

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number Thirteen

A Testing Time

Most Year 3 classes are memorable. They are no longer ‘the little ones’ feeling their way nor yet fully-fledged juniors. They can look down on the Reception class, and take no notice of the juniors. They are generally knowing, critical and talkative. Some would indeed talk the hind legs off a donkey – but not before they had found out the donkey’s name, who was pulling it apart, and why. Grace Archdale told me a delightful story of her most memorable class of 6/7 year-olds - led by Maisie, who, she confidently predicted, could have a successful career as a sergeant major or leader of HM’s Opposition or any other position that requires her to turn opponents into quivering heaps.

My first ever experience of an Ofsted inspection was just before the end of my first term as a Newly Qualified Teacher and as a Year 3 class teacher. When the Head announced at a staff meeting that just before Christmas there was going to be this awe-inspiring event, I remember a collective groan, and a sense of impending doom settle over my dozen or so colleagues. Tea cups rattled nervously and magazines slipped off knees unobserved. It was a novel experience for me as I had been used to a lively, carefree and humorous lot of colleagues. But no-one seemed to find anything witty to say. Personally I felt no concern at all. I was learning the ropes day by day, period by period. Another person peering at my class and making notes to help me along was no big deal.....or so I thought until the first day of the week-long inspection, which was the normal period for those days.

The staff were gathered in the staff room just before registration and the daily assembly, while support staff looked after the kids. The lead inspector, appropriately but unexpectedly named Cyrus Judge, wanted us to meet him and his team and...according to the Head...reassure us.

Well, he met us all right... but as to reassuring us, that was another matter. He began by simply announcing, 'I'm Judge by name, judge by occupation and judge by inclination...' He paused for the expected laugh, but I heard only a single short titter... and that came from one of his team. So he continued....I kid you not....by staring at the front row and declaring, 'If you are wondering what the point of this inspection is let me explain it to you in the words of the great Duke of Wellington at Waterloo, 'Your duty is not to reason why, yours is to do and die...'

'It wasn't Wellington and it wasn't Waterloo,' said a small voice from the back. It was our deputy head and learned historian, Anna Dyne.



'Well, some other general then, at some other time' replied Judge, laughing it off without batting an eyelid. 'The point I am making is that you must not spend the week trying to work out what we are inspecting and adjusting your teaching accordingly. Just get on with teaching classes as you do all the time. Just pretend we are not there. We are well trained to blend into the background. Any questions you might have please address them to the Head. We will be liaising with him constantly during the week.'

The Head stopped me on the way out of the staff room. 'Grace. Just a moment. Mr Judge is with me for the first part of the morning, but then wants to see your lesson after mid-morning Break.. Can you pick him up at my office? Thanks.'

I can't remember what my reaction to this surprising news was. But I do remember collecting Mr Judge and escorting him down the corridor – trying on the way to demonstrate my confidence and lack of concern that the top man himself was starting off the inspection week... with me.

'I suppose you are an infant specialist,' I queried, thinking that this would be an easy opener.

'Oh no,' he replied. 'I haven't been in an Infant class before... not since I was a child myself. I have been a secondary school art and craft teacher for thirty years... a head of what they call Design and Technology these days. My inspection team of six is a mixture of secondary and primary, but my expert in infants is looking at another of your colleagues this period....science, I think. But I thought it was appropriate for me to attend your class since I noted on the Lesson Plan that you were doing some elementary craft work today. Isn't that so?'

'Yes, I am,' I said.

I should have shut up there and then, but I suddenly felt rather indignant. I got the impression that Mr. Judge was looking down on infant teachers.... as art and craft interlopers.... lacking in specific expertise.... and so I bridled.

'But won't you find it rather difficult inspecting an infant department if your whole experience has been in secondary education?' I enquired. I did not even try to suppress my indignation.

'I don't think so,' he said, without a pause. 'A teacher is a teacher, is a teacher...I always say. We inspectors are trained to be versatile, you know. You can rely on me to size things up and come pretty quickly to a well-honed judgement.' And he had the effrontery to laugh at his own witty play on his name!

