staff had stayed after the final bell for news.

“First the good news,” I said. “Baptiste was discharged this morning. He had not had a heart attack.”

Everyone clapped and cheered.

“And the bad news?” chorused many.

“The bad news is that we have no idea how he is, where he is and - “ I checked the next words and my voice faltered.

“And?”

“And...when he might be back.”

We all agreed the next morning to tell the children he was out of danger but might be away for a long time.

“If they ask about a heart attack,” said Jones, “Just say that the doctors aren’t sure.”

Each day we expected to hear from him but each day passed without news. A supply teacher was drafted in to cover ICT. One morning I was called over. A furious row had erupted between the teacher and ninth year boy - one of our erstwhile pupils with behavioural difficulties. A terminal was out of action and the lad was being accused of damaging it on purpose by spilling a drink on the keyboard.

“It was a fucking accident!” he was screaming.

“I TOLD you at least TWICE not to drink near a station, you MORON!” shouted the teacher back.

“Well I was BORED. You’re RUBBISH compared to the Doc - can’t even work the white board properly! WANKER!”

I got between them and took the boy out. For the first time in months we had an angry, sobbing candidate for the internal exclusion room. Later I asked the ICT technician if the teacher was any good. He shook his head slowly. “Some of the kids know more than him.”

So it fell to me to phone the agency and request a replacement only to be told that they had no-one else on their books. The assistant agreed to soldier on with classes as long as a member of staff was present. We got by. But a glumness seemed to settle there and spread gradually around the building.

The following Monday Nathan Stringfellow was due to arrive. It was my task to meet him and his parents and welcome him to the school. I was late coming down after briefing and hurried into reception, expecting to see a smart young man between two smart professionals. The seats were empty.

“You haven’t seen the Stringfellows, have you Joyce?”

She was at the counter arranging a magnificent bouquet of flowers, looking rather taken aback. Her colleague was smirking.

“Have we seen the Stringfellows, girls?” she said.

“No. Only one,” said Pam who was sitting typing.

“Only one??

“A young man. A very charming young man,” replied Joyce, shaking up the flowers.

“He brought in these?” I asked, to which she nodded. I asked her where he was.

“He said he fancied a stroll round rather than just sitting and waiting.”

I looked along the long main corridor. Pupils were on their way to assembly. There was pushing and a lot of noise.

“Calm down there! Behave!” I shouted. “And keep that noise down!”

I realised I had not had to speak to pupils in the corridor like that for ages.

As soon as they had all gone into the hall I went looking. I could not find him. Puzzled, I returned to my study and there, to my utter disbelief, I found him sitting behind my desk. In my chair. I tried to say something but he was already up, apologising profusely, holding out his hand - a slender pianist's hand - for me to shake. I took it without thinking and felt a curious energy run up my arm.

“I'm so sorry, Mr Kelly, but I've been looking for you absolutely everywhere.”

He came out from behind my desk.

“I've been looking for you too, Nathan. But you should not have come in here. This is my private office.”

He smiled but not with his eyes. He was tall and looked at least fifteen. He was slim and elegant. I noticed immediately how sharp and dark his eyes were, almost black. His skin was also remarkable, the colour and finish of ivory. His hair was jet black, and below his earlobes, in two or three stitch-like hairs threaded down his cheeks, were the hints of sideburns to come. And his top lip was already dark with a dawning moustache. He measured me up as I measured him and a sparkle came into his eye. He knew he was impressive and my eyes must have confirmed that I was impressed.

“My word!” I exclaimed. “What a smart uniform!”

The blazer was a dark purple-blue, almost aubergine, with brass buttons. And he wore a yellow and light brown diagonally striped tie, neatly tied over a crisp white shirt. The trousers were light grey and immaculately pressed into a sharp crease. The shoes were of a highly polished black. I blushed to think how mercilessly he would be chivvied by Bragwell pupils who wore their shirts outside their trousers, were shod in grimy trainers and had a very loose, ugly bulge of a tie, if any.

“Don't worry, Mr Kelly,” he said, reading my mind. “I ignore taunts. I can look after myself.”

I had no doubt about that. Here was a different species compared with the Bragwell child, full of ease and self-confidence. Too much if anything. His arrogance had made me uneasy and I found myself taking an instant dislike to him.

“Are you on your own Nathan?”

He returned me a puzzled look, as if to say how preposterous a question!

“Your parents?”

“Oh, they were unable to make it, I'm afraid to say. My father is in theatre this morning.”

“And mum?”

“My mother was indisposed.”

Indisposed! I looked at him in silent wonder. He smiled. Putting his hand inside his blazer he drew out a piece of paper. “This is my admission form, Mr Kelly. I would be grateful if I could have my timetable. I'm keen to get started!” I glanced at the form and put it in my pocket. I printed him out a timetable and offered to take him along to his first lesson.

In the corridor pupils were still milling about after assembly. His appearance drew no whistles and jeers as I had feared, but utter silence. I told them to get along to their lessons. The crowd parted for us as we walked along, and children on the staircase stopped to press themselves against the banisters. We came to the music room doors and I pushed them open. Clive stood at the front trying to take a class register above the hubbub. His face - total amazement - alerted the class to something extraordinary behind them. They turned and fell silent.

“This is Nathan,” I said to Clive and the class. “Nathan, this is 8/3 and Mr Sutton.” Nathan

walked forward and gave Clive that electrifying handshake, then turned to face the class. "Hello, everyone. I'm Nathan Stringfellow."

Many said hello under their breath and I noticed that Jade, one of our more physically mature eighth year girls, was staring at him in helpless wonder. Nathan looked around. There were drums, bongos, an old upright piano, piles of dog-eared textbooks, some keyboards, and, propped up in a corner on a high shelf, a violin. Nathan saw it and said "Would you mind, Mr Sutton, if I tried out the fiddle?"

Clive flickered his eyes and was about to reply but Nathan had already fetched it down and was plucking at it, frowning and adjusting the pegs. He took up and shook the bow, and after a backward and forward draw across the strings to make sure they were in tune, he began to play. I recognised the tune. It was Elgar's Chanson de Matin. He played it beautifully and sensuously; as he came to the final bar he opened up his eyes and winked before bringing the high suspended bow crashing down on the strings for a raucous jig. He surged backwards and forwards and bent his knees. The children clapped and swayed and stamped to the rhythm. Clive began to dance and spin around like a fairground organ marionette. The jig raced faster and faster until, to everyone's delight, Clive stumbled and fell. The bow became almost invisible and just when I thought I would lose track of the notes - he lifted his arm aloft - and brought it down, with its horse hairs frazzled, in a final frenzy. Then there was silence. He gave the bow and fiddle to Clive who was still sitting on the floor and told him it was a fine instrument. He inspected it as if he had never clapped eyes on it before. He told me later he had bought it for £20 as a classroom knick-knack. How Stringfellow had made it sound like that, he could not explain. And to prove his point he tried to play the Elgar on it. It sounded like a cat undergoing castration.

