

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 36

Education does not stop at the school gate. That is a well known aphorism. Teachers are keen to point out that learning takes place 'on the playing fields of Eton,' ...or the local public park.

An Apple a Day

Inactivity did not sit easily with the Kids. It was five years into the Second World War. Fathers, uncles, brothers were away at the or nursing injuries at home, but bombing raids on their city were becoming less frequent. It was a time when nervous energy and ceaseless schoolwork and play hid the heartache they all felt but could not articulate.

But there was only so much running about as cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, or German and British air aces, that young legs and lungs could take, and so a prolonged sprawl on the Stubbs Walks benches was necessary.

And there was only a short span of time before boredom set in, and for Charlie at least that span had been reached. Something exciting had to happen soon. He lay with his chin on the park bench, looking at the back of the High School field that backed onto the Walks. He noticed that a couple of branches loaded with large green apples were overhanging the fence. That gave him an idea. He straightened up and announced. 'Let's go picking apples.'

They all stared at him.

Charles was after all the leader, the self-appointed leader of 'The Kids', mainly because he volunteered himself and no-one else did.

Then there was Gary Gough, known as Gee Gee, also nearly eleven. Adults thought his nickname came from his initials GG, but the gang knew it had originated when Gary kept on telling them that he was 'slow' - slow at thinking and slow at making up his mind. 'But I get there eventually, my mum keeps on telling me,' insisted Gary. And so he became '*Get there eventually Gary*' - alias Gee Gee. He had been known as this for so long that even the other members of the gang were forgetting how it first came about.

The next eldest, Pinkie Pat Evans, was from the outdoor pub. Only take-away bottles and bring-your-own jugs of a thin brown ale were dispensed there from the back kitchen. At ten - going eleven - Pat was, you might say, self-sufficient... some would say 'self-centred' and some 'wild and wayward'. But she wouldn't agree. She just loved life, the great adventure, full of things you could do that people told you not to. No-one disputed she was a bit of a tomboy, who stood up for herself and was not averse to stretching a point or two - like tucking her skirt up in her knickers to do cartwheels and handstands, which she did frequently - especially when boys were around, because none of them could do these gymnastics as well as Pat. And they did not have pink knickers to show off like Pat. She was Pinkie Pat, and she loved it. Her parents did not.

But Hattie - now there was someone who was going places - a born king-maker, with just the disadvantage of being a girl. Harriet Mason, daughter of pottery modeller dad and ceramic painter mum, was rather clever and knew it. She played hard and with a cunning none of the others could match. She just liked instinctively to work in the background, influencing front-man Charlie, but not wanting to take the limelight. Charlie was always wary of this little ten-year-old.

Hattie found her voice first. 'Just one problem, Charlie. There are no apples in Stubbs Walks.' She slithered back down on the bench.

'Ah,' replied Charlie, 'Maybe not exactly *in* the Walks, but look over there. Loads of them.' He pointed to the orchard over the fence. 'I bet there are thousands more in the orchard there.'

The gang followed the direction of his wagging finger.

'Charlie,' said Hattie reprovingly, 'That's the high school headmaster's garden! You know it would be stealing. And we may get caught.'

'Well, that's all you know. It is *not* 'stealing'.... I know it is called 'scrumping'. That's different... and everyone does it. Read the *Just William* books.'

'I don't read books about stupid boys.'

'They are not stupid books.'

'I didn't say they were. I said William was stupid, just as stupid as Billy Bunter in *The Magnet stories*.'

'I agree. Bunter is stupid,' admitted Charlie, 'But he doesn't scrump apples. He isn't adventurous enough for that. Anyway, I thought we could get some apples...and just eat a few and then sell the rest, and give the money to that Mayor's Fund the head was telling us about last week. Do you remember Shirty Shelton said we would get army ranks depending on how much we raised for people made destitute by war? Five bob and we'll be majors; one pound and we'll be generals! Sounds a good idea to me. Selling apples is better than asking parents for money again, isn't it?'

'I agree. I fancy being a general. I'll come with you.' Pat piped up. 'It could be fun'

'And if Pink...if Pat is going, then I will go, too,' said Gee Gee. 'And I don't mind which rank I get. In fact, I think I prefer to stay a soldier. I didn't like being that German Field Marshal Goering this afternoon.'

'OK. Let's go then,' said Charlie. Then turning to Hattie. 'As chief of the gang I give you permission, Hattie, to stay as rear-guard.'

'Yer what! You don't order me about when we are not playing games, Charlie Short. I decide myself what I do. And I may....or may not, follow you.'

'Suit yourself,' said Charlie with a shrug. He did not really know how to deal with the strong-willed Hattie. 'Come on then. Let's get through the broken fence behind the bushes.'