So at that point I did shut up. I could not trust myself!

Just before we got to my classroom he piped up again. 'I see you are using scissors for cutting coloured paper this period. I hope you have done a risk assessment and a risk management plan. Perhaps I could have a copy.'

Inwardly my heart stopped beating and my brain froze. A risk management plan! They were only 5 and 6 year olds! And using blunt scissors with rounded points. He didn't really want a ten-page written assessment....did he?!

But then I realised that he was right. There were risks. Every period of every day there are particular and peculiar risks with little ones. That was reality. That was life.

Rapid thoughts went through my mind. Will I be telling Maisie not to snip off the ends of Peggy's pigtails? Of course I will!....I do it every craft period! And does she take any notice? Just for a moment, no longer. She will almost certainly have to grace the naughty step,...unless she is overawed by the presence of an inspector...and she will once again miss out on the smarties for good work. And I will then have to prevent her pinching Penny's smarties? Of course I will!

And will I have to tell Danny to stop flicking Arjun's ear with his pencil. Of course I will. I did yesterday and I did the day before. I can hear myself saying, 'No, Danny, Arjun does NOT have a flea in his ear...and no, Danny, neither do you....no, it's not what your mother meant.....It's just an itch... and you can rub it gently with your finger. It does not require a ruler in one ear and a pencil in another....No, it did not work yesterday, Danny....' I sighed....and smiled to myself. This is infant school teaching.

And no, Milton, Joey does not want to be an Apache....no, not even Geronimo.... Nor Crazy Horse either...Just put the blue wax crayon down, Milton, and , Joey, you go and clean your face and arms with a Kleenex tissue...no, it does not look good at all...it is not good for your skin....because I say so, Joey....and your mother will, too, if she sees it...don't argue... I know she will be furiousagain....No, it won't make any difference if you are Sitting Bull...whether he was a hero or not is neither here nor there, Joey... yes I know we read about them in '*Heroes and Heroines*'...you can play them in our drama lesson later...

I could not help wondering what would happen when we got to '*Wizards and Witches*' after Christmas! And almost certainly we would be!

I snapped out of my reverie when Mr Judge addressed me again, as we entered the classroom.

'Well?' he asked.

I was about to enquire 'well, what?' when I remembered he had asked me for a copy of my risk management plan.

'Of course, sir. It will be with you before you leave school today.'

'Highly satisfactory. Now just leave me to wander round....and taking notes. I shall be able to draw my own conclusions while observing.'

With that he set off for the tables at the far end of the room, greeting my classroom assistant, Maggie, as he passed. So far none of the children had paid him the slightest attention, so absorbed were they in their cutting and pasting. Then he made the fatal mistake of saying loudly, 'Good morning, boys and girls.'

The silence was broken.

"Morning", sir.
'Ow do.'
'Watcher'
' 'Ow are you?'
'Good bye'
'Tara'

And, of course, having got going the greetings went round again.

'Ow do'
Good mornin'



'Watcher.'
'Nice day, sir.'
'Tara'

It was like church bells ringing from all parts of the city, but not so mellifluous! My inspector colleague was caught unawares. But just before the third round began, I decided to intervene.

'All right. That'll do. It was very nice of you to welcome our inspector visitor. Now get on with your work. You have a lot to do.'

Mr Judge nodded his thanks to me.

But the damage had been done. The inner world they had inhabited before we entered had been invaded. There was now a subdued but excited buzz. I bent over the table of four I was at, and tried to absorb myself in their activity, but my ears would not stop wagging. Someone was going to make the first move, and sure enough it was Maisie. ...little Maisie with the smiley round face and even rounder wire spectacles, through which she blinked with disarming innocence. She leaned back on her chair, stared at Mr Judge and pointed her crayon straight at him.

'So, are you a spectre then?'

'No, you mean ins....' He got no further.