"What was the jig" I had asked. It had sounded familiar.

"Camille Saint-Saens - Danse Macabre."

Before long Nathan was of course the new celebrity in the staffroom. He had volunteered to answer so many questions and do so many things in so many classrooms. What a genius! What a discovery! What an example to the rest! I listened to them laughing and going into raptures as I poured myself a coffee. I was waiting for someone to raise a doubt. But no-one did.

A few days later we made the Midlands news. It started when a girl ran out vomiting from a classroom. Within half-an-hour what seemed to be half the school was heaving and the medical room was overflowing. Old Terry did not where to begin with his mop and bucket. Public Health was called in and the kitchen was closed. The next day two-thirds of our pupils failed to arrive. Many just took advantage but some were so ill that they were taken to hospital and one almost died. The fish in the spicy African dish was declared the culprit. A cook had told Mrs Stoker that she did not like the smell of the haddock but had been overruled. This devastating piece of evidence was included in the report and poor Mrs Stoker, who had worked at Bragwell for twenty-six years, was forced to resign. Many other cooks left or retired and took Merveille's recipes with them. A county caterer was engaged. The grease and stodge returned. Concentration wavered and collapsed. Discipline declined. I was soon as busy as ever I had been.

"When is Doctor Merveille coming back?" asked another crestfallen little girl one day as I walked out on duty.

"I'm not sure. Soon I hope."

This was my stock response to a question which was posed less frequently as the term wore on.

The exclusion room was more regularly in use and behaviour referral forms began to arrive again in my tray. Each day two or three members of staff were absent.

Then one morning we had a message from the husband of Shelagh Dixon, our Head of Year Nine. He had found her sobbing in a lay-by. She had pulled over on her way to work, phoned him and had a nervous breakdown.

I was called to the medical room. One of our rucker mafia was laid out flat on his back and was howling in agony. What had happened?

“Nathan...bloody..Stringfellow!” he cried. “Ba-astard grabbed me and threw me on my back!”

I could scarcely believe it. Tim Rowan was the biggest lad in the school and a thug whom I could not abide. I sent for Stringfellow straightaway. He knocked, came in and sat down without an invitation. There was not a hair or thread out of place. I was caught on the horns of a dilemma - I felt secretly pleased that Rowan had got his long-deserved comeuppance but had a duty to punish a boy - albeit a boy I did not much like - for inflicting the injury.

“You look remarkably composed for a boy who has just been in a fight!” I snapped.

“Involved in a fight? Not I, Sir!”

“You deny attacking Rowan??”

“Absolutely! It was self-defence. I told him that if he did not stop insulting me I would be forced to walk away.”

“Walk away?”

“Absolutely, Sir. Just ask Tania McEwan. He accused me of trying to steal her away from him. It’s hardly my fault if she follows me around like a puppy dog.”

“So what happened?”

“He called me - and I’m very sorry to soil my lips and insult your ears with such a vulgarity - a fucking gay-boy.”

I jotted this down. “And you replied?” At this he smiled and looked away.

“WELL?”

“All I said back was, Mr Kelly, that if I was a gay-boy then there was absolutely nothing for him to worry about as far as Tania was concerned. I’m terribly sorry - I realise of course now that that was rather a provocative thing to say....”

“What happened next?”

“Well Tania and all the others started laughing and Tim shouted that he was going to beat my effing head in - so I warned him.”

“Warned him?”

“Warned him that I was a black belt in judo.”

“A black belt? Are you really?”

“That was precisely the question which I saw in Rowan’s stupid face. He was in a dilemma obviously. If he backed off, he would look small and cowardly in front of his mates and his girlfriend, so he had to come for me. I should have offered him an alternative. Anyway, Rowan basically threw himself through his own momentum - I just helped him on his way.”

He shrugged as if to invite me to criticize him. I tried to look into those dark, inscrutable eyes but was obliged to avert my gaze. He smiled and without a blink added

“You don’t like me, do you Sir?”

To this I did not respond. I looked him up and down and leaned back in my chair.

“I want you to remind your parents about getting you the proper uniform, Nathan. By next Monday, please.”

I sent him back to his lesson. A short talk with Rowan and Tania confirmed his version of events.

Rowan's parents wanted to press matters and involve the police but soon realised that their son had brought it all on himself. I thought I ought to warn Stringfellow about the exercise of his martial arts but it dawned on me that there was no point. Having bested the biggest, burliest bully in the school he would have no other challengers.

One morning in the week before the half-term break a passer-by came into reception. He had just seen two pupils drive a car into a tree and run away. I dashed out with him and could not believe my eyes. There, in front of us, was a car stuck on the muddy field with its steaming bonnet crumpled up against a tree trunk, with both doors wide open. He told me that the two had thrown themselves out at the second of impact. He had not got a clear look at the passenger - he thought it might be a girl - but the driver was a tall lad, dark hair, in a blazer - a maroon colour.

I asked the gentleman if he would mind coming back in for a moment. I organised a cup of coffee for him and left him in reception. The timetable told me that Stringfellow was in French. Relishing the prospect of getting him permanently excluded, I galloped up the stairs and entered the room.

A hapless, hopeless Jane Halfpenny, stood in a maelstrom of hurtling pencils, rulers and books which abated as soon as I came in. Only Nathan, by the door, had been sitting silent and busy at his work. To the amusement of many others he sprang to his feet as a mark of respect when he noticed who had come in. My attention was immediately drawn to the carpet by his feet. A bunch of keys. I picked them up quickly and told him brusquely to be seated. I walked to the front of the room and with my back to everyone I opened my palm to show them to Jane.

"Why, they're mine," she whispered in amazement. "How on earth..."

I asked her under my breath if she owned a red Fiesta. She did. Had anyone left the room on an errand or to go to the toilet? She thought about and told me that Rebecca Lavender had gone about twenty minutes previously.

"Not Stringfellow?"

She thought this over but could not remember. Quietly I asked her to go to the staffroom and make herself a cup of coffee, as I had a matter to discuss with the class. There were seven or eight minutes before break. She seemed more than relieved to be on her way.

"Right," I said as soon as she had gone "I want you all to pack away and go down to the main yard. You're having an early break. You NEEDN'T cheer - because you are all coming back here at one o'clock to have a long discussion with me about how we should conduct ourselves in a classroom." (They groaned.) "If I hear one complaint about noise as you leave the building that chat will last at least ten minutes longer!"