It was 'breaking and entering', but no actual '*breaking in*' was necessary as the wooden fence had disintegrated in parts, and '*entering*' was not a problem.

Once inside they stood in awe of a bumper crop of apples, Bramleys and Granny Smiths. Charlie knew what these types looked like as they were the best-sellers in the family corner shop, run by his mum and invalid dad.

'Cor,' exclaimed Gary. 'How are we going to collect this lot, Charlie?'

'I'll run home and get some bags,' said a voice from behind them. They whirled round in fright.

It was only Hattie. Curiosity bordering on bravado had got the better of her.

'Pick what you can and put them by the fence. We'll collect them from there,' she whispered. Then she was off. Charlie smiled to himself. 'Good old Hattie. She's a real sport when it comes to it.'

'Right then, men...er... man...and girl, let's get cracking.'

The three of them set to, picking the fallen apples from the ground and stuffing them into their pockets, or in Pinkie Pat's case into the skirt of her dress and down her knickers. They scampered back and forth to the fence, and when Charlie judged that there were no unbruised ones left he began tugging them from the lower branches. Each of them selected a tree, but it was hard going, so much

so that Pat stopped and said, 'How about you shake the branches, Gee Gee, and we will pick up the apples that fall.'

'Good idea, Pin... Pat,' said Charlie, though he wished he had thought of it.

Gary shook the first branch with inordinate force and the apples flew off in all directions, one of them clonking Charlie on the head.

'Ouch,' cried the injured chieftain. 'You daft b.....' He got no further. There was a loud yell from the groundsman's shed on the other side of the orchard.

'Heh, you lot! What do you think you are doing? I'll get you, you little blighters.'

They could see a large figure lumbering towards them. He was hampered by having to use a walking stick but he was still moving at a surprising pace.

'Crikey,' cried Gary.

'It's the Red Baron,' cried Charlie, not caring at that moment for historical exactitude. The First World War German air ace, the Red Baron, was an all-time favourite in the Kids games..

'This way,' he yelled pointing towards the back of the Headmaster's house on the other side of the trees.

Pinkie was already ahead of them, still carrying an apple in each hand. Charlie, relishing the chase, quickly overtook her but came to an abrupt halt when the backdoor of the house was flung open and there on the steps above them stood the man himself, tall, stern, imperious, jet black hair flowing behind him - and in striped pyjamas, a brown raincoat....and a black academic gown draped over the top! And not only that - wearing flying boots for slippers.

He pointed a crooked finger at the gang.

'Stop right there,' he ordered. They did. Pat let the apples slip from her hands. Gary kept muttering, 'O crikey, O blimee.'

Charlie found himself caring less about the romantic Red Baron, seeing instead a wounded second world-war soldier and current head groundsman bearing down on them from behind - with a stick. And in front of them stood the equally frightening figure of the headmaster, looking for all the world like a Stag beetle about to launch himself from a windowsill.

The fast-hobbling Red Baron arrived on the scene and grabbed Charlie and Gary round the back of their necks. Charlies had never felt a grip so strong.

'What is going on here?' asked the beetle wafting his arm at them.

'O God,' said Gary in a small but clearly audible voice.

'Not quite God, young man,' came the stentorian reply. 'But I might be the closest you ever get to him if I don't get to the bottom of this. Now, who are you?' he demanded pointing at Gary.

'Goering,' said GG completely flustered. The beetle's hand shook and his mouth twitched.

'So.... I suppose you are Hitler then, eh?' he roared, turning and waving at Charlie. Before Charles could open his mouth Gary pointed straight at Pat,

'No, he's not, she is, sir. Charlie is Biggles.... you know, the ace pilot in the Biggles books.'

There was a complete silence, for what seemed an age to Charlie. 'O Lor', he thought. 'That's done it. Now we've added lying to stealing.'

'Well, I'm simply Doctor Sweeney, not as world- famous as you three, but just as well-known round here as you, Field Marshall Goering.'

He turned his attention to the hapless Charlie.

'Biggles!....you would not like things to be stolen from your home, would you, eh?. Well, this is my home, Biggles, and I do not take kindly to having my apples stolen.'

'We haven't stolen any, sir. They are all still in your garden,' pleaded Charlie. 'Anyway, we were only scrumping them. For a good cause, you see.'

'Really? And what might that be?'

Charles explained that they wanted to contribute to the Mayor's Fund..

'Hm. How old are you, eh?'

'Nine, all of us,' answered Charlie, not adding the 'going- ten' bit that he usually did.

Another 'Hm'. Then he turned to the groundsman. 'Mr. Jackson, do you know Hitler, Goering and Biggles here? And what do you think we should do?' The groundsman released the boys' necks.