'He's not a spectre, our Maisie' said her table companion, Peggy. 'Spectres are ghosts.... Miss Archdale read a story about them last week from our reader, '*Ghosts and ghouls*'. Remember?'

'No, you don't understand...' cried Mr Judge, a certain amount of desperation entering his voice, 'I am an INspector.'

This temporarily stopped the table in its tracks. Danny asked the question they were all dying to ask.

'Well, if you are an INspector, what's an OUTspector do?'

'No, no, there are no OUTspectors, just INspectors, like me.'

'What do INspectors do, then?' asked Peggy.

'Well, they come into school and observe what you do.' It was a bit of a lame explanation and Maisie was not going to let him get away with it.

'That's not much of a job, is it?' She looked around and got the nods from her table companions. My dad has a real job. He works in the quarry.

'So does mine,' said Danny.

'And mine,' echoed Reggie next to him. Others joined in. Most dads worked in or for the quarry.

'My dad hasn't got a job,' growled Peggy, 'Not since Danny's dad blew him up!'

'No, he didn't! Your dad should have moved away when the hooter blew. Everybody knows that.'

Disputes about life in the quarry were not rare! I decided not to intervene. Mr Judge could devise his own escape plan.

'That will do now, children.... I am very sorry to hear about your father... and I hope he will soon be back at work. Now shall we get on. You have a lot of work to do.' Mr Judge was learning fast.

There was a general subsiding, but I heard Peggy mutter, 'My dad won't go back to work. He gets his cards every day...'

Mr Judge cut in. 'I think you mean 'he got his cards.....made redundant...don't you?'

'Redcurrant!' cried Peggy in high dudgeon, 'My dad won't like that! He's black. You can see that if you look at me! You shouldn't say things like that!'

'No, you've got it wrong. I didn't say 'redcurrant'. I said he was 'redundant'...Mr Judge now realised he had used a word beyond the comprehension of Year 3....it means 'lost his job'. That's what 'got his cards' means, you see.' Mr Judge on the backfoot again.

'No it doesn't,' said Peggy, obviously totally puzzled. 'I said he gets his cards every day, and that's what I meant..... He gets his pack of cards, and his box, and his matches, and takes them with him down to the Quarryman's Arms and plays canasta with his pals every morning till it's dinner-time.' She turned to her table companions, 'Do you know what this 'spector bloke is on about? He's lost me.'

'Naaaw,' said Maisie, drawing it out in disdain....and shaking her head. 'No wonder my mum says we shouldn't speak to strange men.'

Mr Judge was just standing there swapping his big black book from hand to hand. 'Welcome to the infants,' I thought.

I did not catch the next exchange. Maggie, my assistant, had sidled across to me. 'Sorry, Grace. I had to let Pansy go to the toilet. She was desperate.'

'O dear! Not to worry, Maggie. She often forgets to go before school. Always too busy.'

I appeared calm but my inner thoughts were building up again. Vision of Pansy bouncing through the door. 'What is the first thing we do when we have been to the toilet, Pansy?.... yes, that's right, we pull our knickers up....BEFORE we get back to the classroom!....no, you are not missing anything if you take the time to smooth down your skirt.'

Just then the door opened, and in walked Pansy....utterly prim and completely dressed. Not a trace of blue knickers. Triumph!

'Well done, Pansy,' I whispered as she skipped past me. 'You see, you can remember to make yourself tidy sometimes.'

'Yes, miss, I can....A lady with a big book walking in the corridor with the 'eadmaster just told me what I was showing..... just as I got to the door. That was lucky, wasn't it?'

'I hope so,' I thought.

I took the opportunity at this point to whisper to Maggie to nip along to the Head and implore him to find, write or otherwise provide a risk assessment for the use of scissors in an infant art class and to slip it into the bundle of inspectors' information. All corners covered now.

Meanwhile Mr Judge seemed intent on regaining the initiative. He was speaking to Maisie. That was a mistake.