I told Nathan and Rebecca to follow me.

The passer-by sat with a mug in reception. I told Nathan to stand by me. The man looked at him and then away, unconcerned.

"Well, Sir, is this the pupil you saw?" I asked.

He raised his eyes and instantly shook his head. But how could that be? Nathan matched the description perfectly. I asked the man if he was absolutely certain.

"Definitely not him. The driver was not so tall. Same blazer but not him."

"And the girl? Was it this girl? Come here Rebecca." He studied her for a while and said that it might be her.

Nathan smiled at me sardonically and asked me if I required him any longer. I glowered at him.

"You must come to school in our uniform and not in that one. The Head has mentioned it to you and so have I. Sort it!"

I sent him on his way, before taking a protesting Rebecca to my study. No matter what tactics I tried to get a confession out of her she stuck resolutely to a denial of any involvement.

“Has Stringfellow threatened you or something...put pressure on you?”

She smiled in astonishment and told me she never spoke to him.

“Don’t you like him?”

“Like him? He’s gorgeous but he doesn’t notice me. We all like him - he does our work for us, answers all the questions, whispers us the answers.”

“But not in French lessons?”

“French!? What a mega-doss! Stringy can speak better French than old Penny. Not even he can be bothered any more, she’s so boring and useless -“

I told her to hold her tongue. The bell for third lesson rang and I sent her off. My next task was to arrange cover for Miss Halfpenny’s lessons (and I had a terrific row with one of the science teachers who had lost a free the day before.) A kindly colleague had driven a distraught Jane home. The school’s insurance paid for the damage to the car but the damage to her confidence was irreparable. I knew that she spent every evening until late preparing her dull, uninspiring lessons. Now she had a complete breakdown and we never saw her again.

I asked Terry to get the film from the security camera, but when he looked there was no video in the machine.

There were two days to go before we were to break up for half-term. I came in hoping that they would pass without major incident. I was weary. Mid-morning a parent phoned up in a rage.

What was I going to do about a boy with a strange name which he had just forgotten? My spirits sank...then rose. Did he mean Stringfellow, I asked him?

“That’s the name! You should see what he’s done to my daughter!”

I raced through all the possibilities. Had I got chapter and verse on him this time? For a heinous sexual assault?? This time he would not escape!

“He’s put a spell on her!”

A spell. I asked him with a sinking heart to explain.

“I know it sounds crazy, but he said that if she didn’t stop calling him Stringy he would make her regret it. Well you see her mouth! Her lips are all covered in sores and her tongue’s swollen up so much she can’t speak!”

“Mr Hollingworth - I had the exact same problem some years ago. I bit my lip and a germ got in. I could eat nothing but warm soup for a week. It wasn’t a spell, it was a nasty infection.

Antibiotics will clear it up in a few days.”

“So - you’re saying, it’s a coincidence.”

Now I remembered the name Hollingworth. They belonged to some peculiar sect and worshipped in a chapel a bit larger than a king-size garden shed. The girl had been permanently withdrawn from RE by parental request. After half-term she returned with a letter demanding to be moved from 8/3.

A few days in our Brittany cottage recharged my batteries for what I knew would be an exhausting seven weeks.

We had been back from holiday a few days when a mysterious fire broke out in the Exclusion Unit. It involved a waste-paper basket. Priti Patel, our part-timer, was adamant that no pupil could have been responsible.

“They were sitting down, all more or less working when Sykes - that new lad from Forest View - shouts - Hey up Miss! The bin’s on fire! I turn round and there were flames leaping up - so I threw my laptop bag over it!”

“Could anyone have got up and thrown a lighted match into it?”

“Absolutely not.”

I interviewed every member of the unit separately and heard the same tale of the innocent onlooker, until I got to around to Sykes. He had a particularly brutal, stupid face with slitty, boss eyes and his hairline began just above his eyebrows - a convict of the future without a shadow of a doubt.

“Did you sling a match into the bin?” I said vehemently, fully expecting an equally vehement denial. But pathetically he nodded his head and gazed down at his trainers.

“What? You did? Why?”

“Nathan told me to do it.”

“Nathan? Nathan Stringfellow?”

“I dunno.”

“What did he look like?”

“Dunno.”

“Of course you know you SILLY boy!”

“I doon’t - He just told me to, and I did.”

“A voice told you to do it - When?”

“When I sat doing maffs.”

I asked Priti if he could possibly have thrown a match without her noticing. His confession unsettled her. She told me she had been typing up her weekly reports at the front. Sykes had been on her left. If he had thrown it, he would have had to do it from under his table. There had been no noise and no stink of sulphur. I saw that it was almost six feet from table to bin. How could a fragile match have crossed such a distance and stayed lit? I decided to try a new tack. Had she come across Nathan Stringfellow at all?

“He’s a new boy - tall - dark-haired - dark blue uniform - “

She looked at me in astonishment.

“Him!? Stringfellow?? Is that who he is? I found him in the car-park a while back, looking suspicious....examining the cars.”

“You did? When? Priti - it’s vital you try and remember exactly when!”

“Well, I know it was a Tuesday because I don’t come in till break. But I can’t - wait a minute! That was the morning I went to the dentist’s because I couldn’t talk very well, my mouth was still frozen...”

And she mentioned the very day when Jane Halfpenny’s car had been wrecked.

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“Oh, positive. I asked him what he was doing in the staff car-park and he told me that he had been sent to get some books from the boot of a car. I must have sounded like some kind of nitwit with my frozen mouth and he just looked at me as if I was the proverbial piece of doo-doo. I asked him which member of staff and do you know what he said? He asked me what business exactly it was of mine! What a cheek! I told him was an extremely rude boy and told him in to go back and explain to the teacher why he had been sent in.”

I considered phoning Miss Halfpenny at home to confirm the story but decided - in view of her illness - not to make matters worse for her. I sent for Stringfellow and of course he adamantly denied going into the car-park then and at any other time. I smiled at him in the knowledge that I

had a witness of whom he was unaware. This time I had him.

“It wasn’t this boy,” she said. “He is much taller than the one I spoke to.”

“But what about the blazer?” I almost yelled, simmering with frustration.

“It was like that but not so dark.”

I told him to follow me to my office.

“I don’t know exactly what your game is, Stringfellow, but I know, and you know that I know, that you are behind some pretty nasty business at the establishment! Things have gone downhill ever since you came.”

To my fury he remained utterly calm, raising one quizzical eyebrow. I felt an almost irresistible urge to wipe the supercilious smirk from his face. As is my wont on such occasions I put my hands firmly in my trouser pockets.

“Yes, you are quite right, Mr Kelly. That would not be a good idea. It would be quite a sizeable pension to lose, would it not?”