'Yes, I know who these little beggars are, headmaster. This is Charles Short, and this is Gary Gough.' He re-applied his grip to the back of their necks. And this is Patricia Evans. They are all from Castle Street over there. I have had trouble before with people stealing apples and pears from your orchard, sir. I expect it was this lot. We could make an example of them and hand them over to the police.'

Dr. Sweeney scratched his chin.

'I think he has a point there, even two points, perhaps.

'What,' cried Charlie, now thoroughly alarmed. 'For trying to do some good? And we haven't ever scrumped before.'

Doctor Sweeney eyed the gang. 'It is certainly wrong to steal. You know that, don't you?' he demanded, still retaining his stentorian tone. But without waiting for an answer he added, 'You might be young and you may not have transgressed before, but I expect an apology from you here and now, and a promise not to do it ever again. Now each of you apologise and promise in turn.'

They did.

The Head's face softened just a little. Well now, I admire what you are trying to do, but this is not the way to do it. Now, I'll tell you what we are going to do.... Mr. Jackson is going to fetch his wheelbarrow and you are going to load it with as many apples as you can pick and take away. You will then come back as many times as you like till four o'clock this afternoon and collect more. But, as punishment, you must carry away at least ten loads. But you must not, and I repeat must not, climb any of the trees. You can only have what you can reach. Understood?'

They understood and muttered their thanks.

'What about their parents, headmaster?' asked Mr. Jackson. 'Shouldn't they be informed?'

'Good point, Mr. Jackson. But I am going to leave it to their consciences. They can decide whether to tell their parents what has happened. Do you understand that as well, eh?' The headmaster, now looking more human addressed Charlie who was clearly the leader here.

'I dunno about the others, but I always tell my parents everything,' said Charlie with some defiance in his look. 'We are a loving Christian family, see.' He had heard the vicar refer to this once and it had impressed him. He thought now might be a good time to resurrect it.

'Well, be that as it may. Off you go now to your work. Mr. Jackson will keep me informed on progress.' With that the headmaster drew his coat round his body, transmogrifying back into a beetle, and disappeared through his back door.

The Head Groundsman, alias legendary air ace, rubbed his hands. 'Right. Now you will do as I tell you. You two, start picking up apples and, Gary, you fetch the barrow with me.

There was no arguing with Mr. Jackson. They recognised the value of just getting on with it. As Charlie and Pat picked up fallen apples they heard a whisper from the bushes. Hattie was back.'

'Pssh. Have you been captured by the enemy?'

'Well sort of,' replied Pat in a whisper. 'To tell yer the truth, I 'aven't got a clue what's happening. The 'eadmaster has got us working t' clear 'is garden of apples. Then I think we can go 'ome.'

'Working on his garden!' cried Hattie in indignation. 'E's got no right to do that. It's slave labour, that is. There's a law against it. My dad says workin' for posh people is always slave labour. And a grammar school 'eadmaster is definitely posh - definitely.'

'Oy you, girl.' The groundsman's voice cut in from just beyond the bushes. 'Is that Hattie Mason, eh? Come here. I want a word with you.'

But Hattie had slithered through the undergrowth and had gone, whispering, 'I'll tell the police.'

It was no good Charlie crying out, 'No!'.... She'd already gone.

Jackson, no longer 'Mister; in Charlie's book, still kept his hand firmly on the Chief and his temporary deputy Gee Gee. Pat walked behind dejectedly, with two more bags of apples hanging down loosely. Before they got to the shop Jackson bent down and whispered to the boys.

'Just you wait till you get a place at the High School. I'll be watching for you, and I may have a gammy leg but I have A1 eye-sight, see.' And he opened his eyes and rolled them round.

Gee Gee thought he looked daft but Charlie shuddered involuntarily. Jackson looked sinister to him. He decided there and then that wild horses would not drag him into seeking a place at the High School. Gary was much happier.

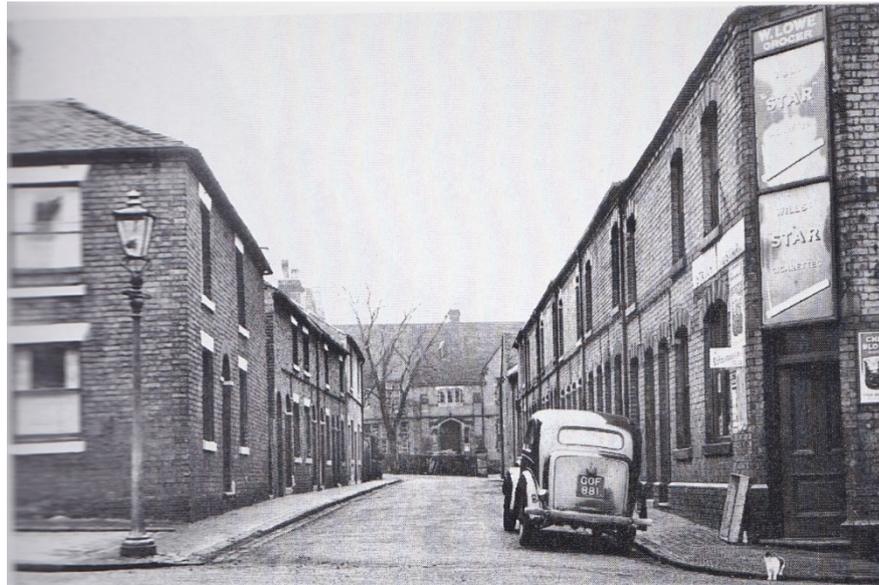
'No chance of me getting a grammar school place,' he said later. 'Too slow, you know.'