Maisie had stuck a big red circle onto her white card, with one yellow triangle sticking up straight out of the top, two long orange rectangles protruding left and right and two more big green rectangles hanging from the bottom capped by a yellow square at each end..

'That's a nice hot sun with colourful rays,' said Mr Judge in his encouraging voice.

Maisie, with an instinctive sense of drama, laid down her scissors, put her hands firmly on either side of her card and turned her head slowly and upwards to fix the hapless inspector in her gaze. Her eyes were blinking through the large round circles of her spectacles. Indignation was writ large.

'That is NOT a sun....and these are not rays,' she said with a hint of contempt. 'That's our teacher, Miss Archdale.'

'Ah, yes...now you tell me, I can see it is the teacher....very good... but why has she only got one ear sticking out of the top?'

'It's not an ear! That's her hair done up in a bun.'

She pointed her finger at the inspector. 'You don't have one ear on the top of your head, do you? You must know some funny people, you must..... Ears are at the side of everyone's head in this class.' She looked round the table at the nodding heads.

'And I haven't stuck the ears on yet 'cos I am just cutting out two more triangles,' she added.

'Oh, jolly good. I suppose you will be adding eyes, nose and mouth later.' Mr Judge was trying hard to retrieve the situation, and I smiled as I shuffled round the adjacent table relishing the encounter behind me.

'No. I will not be adding any mouth or nose or anything else because we haven't got those temp things..... what are they, Danny?'

'Templates.'

'Yes, that's it. We don't have any of those cardboard template things for a mouth or nose, so you have to imagine them.'

'Well,' said Judge still in the middle of extricating himself from an artistic mire. 'You could draw them on with your felt-tip pen.'

This was just too much for Maisie... and the other children, too. There was a general muttering of youthful revolution.

'You can't do that. This is a cut and paste lesson!'

'That's not allowed! That's crayoning!'

'That would be cheating!'

Mr Judge gave in. He might have been a bit pompous but he was at heart a kind and caring man. Before he moved on he attempted one more move for rapport.

'Thank you for your conversation...er... what's your name? He was addressing Maisie.

'We're Table Four,' replied Maisie slowly and suspiciously. 'We don't give our own names to strangers'.

Mr Judge smiled. 'I don't think I count as a stranger, do I?'

I think he realised as soon as he said it that Table Four would not miss the chance.

Maisie looked round her pals, and wagged her crayon at each of them in turn.

'He's been a bit strange, hasn't he? Just popping in here, interrupting our work?' Naturally the others agreed unanimously,, nodding heads vigorously. So Maisie reported back to Mr Judge.

'We all think it's a bit strange you coming in here for a few minutes and then going away. I expect you will say we are all daft, won't you?'

'No, certainly not...er... Table Four... you have been most interesting. In fact, I think you are a credit to your teacher.'

I could have hugged him...and them... for that. I gave him full marks for his perspicacity, although I suspected that nobody would be terribly interested in my estimation of inspectors.

'I am sure Miss Archdale is proud of you and I can see you like her.'

I appreciated that gesture, too.

'Yes we do,' they chorused.

At the end of the morning, when inspectors and kids had left, I wandered round the tables looking at the range of picture cut-outs. I left Table Number Four to the end. I do not know why, but probably because in my bones I knew that Maisie would have the last word. And so she did.

Neatly laid out in her place were two pictures – one of a red face, orange arms and green-stockinged legs, entitled 'Teacher'. And next to it a grey paper with a royal blue circle, three black triangles on top, two yellow squares at the side, two red rectangular arms, and two columns of green squares dangling down from the circle to the bottom edge of the paper. On the blue circle were drawn – in black felt-tip – two dots for eyes, two oversize black ovals staring out like a Tamworth pig, and a thin sliver of white sticky paper for a mouth. It was entitled boldly at the top in black felt-tip, 'A SPECTER'.

Inspectors are not immune from inspection. Judge not that ye be not judged, Mr Judge.