I shouted at him and ordered him out of my sight. As he sauntered off down the corridor I told him that I would be watching him like a hawk from then on.

“And get our uniform, or you’ll be sent home!”

He turned, gave me the sweetest grin and put his finger up. I bounded after him.

“And what do you mean by that gesture?” I shouted.

“Please calm yourself, Mr Kelly. I was merely showing you that I intend to comply. What other possible interpretation could be placed on a raised finger?” And to illustrate his point he raised it again. I put my hands as deep into my pockets as they would go.

As I climbed into my car exhausted, I felt an all too familiar twinge in my left buttock. That night I awoke in agony with my back. Whichever way I lay I had no relief. I took my strongest painkillers. They had no lasting effect. So that my wife could get some sleep I went into the spare room. My pain got worse. It spread into my neck and right shoulder. It ran along my sciatic nerve like a pulse of fire. I slept not a wink and by the time the day broke I was so exhausted that I could not possibly go in. I could barely stand. I tried one hot bath after another but the relief was only temporary.

For three long days and three longer nights I suffered. On the fourth day it eased and I caught up on many hours of lost sleep. The following day I managed to struggle in. I had only one lesson and, apart from a sore shoulder, was relatively pain-free. I sat at my desk wheeling around my arm to try and free the trapped nerve and noticed that my desk drawer was slightly open. I looked in and saw, to my horror, a plasticine effigy of myself - unmistakably me, chubby and of exactly my proportions - and from my right shoulder there was protruding a pin. I almost burst out laughing. I watched my trembling thumb and index finger reach down. As soon as I took out the pin the sweet feeling came back into my joint and, when I put it back, the stinging pain returned. With a mixture of fury, disbelief and revulsion I picked it up and threw it against the wall. Immediately I was wrenched from my chair and thrown to the floor where I lay in agony for full five minutes. As it began to subside I stared at the ceiling waiting for inspiration. How could I go to the Head and tell him a story I could scarcely believe myself?

During my few days absence a nasty assault had almost put one of our new Fairleigh Magna recruits - a Pakistani boy - into hospital. No-one had witnessed it and the victim had been attacked from behind. All he could remember was a vicious racist snarl in his ear of “effing

Paki". Neither he nor his sister returned. Enquiries about vacancies and tours were drying up. The staff looked as stressed as ever and absenteeism rose. The behaviour of many elder pupils was, by common consent, dreadful, with gangs on the prowl intent on intimidation and vandalism.

Jones finally decided that enough was enough. He called a special assembly for Years 8 and 9. A nasty fight had broken out the previous break between two gangs and the police had been called. "Unless there is a dramatic and lasting improvement in behaviour there will be no Year 8 trip to Drayton Manor in the summer and no Leavers' Ball for year 9."

I closed my eyes in disbelief. Why had he not consulted me? Here was a hostage to fortune if ever there was one. He had thoughtlessly thrown away our ace of trumps. Afterwards we had our very first row.

"What you should have said was that anyone with a poor disciplinary record would be refused a ticket - NOT threaten to cancel the whole shebang! What will they be like if there's no incentive to behave? Why didn't you ask me what I thought?"

He had reacquired that hounded, panicky look.

"Please leave discipline to me!" I shouted.

To my astonishment he banged the table.

"I only wish I could! That would be rather nice!"

"Are - are you trying to imply that I -"

"No! I'm TELLING you - get it sorted, Richard."

I admit that at this point I stormed out. I felt utterly useless. How could I tell him that the source of malice in the school was chiefly down to his star recruit? What evidence had I got?

Later that morning, after I had threatened the direst consequences to the ringleaders of the scrap, the whirring of the fax machine in my office roused me from my state of staring lethargy. It was from Baptiste. At least that was definitely that number of his at the top. Immediately I phoned back but only got the peeping sound of a fax machine. Later I tried to send him a reply but the paper refused to budge.

The message was simple: 141?

I do not know why, but I got to my feet, found the doll, and smoothing the back of it down carefully, I laid in my bottom drawer and turned the key on it.

I'm going bloody mad, I thought.

The first week of November was unseasonably hot, with temperatures in the twenties. The air in the building became more and more stagnant and stifling. I asked Terry more than once if he was sure the boiler was off. The pupils became even tetchier and more unbiddable. We opened the windows but the air refused to change.

One morning I needed to pop over to the new Upper School to have a chat about a history project we intended to trial the following summer. The atmosphere there was entirely different. I told my counterpart how unbearably hot it was at Bragwell and she asked how I could bear to work in such a rabbit warren.

"It's totally unsuitable in this day and age. No wonder the kids are so difficult. I would never work there."

I took her point but even when the weather broke soon after, and a cold north-westerly set in, the atmosphere in the main corridor still remained oppressive.

I remember I was sitting at the end of school staring at Baptiste's fax and wondering what on earth he was trying to say. Was it something to do with his telephone number? It just did not make sense. There was a loud rap at my door and in walked Terry with a face like a thunderstorm. Oh no, not bloody litter again, I thought.

"Richard. You will not believe what one of the cleaner's found..."

He opened a plastic bag and drew out the most wicked knife I had ever seen. It was jagged like a shark's teeth and was getting on for a foot long.

"Where did you find that?"

"On the top of the lockers near PE, shoved to the back and hidden. Sheila's certain it was not there yesterday."

I was tired and not thinking properly. I told him to go and put it back exactly as it had been found. His whiskery face creased in disbelief.

"Terry - it's been put there for a purpose. I want to see who comes for it. Tomorrow, as soon as you've opened up at seven thirty, go into the PE office and keep your eye on the lockers. I'll be in at eight."

"Don't you think it's a bit of a risk? I thought you'd call the police."

"Look, Terry, who's deputy Head here? Me or thee? I want to catch this character red-handed." I had little doubt who it would turn out to be.

"What about all my other jobs?" he moaned. "Will you square it with His Nibs?"

I told him not to worry and to leave everything else until I came in.

I came in at twenty to eight. I had had a restless and disturbed night, dreaming of Stringfellow swishing about with a set of knives and throwing them indiscriminately along the corridor. I hurried in, having realized just how much unfair pressure I had put on Terry's old shoulders. I was also looking forward to being there when the culprit appeared. This time there would be no escape. I met Terry in the main corridor.

"Terry! Why aren't-

"It's bloody.....gone!"

"GONE?" My heart and blood froze. I studied his furrowed face.

"I told you it was a bloody risk to put it back.....but you're the Deputy Head."

By eight thirty the police were there. They gave me an absolute roasting.

"You should have called us the very moment it was found! You're an absolute bloody incompetent disgrace!"