Outside Shorts Stores on the corner of Castle Street, Jackson addressed all three of them.

'Right. In you go Charlie Short, and tell your parents all about it and then come back to the Headmaster's garden. I'm taking Gary and Patricia home and then back to the orchard. I expect to see the fourth gangster, Harriet Mason, there, too. See you in ten minutes. OK?'

Charles sighed, took a deep breath and stepped inside. His mum was behind the counter. No sign of dad. He had been invalided out of the army just a month ago and needed to rest his shattered leg.

'I was wondering where you had got to,' said his mum brightly. That did not last long, as Charles explained what had happened, putting the best gloss he could on the debacle, and emphasising they were wanting to support the mayor and help the wartime destitute. That was the noble ideal. Apples were merely a means. He was about to explain the reward of army ranks, but decided there was no real need. That might be confusing.



The Corner Store, with the High School at the end of the street

Luckily Mrs. Short was minded to be sympathetic. She did not tell her son that she, and her husband, David, had both scrumped apples in their youth – from the same place. She tut-tutted about how the Shorts had always done ‘the right thing’ and kept on the right side of the law. She knew that was the right thing to say.

‘You’ll take note of other people’s feelings now, won’t you, Charles. Then we’ll say no more about it. Get off and finish the picking. I must say there’s a huge number of apples. Dad will certainly put them on display in the shop, and any money he gets for them will go to the Mayor’s Fund. I will make some apple puree and apple juice from some of them and sell those as well. How many do you think there will be?’

‘Hundreds, mum. At least ten barrow loads full, even after Gary and Pat have their share. And Hattie has already got some, too.’

‘Goodness me! We’ll be selling jars right up to Christmas. I don’t know if the Mayor’s Fund is open that long, but we’ll find a good cause. Off you go.’

‘Will you be telling dad, mum?’

Mrs. Short contemplated the request. ‘He’ll have to know where so many apples come from, but I am sure he will understand your good intentions. Don’t worry.’

But Charlie Short did worry. Up to then he had not faced a stranger giving him a right talking to. He was not used to being taken to task at all. His mother and father were loving people and believed in talking to their children, not hitting them. So, no-one had gripped his neck like Mr. Jackson. More facts of life were revealing themselves to young Charles Short.

And the facts revealed themselves a bit more when on his second trip back with a load of apples he found local bobby, P.C. Embley, talking to both his mother and now his father in the shop along with Hattie Mason. He couldn’t run away because he had gone through the shop door with his barrow. He could only stand and stare.

‘Is this the boy what captured you, Harriet?’ asked P.C. Embley.

‘No. I told you! He was the one captured. There were these two big bullies grabbing hold of him and beating him up. I saw it all happening. One of them called him Hitler. That’s terrible isn’t it? Are you all right now, Charlie?’

‘His name’s Charles,’ said his mother rather haughtily.

His father held up his hands. 'Whoa, whoa. This is getting out-of-hand. Charles, you and Harriet wait in the shop. Constable, just come into the sitting room for a moment and we will sort it out.'

And, of course, dad did sort it out – much to the amusement of the constable who had been asked to give the Castle Street Kids a 'little talking to'.

That was something else that Charlie did not like either. It meant five 'talking-tos' by three strangers and his mum and dad in *one* morning.

'Could be a record,' he thought ruefully.

That same evening Dr. Bertram and Mrs. Cynthia Sweeney were guests at dinner with the school's chairman of the governing body, Hugo, and his wife. Daphne.

As she put down her spoon on her empty dessert dish and wiped her mouth on the linen serviette, Cynthia became ecstatic.

'That's the nicest apple charlotte I have ever eaten, Daphne. The apples were simply delicious....where on earth did you get them from?'

'From Short's Stores, Cynthia. They are the only apples I have found in the shops for...what?... two years? But they were expensive....really expensive. Mrs Short told me they were very hard to get hold of.'

'Well, They are as good as the ones in our garden... well nearly as good, aren't they, Bertram?' said Mrs. Sweeney, turning to her husband.

Bertram Sweeney smiled. 'Yes, dear....nearly.'