Lessons were immediately suspended. Every tutor group was confined to its room. A group of visiting teachers from Germany was sent packing. The police requested that every bag be emptied out. They had no right, they said, to search but made it clear that anyone who refused would be taken along to the local station to await the arrival of parents and, possibly, if access were still denied, the arrival of a search warrant a few hours later. No-one refused. The haul of cigarettes was impressive and there were a few very pornographic magazines, a knuckle-duster (which produced a caution), a set of darts, a stolen calculator, some stink bombs, some pen-knives and even a flask of brandy. But of the murderous knife there was no sign. Every single locker was opened, every cupboard was shifted away from the wall, the field was searched and

every conceivable nook and cranny scrutinised.

A senior officer had arrived. I apologised to him as abjectly as I could without throwing myself to my knees. He looked kind. His voice was Bristolian and his face reminded me of Frankie Howerd. But he entirely lacked his sense of humour.

“It’s up to the authorities of course, Mr Kelly, but if I were your headmaster you be suspended *sine die* for pulling such a daft trick. You acted irresponsibly and without recourse to higher authority. If that knife turns up in a pupil, you will be largely to blame. I can scarcely believe that a man of your experience would attempt such a stupid act of amateur sleuthing. Why won’t you people - who think, naturally, with their degrees, that they are so much cleverer than poor old Mr Plod - why won’t you leave it to the real EXPERTS?”

Of course I was badly stung and could not help blurting out that such people as me might do so, had not the police such a poor reputation for punctuality and reliability.

He turned crimson at this and thundered, “If I can think of a charge to put you on, I will! Oi’ll have you down the station like a shot for a remark like that! What do you ivory-tower people know about how stretched we are in Earlstone and its environs? Do you know?”

He disappeared and was back in a trice with the Head who looked more uncomfortable than I had ever seen him.

“DI Craddock has informed me that you are not fully co-operating with his enquiries, Mr Kelly.”

I sat down and swept what was left of my locks backwards with both hands. I told them that I wished to apologise unreservedly for any unfortunate remark which had caused annoyance.

“I thought I was acting for the best with the knife...but I recognize now that it was a bad error of judgment. I was tired and not thinking straight.”

This seemed to take the lightning out of the air. The detective inspector sat down and let out a long sigh. I saw immediately that he had to deal, day in, day out, with the same sort of nasty stuff that I did. I gave him my hand and he understood and shook it.

“I want you to close the school Mr Jones,” he said as he inspected my ceiling light. Close the school. We were startled. Yet another nail in our battered coffin.

“We’re bringing in metal detectors to make a more thorough search of the place.”

I felt thirsty. I opened my drawer to look for a mint and there it was. Slowly I drew it out to its full, appalling length. I held it up and watched it glint in the low November sun slanting in behind me. It cast its reflections on the walls and on the jacket and gaping face of the policeman.

“Do you mean to say that it’s been in your drawer all this time?” he whispered.

The Head just stared at it as if entranced.

“Someone is trying to make a monkey out of me,” I said quietly, knowing full well who it was, but unable to make any accusation.

141? One hundred-and-forty-one. Where had I seen that number before? Not a telephone number. An address? I kept closing my eyes and viewed it, glowing like three torches in my inner dark. It would not come.

Jones decided that he would hold an extra long briefing one morning. He wanted to know what was going wrong and how we could put it right. Should we suspend the timetable and have a special morning with tutors revisiting the code of conduct?

“These kids - they can’t help it - look at their backgrounds - it’s amazing that they’re as good as they are,” said someone. “You can try codes of conduct until you are blue in the face - but what

codes of conduct do they have in their own homes, some of them - no - most of them!"

"But they were a lot better last year," said someone else.

"This all kicked off again after Baptiste had his attack,"

"Can't we function as a community without Dr Merveille? Are we so lame?" asked Jones. "Can't we be positive and good without his example and encouragement?"

No-one spoke. Many of the staff had worked out one half of the problem but not the other.

I was climbing out of the shower when it suddenly came to me. 141. Had I not seen that number on Stringfellow's form?

The next morning I could hardly wait for Terry to open up the office. I went to the filing cabinet and opened drawer S - Y. My fingers ran through the document holders - Sperry, Squires, Staines, Stines, Stowell ...Stringfellow. My fingers trembled as I opened the hanging file. There was one sheet of paper. I hardly dared look. There it was. His admission form. 141 Fairleigh Parva Rd. I photocopied it and returned to my office as furtively as a thief.

As soon as assembly ended I told Joyce that I was just popping over to Bragwell Upper. Then, instead of turning right I turned left onto the main road and drove into the heart of the village. I suddenly realised that I had not got a clue where Fairleigh Parva Road was. I had worked in Bragwell some twelve years but had only driven in and out the same way every day. At the service station I got directions and after a few wrong turns I found myself on an unmistakably well-to-do avenue, with large mansions set well back behind lawns and cedars, weeping willows, chestnuts and other impressive trees, facing and almost challenging their counterparts on the other side of the road. I could not see the numbers from the road so I stopped and got out. In the distance beyond the final house on the left there was a farm then just open country. In the middle distance there was a spire, probably the church of Fairleigh Parva. Now I hesitated and almost came to a stop. Here already was number 129. What exactly would I say to Mrs Stringfellow when I knocked her door? I admired the last show of chrysanthemums in the garden of 131 and walked on. I counted the houses as the numbers began to peter out and realised that the last one in the row was 139. I stopped and looked the quarter of a mile further on to the farmhouse and its adjacent barn. That then would be 141. Was Dr Stringfellow a smallholder or a part-time farmer as well as a surgeon? I retraced my steps and got back into my car. I stopped at the entrance to the farm, a dirt-track, and read Ashtree Farm on a swinging sign, but could see no number. I drove into the front yard and parked beneath the enormous ash, which was swaying in the steady late November wind and finally shedding its most tenacious sets of golden leaves. I rattled the old fashioned knocker which, I noticed as I let it go, was a brass fox. I stood back and waited. I knocked again. And then knocked a final time. I looked up at the high widows and they stared back at me. The wind summoned up a rough squall which sent a blizzard of ash leaves flying and swirling. I saw a side gate and opened it delicately. I looked in through the side window of the kitchen and saw only a tableau of dark fittings and objects. To my right there was a path of slabs bordered by weeds and shrubs leading into the barn. I could hear no lowing of animals and began to surmise that the Stringfellows had bought up a derelict or bankrupted farm as an investment. I began to turn to go when I heard an animal noise. It sounded like a goat. Amused, I went towards its source, the barn. A sudden gust of wind made me shudder and sent the side gate clanging to. Beyond the roof of the farmhouse the great ash bent forward and back and creaked and groaned as the full force of the upper air assailed it. A crow or a rook in its highest branches vented its disgust.

The dark of the barn both fascinated and perturbed me.

“Anyone at home?” I shouted. In reply a magpie to my left rattled, broke its wings, hopped two paces and flapped up, black then white, into an apple tree. I had almost reached the doorway to the barn. There was a sweet, pungent smell which brought to mind the ancient memory of mash in my grandfather’s pig-sty. I had been drawn almost into the doorway and could see beams of light in the far corner of the barn when I heard a thud near to me. I drew back and saw to my lower left a creature emerge - a large billy-goat. I noticed first its appalling yellow-green eyes, unnatural, as if its head had been studded with agate stones. I instantly saw it was not friendly. It bleated again, its jaw and beard trembling with indignation. I knew instinctively that to turn and walk away would be an invitation to be butted by the beast. I stood my ground and tried to stare it out. Surely it would back down. But this was obviously not good goat-psychology. It took a menacing step towards me on its ugly hoof and I retreated. This encouraged it to take another, and then another. I suddenly reached forward and grabbed its stiletto horns at their base by its rough furry head. It bleated furiously and tried to shake itself free. I held on as it twisted first one way then the other. What a hopeless dilemma I found myself in - I could not hold on for long as it was a strong beast - but to let go and concede would be to risk a serious injury. Breathlessly I shouted for help but the beast only bleated louder. Round and round and round we danced. I began to slip in the mire. To fall over now would be disastrous, the temper my foe was in, and I had to try to stay balanced and upright. To my distress I realised that I was beginning slowly to lose the contest; my back was hurting with the bending and twisting and I slowly sank to my knees. In the mud I came face to face with my nemesis. It belched into my face. The stink was suffocating and nauseous. My elbows, my last defences, were beginning to give way. Now only a few inches separated our faces, both so alien to each other.

“For God’s sake, back off you fucking goat” I managed to stammer. I looked into its stony eyes and saw in them not a speck of pity. Then I became aware of a large figure looming in the entrance to the barn beyond us.

“What the ‘ell’s gooin’ on?” it yelled.

Then the figure emerged fully. It was a fat man in an old cardigan with a tea-cosy hat on his head. He seized the goat and booted it off as my hands finally gave way.

“Who are you and what the ‘ell are you dooin’ on mi’ land?”

“I was looking for Dr Stringfellow” I managed to gasp as I struggled to my feet. I did not imagine for one moment that this vulgarian was he and I assumed he was a farm hand.

“Doctor who?”

“Is this 141 Fairleigh Parva Rd?”

“No. This is a Fairleigh Parva address, not Bragwell. Bragwell finishes back there with the last house. Now up you get and be on your way - you’re trespassing....”

The goat echoed his displeasure and had to be restrained again. I needed no second invitation to take my leave.

Back at the car I wiped the mud from my knees and reversed out onto the main road. I slowed down at the last odd number to make absolutely sure I had not made a mistake. I looked down at the form. No. 141 did not exist and this was the jist of the message. So where did the Stringfellows live?

From my office I rang the number on the form and kept getting the engaged signal. I phoned the Infirmary in Leicester and enquired about Dr Stringfellow. There was no such person on their books. I looked at the form again and phoned directory enquiries to find the number of the Solihull Academy. It was not listed. I put down the phone and wondered what else was a fiction.

I am the last person to be superstitious but a shudder ran through me when I saw the boy's date of birth. It was June 6th.

That afternoon I waited in my car and watched the pupils leave through the gates. Of Stringfellow there was no sign. I had intended to follow him. I sent for him at 3pm the following afternoon but he did not come. I fetched him the day afterwards and sat him down. He tried to find out what I wanted but I avoided the question and avoided his gaze. I had the distinct impression that he felt uncomfortable. As soon as the bell went I asked him to accompany me to the gate.

"Whatever for? What is the meaning of this?" he asked irritated. I did not want to alert him to what, through Baptiste, I had stumbled on.

"Someone has accused you of bullying them at the gate. So I've kept you back." I said.

He laughed. I instantly knew that he knew that this was a lie. As soon as he turned left out of the school gate I got into my car and followed him at a safe distance. He reached the junction with the main road and turned left towards Fairleigh Parva. I counted to twenty and then pulled out from where I had parked. I waited for a car at the corner and then turned left. But of him there was no sign. I drove the whole route but he had vanished. The following day I told him that I was driving him home.

"Is that such a good idea?" he purred. "Far be it from me to make any allegation of sexual abuse against such a well-respected teacher as yourself, but it is not unthinkable, wouldn't you concede?"

I decided to ask Danny Stirk to ride with us but something cropped up just before the end of school. Then I forgot the day after.

November was giving way to December but that normal feeling of cheerful anticipation was missing. Clive threw up his hands in despair in the staffroom. He was sure he would have to cancel his usual entertainment for the school and the old folk at The Beeches. Pupils were not coming to choir rehearsals and the orchestra could barely play a note in tune. That same sad little girl came up to me again in the corridor one dismal, rainy day and asked me when the Doc was coming back. Without thinking I snapped back "Never." She burst into tears and ran along the corridor. I shouted to her to come back but she was already disappearing out of the door.

If November had been blustery December was foggy. The gloom seemed to penetrate the very corridors. We had lights on all day and the blueness of the outside became depressing. I was kept busy removing the ringleaders of disruption from classrooms and quelling insurrection. I noted that it had begun to dawn on some staff that Nathan was not as apple-pie innocent as was first thought.

"He sits there like a cherub," said one of the English teachers, "But I know, and he knows that I know, who is pulling the strings."

"No-one will answer a question any more. Not even Nathan," complained a science teacher, our most promising novice. "I asked the class what an indicator was and that buffoon Bantick shouted out that it made your car turn round the corner. Stringfellow laughed himself so silly I thought he would die of suffocation. Since then no-one dares to open their trap."

Others reported similar reluctant silences in their rooms and the fact that many pupils seemed to be glancing at him for approval.

I stood watching one break time. Nathan was wondering around alone. The children seemed to ignore him but as he went past groups he seemed to stir up some sort of reaction, like a wind almost making the waters bristle on a lake. If I had not been looking for it I doubt if I would have seen it.

The final straw came one Tuesday as the blue dark outside seemed to grow more intense. I was called to the ADT corridor. Three boys - Rowan and two of his henchmen - were writhing in pain on the floor. Nathan was just staring at them with a sarcastic smile and folded arms. By this time he had acquired the Bragwell uniform and was so smart that he looked as if he might be modelling it. I sent him off to wait outside my room.

“What ever has happened?” I shouted. Pat, the Head of Design came over and said that Nathan had shaken them off like a dog would water.

“He punched them as they fell. They had jumped him from behind.”

I inspected their faces. Bruises and swellings were already appearing.

“That will teach you not to be a bully, Rowan. I don’t suppose you know who attacked our little Pakistani boy before half-term? No? - I didn’t think you would.”

When I returned to my office Stringfellow had made himself comfortable again. I ordered him to stand up and in exaggerated slow-motion he stood to mock attention like a soldier. If he had saluted me I would probably have struck him.

“I told you, Mr Kelly, that I could look after myself.”

“Oh, I know you can look after yourself Stringfellow! In fact I know all about you now. I know you have some special gift or power. I think I know who you really are...”

“Special gift?” he said laughing. “Who might I really be then?”

“You know that I know you are not a normal boy.”

“Not a normal boy? What is a normal boy?”

“I’ve found out things about you which you are not aware I know, Stringfellow.”

He tried to penetrate my eyes but I looked away. For the first time I heard a hint of uncertainty in his cool insolence.

“What things might they be?”

“I’ve heard from the Doc, Stringfellow.”

“The Doc?”

“Oh come, disingenuousness is not your style, Stringfellow.”

“The name is NATHAN....What have you heard from the Doc?”

Still I refused to engage him and now refused to answer his question.

“If it is related to me I DEMAND to be told!” he shouted in a low, menacing voice I had not heard before. But I was undaunted.

“You can demand all you like STRING - FELL - OW but I command here - not you. Now go.”

I had pain all night but I was determined not to give into it this time. I had a long hot bath, drank some brandy, took extra tablets and knocked myself out. I managed somehow to get in the next day and resolved to tell Simon Jones everything I had found out.

Could I persuade him to believe that we had admitted the devil incarnate? No chance. But I had to have a try. At least I might get suspended from that hell-hole on grounds of stress, over-work and ill-health.

I wrote down all the bullet points of my little discourse and during lesson two I managed to get in to see him. He looked listless and depressed. He said he could not wait to break up - the

weather was getting to him, the interminable fog and dark.

“And this place - going to rack and ruin despite everybody’s best efforts. I wish I’d never heard of it. Bragwell College. I’m sorry if I had a go that time. Without you, Richard - the backbone - the place would just collapse. I’m sorry.....I ca..can’t....”

He held his face in his hand. I phoned to the office and asked Joyce to bring us a flask full of coffee.

“Listen, Simon, this all went wrong when a certain person stopped comingand another one started.”

“Don’t you think I’ve worked it out for myself, Richard? Nathan Stringfellow is a devious, hypocritical nasty piece of work!”

I was astonished to hear him say this. He was a decent man, prepared to look for the very best in everyone and he rarely gave up hope of discovering it.

The two of us had come up into our positions of responsibility by very different paths. He was the genial, innovative trendsetter full of targets and curricular reform, who had caught the eye and mood in the late nineties; but he had met his match in Bragwell and he knew it; setting targets for aimless, pointless people was a futile exercise.

I had come up through the ranks; commonsense, scepticism, organization, discipline; these were my strengths. Oddly - though we did not always see eye to eye - we had complemented one another. Basically I had held the ring and created time and space for him to dream up and implement his initiatives. I would never have gone for a drink for him but I had a lot of time for Simon Jones.

“ Simon. There’s more to Stringfellow than you think.” I placed the plasticine doll of myself on his table.

He stared at it, he smiled mysteriously then rummaged in his drawer and took out one of himself. I was so taken aback I could not speak. He told me his depression had started one day after he had told Nathan for the umpteenth time to come in the Bragwell uniform. He had threatened to phone his parents.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” I asked him.

“Probably for the same reason you said nothing to me. It’s just ridiculous! I found it the other day. It gave me quite a turn. But it’s just a schoolboy prank, isn’t it, albeit a nasty one.”

I ran through with him all the odd events I had noted down. I handed him the admission form and told him that there was no 141, no record of Dr Stringfellow, and that the telephone number was always engaged. He stared at it and then at me.

“But that is preposterous!”

I handed him the receiver and told him to dial. He dialled, he listened and suddenly he was speaking.

“Ah hello. Is that Mrs Stringfellow? It is! This is Simon Jones, Head at Bragwell....no, no, Nathan’s fine....it’s just that I need to clarify your address...there seems to be an error on your form....Hello? Hello?”

The phone had gone dead. He told me he had been cut off. I took the receiver from him and dialled again. This time it was engaged. I held it to his ear.

He shrugged and said “So what? Half the phones Britain are probably engaged at this moment.”

A rap at the door broke up our meeting. I agreed to talk to him later. He thought I was touched, I could tell by his expression and the kind way he spoke to me. I had overplayed my hand. I went back to my room and sulked.

On Wednesday he came to me. He was trembling. He sat down and tossed a brown envelope onto my desk. I gasped, unable to believe it.

“We must keep this quiet until after the holidays, Simon,” I managed to say after I had read it. “This would be the final straw for many. They don’t need this hanging over them and spoiling Christmas. The rotten bastards.”

It was a yuletide greeting from Ofsted. They were coming to visit at the end of February.

The next day, our last Thursday but one before the Christmas holidays, Mr Jones did not appear. At about ten we received a call from the police. Returning from the supermarket his wife had seen smoke coming from the garage and found him almost dead inside his vehicle. On an impulse I unlocked the drawer where I had replaced the effigy of me and there to my horror was the effigy of Jones with a pin in its throat.

I closed the school the following day. The entertainment was cancelled. I became acting Head. Now I felt lonelier than I had ever been. I had the power to act against my enemy but no pretext. I had no-one to share my concerns and thoughts with. In vain I tried to fax and phone the Doc. If only he would reappear he would lift everyone! Why had he fled from Stringfellow? Surely his medicine was stronger?

Medecine?? Had I gone stark, staring mad?

The final week came. I took it upon myself to choose advent readings for my assemblies. I felt tempted to hand the job over to Mrs Bailey for I am not a religious man. I have no desire to go to heaven even if it exists - but as I re-read those verses for the first time in my adult life - I became aware of a glow within me, a conviction that here was a remarkable, a wonderful event, a turning point in human history. I sat reading with my now regular companion, a bottle of wine. The optimism, certainty and persistence of the Magi, the simplicity and earthiness of the event, and the awe and wonder of the shepherds, and the terrified threats of Herod combined to overwhelm me. Or was it the wine?

“What’s wrong?” asked Anne, my wife, who had come down to see why I had stayed up so long. She was an elder in the local church. I had pushed her bible and my pathetic notes away and sat with my head in my hands. I could not reply. Dear Anne, she put her arms around me and told me how much she loved me. I began to tell her about the doctor and Nathan Stringfellow. She listened patiently and finally said, “You’re tired, Richard. Come to bed now. One more week and you can rest.”

I stood up before the school and began to read. “Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be counted.....” I put the bible down and looked around at them all. “Mary was pregnant, “I said quietly. “Joseph knew that he was not the father. However he trusted his wife when she said that she was carrying the son of God. Who nowadays would believe such a story? Put your hand up if you or your parents would believe such a story from your sister?” No-one put up their hand. They laughed. I shushed them and carried on.

“I too have a story which no-one would believe. Do you believe I have, even before you hear it?” No-one put up their hand.

“No? Well, let me tell you my story. It’s about a school. It was, to be honest, no great shakes as a

school. It wasn't the worst but there were lots of better ones around. There were quite a number of unhappy kids there who had no clear idea about why they came or where they were going to go afterwards. The teachers were always asking the pupils to stand up, a little like Joseph and Mary, to be counted. Did they believe and share its values or did they just want to loaf around and fall by the wayside? They were no more or less stupid than the pupils of other places but they had no ambition and no faith in their own ability or in what they might achieve. They often listened to the wrong voices. Why work when the Social would pick up the tab, and when you could make a few bob on the black market, wheeling and dealing, receiving and selling? Why learn anything new - anything fresh - anything challenging - in fact anything at all - if it hadn't got a twenty pound note stapled to it? To be honest it was a school with more than its fair share of bullies, nuisances and troublemakers. Not only did they have no ambition for themselves, they were determined to wreck the learning chances of the few who did not think that way. And then - into that school one day - and he chose that school out of thousands - there walked a marvellous teacher. He showed those pupils that they could do things beyond their wildest dreams. He taught them skills and gave them ambition, but more than that gave them the belief that they were capable of doing as well - and better - than any child born into a privileged background who went to a posh school. He - literally - turned those children upside-down. In the same way, but on a much, much grander scale, a tiny child born in a filthy stable one chilly night grew up to change the way that people thought about themselves and about others. That was 2000 years ago. Such people are rare. Their days seem shorter than the idle, the mean and the selfish. Yet we never forget them. They are always there at the back of our minds even when - especially when - we do wrong. And so it was in that school I was telling you about. As suddenly as the good man came, he went. Something unsettled him. Or someone. Someone who on the face of it was a good sort, smart and appealing, polite and obliging turned up out of the blue. But he was underhand, saying one thing, doing another, seeming to be on your side, a good friend, whereas in fact he was working against you - no friend at all. The very opposite. Your foe. Some people stay long and are hard to get rid of like some nasty disease or a really bad smell. That school became infected - it went back to its idle, deplorable ways - even worse than it was. How many of you believe that story I just told you?"

One hand, then a few, then several and finally almost all the hands struggled up. Stringfellow's remained firmly flat on the floor in the space which I sensed had slightly grown around him.

"So, how does my story end? Would you believe me if I said that I have no idea?" A few hands were raised and seeing they were so few they shot back down.

"I think the ending is a secret in the hearts and minds of the pupils and staff of that school. What ending do they want? Do they believe in prayer? If they do then they must believe that someone they cannot see is listening to them and might grant their wish - if it is genuine - because saying a prayer is like making a wish. Now I want you to bow your heads in this special week and ask for the Good to return to that school. The someone who is listening might be God. Or it might be your own conscience. The one who can grant that wish is you."

I looked straight at Stringfellow. He was gazing straight back at me. The pain in my spine made me sit down. I was determined not to show the agony I was in.

"Evil can never defeat evil. Only good can do that. But it is never easy. I can reveal to you that the Doc will never come back to this school."

They all chorused "NO!"

"No, he will not. But he showed us in his time here how well we could get on with each other and what a healthy community in mind and body we could be. We owe it to him, to his memory,

in gratitude for his deeds but mostly we owe it to ourselves to learn properly, to help each other and to do each other good.”

Then I dismissed them and told Nathan to remain behind. I sat on the stage in the empty hall and glowered at him. Slowly he began to lower his eyes.

“You are not welcome in my school, Stringfellow. You may be clever in mind and rich in wallet but you are poor in spirit. You are strong but your strength flourishes only in the weakness of others. It is as simple as that. Now go!”

I watched him get up and leave. Perhaps it was the effect of me being on the stage but I had the impression that he was not as tall as I had imagined.

The day was calm. I was not fetched to one lesson. I showed a visitor around and was delighted to see almost everyone engaged in their learning. On the penultimate day of term a call was put through to me.

“Hello? Mr Kelly? This is June Stringfellow, Nathan’s mum.”

“Hello?”

“Yes, I’m just calling to say that I’m keeping him off today. He has what I can only describe as a fever.”

Her voice sounded like a higher-pitched version of her son’s.

“A fever?”

“Yes. I doubt very much whether he will be in again until next term.”

I knew that there was something urgent I needed to ask her but before I could think what it was, she had rung off. I did not trouble to ring back.

Throughout the two weeks of Christmas I brooded. I drank more than I ought to have done and finally made up my mind to banish alcohol from the house altogether.

On January 5th amongst my mail was a neatly typed envelope. I opened it and read;

Dear Mr Kelly,

This is a brief note to inform you that Nathan Stringfellow will not be returning to Bragwell College. I have accepted a post in London and we are in the busy process of moving.

Thank you and your staff for all you have done for my son and please pass on our best wishes to your headmaster for a speedy recovery,

Malcolm Stringfellow.

At the top there was no address.

The end of February came and we were visited by Ofsted. We took a deep breath. With a few quibbles and reservations we passed. The school did not achieve the giddy heights of Doc’s time but neither had we slithered back into the mess that existed before he arrived. We would slowly begin to climb out of the relegation area of the league table.

Just before we broke up for Easter I received a parcel through the post. I undid it and found a present wrapped in Christmas gift paper. I opened it and found a book. The cover was of a

powder blue colour and the spine was missing. The block capitals THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN SLAVERY was written in fading gold letters. I saw with a start of surprise that the author was one O. M. Kelly. I half-expected a dedication inside but there was none. I leafed through the pages until I came upon a copy of an engraving. The blood froze in my veins. Lashed to the wheel of a ship was a glistening black slave. His head had been twisted around and tied in such a way that he would be able to witness his own punishment. His eyes were white with terror. Preparing to scourge him, cat o' nine tails to hand was the skipper - a dark-haired, bewhiskered, sallow-faced man with eyes like jet. Beyond them a huddle of cowed slaves prepared to witness the proceedings. Sailors, arms akimbo, looked on with relish. The caption read:

Captain L. Stringfellow prepares to punish a slave for the theft of water.

At the bottom I read in beautiful script

To Evil in thrall and in bondage is Good..
Yet the Truth shall break free and shall be understood.

Dr B.H Merveille