

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number 25

*In the great line of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece and Galahad's search for the Holy Grail, and Bunyan's Piers Plowman's quest for the true Christian life, here is Charlie Short's search for the Facts of Life.*

*A strange fact - it took less than four hundred years to translate the teachings of Christ with all the accompanying complexity of ethics, morals and rituals into an international movement with its written biblical guidance, but it took 2,000 years before there was any formal written guidance on sex education in British schools.*

It is obvious that Aristophanes and his 5<sup>th</sup> century BC colleagues, and Geoffrey Chaucer and his 14<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries and William Shakespeare and his 16<sup>th</sup> century rivals and Henry Fielding and his 18<sup>th</sup> century scribblers all knew all about sex and procreation and how to describe acts and feelings in a way that their readership could understand and engage with – and not be offended by.

But it all came to a stop in Victorian Britain in. Victoria and Albert themselves had an active and profitable, and by all accounts thoroughly enjoyable sex life. They knew what they were doing and how to do it. But 'the Victorians' put a stop to anyone else talking about it. Doing it was OK...but teaching about it?... oh dear no.

The politeness about hmmm... sex, which partly characterised the 18<sup>th</sup> century now developed into an all-out taboo. Ordinary dictionary words, never mind ordinary human acts, were snuffed out of literature and theatre and sanitised in the pictorial arts. The use of censorship in sexual matters was not changed significantly, until the decision in the 1960 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' trial paved the way to explicit sexual scenes in the arts and public discussion.

There will be differences of opinion about whether this was a good or bad thing. My purpose here is simply to note the difference.

Pupils today have the benefit of government regulations and even guidance, called expansively: *The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education 2019 Guidance.*

In England and Wales sex education is now compulsory for all pupils receiving secondary education. What a change! And 'Relationships Education' is compulsory for all pupils receiving primary education. And 'Health' Education (which presumably comprises elements at least of sex information) is compulsory in all schools – except independent schools. But Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) continues to be compulsory in independent schools! Who needs to invent comedy?

We are told.....Schools should consider the makeup of their own student body, including the gender and age range of their pupils, and consider whether it is appropriate or necessary to put in place additional support for pupils with particular protected characteristics (which mean that they are potentially at greater risk). Schools should consider what they can do to foster healthy and respectful peer-to-peer communication and behaviour between boys and girls, and provide an environment, which challenges perceived limits on pupils based on their gender or any other characteristic, including through these subjects and as part of a whole-school approach.

We are also informed in the guidance that from the beginning, teachers should talk explicitly about the features of healthy friendships, family relationships and other relationships which young children are

likely to encounter. Drawing attention to these in a range of contexts should enable pupils to form a strong early understanding of the features of relationships that are likely to lead to happiness and security. This will also help them to recognise any less positive relationships when they encounter them.

In my experience little Willy and Wanda in Year 10 could put it all more simply and tellingly, albeit less elegantly.

But at least children today have access to factual information and helpful advice, even though other pitfalls lie in wait through the growth of technology and easy access to undesirable and unpleasant knowledge and relationships. For earlier generations of children and young people the search for a clue about renewing life has been thwarted by ignorance, reluctance and bloody-mindedness. For many of today's grandparents – like me - coming to terms with sex and relationships was an uphill struggle – but not without its humour, and certainly with the adrenalin of the search.

My generation was told, even by the great singer Ella Fitzgerald that:

*Birds do it, bees do it*

*Even educated fleas do it*

*Let's do it, let's fall in love*

However, it was apparent to all us children that what birds did was no guide to human activity. And no-one had a clue about how bees did it. So the search was on. And some 50 years after Ella's plaintive plea the government have advised us all on 'how to do it'. For historic and nostalgic reasons you could keep a copy of *Guidance to Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education 2019* next to your copy of Richard Burton's 1880s translation of the ancient Sanskrit sex manual, the 'Kamasutra' – if it has not fallen to pieces by now.

The following story could be matched by many others from the pre-1960 Lady Chatterly's Lover era. It was inspired by my re-reading of Muriel Spark's '*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', where her little group of young girls in her class speculate innocently and wonderingly on sex. Yes, we really were pretty well totally ignorant compared with 10 year olds today.... But I wonder whether our 'search for the facts' was not worth it in the end.

### **The Search for The Facts of Life**

In the early 1950s the bench in Stubbs Walks - the one by the old bandstand and the Russian cannon captured at Sebastopol in the Crimean war - was definitely the HQ of the Castle Street Kids. They met there every afternoon after school, and at weekends, too.

Ten-year old chief Charles Short was the self-appointed leader, ship's captain, cavalry colonel, aeroplane fighter ace, or pirate king. Then came Gary Gough, Gee Gee to friends and even his family; Pinkie Pat Evans (on account of her preference for pink knickers that she used to tuck her skirt into; and Harriet Mason, just 'Hattie' because no-one could think of anything else. She considered herself to be second-in-command, but had never been officially appointed – by Charlie. He had never really thought about it.

Across the park roamed the Garden Street Gang, led by Bomber Bates, so called because no-one could bowl a cork ball faster than Bomber. Bomber ruled the Stubbs Walks' roost with his four henchmen, or really henchpersons, Nicola 'Nickers' Bailey, Chalky White, Gritty Kitty Murphy and Wham Bam Sam Evans, Pinkie Pat's elder brother.

Bomber and the Garden Streeters had hijacked the one pair of goalposts on the brown patch of clay at the end of the Walks, and they held the best bushes for hiding and jumping out from. Smoke could occasionally be detected from their camp-fire in the marl hole, from which pottery clay used to be mined. A camp fire was the envy of the Kids. The Kids were never allowed matches. Too dangerous.

The Kids' bench in its time had been a wild west United States 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry fort; an Indian camp; the bridge of Nelson's flagship; or, if they fancied a modern battle, an enemy machine gun position to be

overwhelmed. But at this moment it was just a bench – somewhere to lounge on in order to catch their breath and recuperate before the next great battle.

'I'll choose the next game, Charlie' said Hattie. 'It's my turn. We'll play Florence Nightingale nursing soldiers. I'll be chief nurse, Florence Nightingale.'

'What!' cried Charlie. 'That's a cissy game! We are not doing that! I'm chief, and I decide.'

Hattie glared at Charlie. 'Watch it, Charlie Short,' she hissed. 'One day girls will rule the world and I'll be chief – and you will not be a chief nurse....or any nurse....., Charlie Short, you'll be a patient!'

With that she had stumped off with Pat in tow.

'See if we care,' was Charlie's limp parting shot.....But they did care. They did not know how to show it.

'Girls!' muttered Charlie.

'Yea, girls, Chief. I can't understand them,' added Gee Gee.

They sat for fully ten minutes on the bandstand bench without saying another word – and that was light years of restraint for ten-year old boys. The trouble was that Charlie wanted to talk, but just as he was about to pipe up Gee Gee would take a deep inflow of air and breathe out in an exaggerated long sigh. And then he scraped some clay from beneath his feet and kneaded it into a ball, spitting on it now and again to make it flexible.

'Don't do that,' Charlie, irritated by Gee Gee's constant squeezing and pulling. 'It's disgusting,'

But Gee Gee persisted. 'Helps me think and concentrate' was his excuse.

So Charlie whiled away the time by lobbing bits of gravel at the cannon, to see if he could get a piece down the barrel. Eventually he could stand the boredom no longer. He threw a last pebble over the top of the cannon and then turned on Gary.

'For goodness sake, Gee Gee, what's up with you? You are making me nervous with all this heaving your shoulders up and down and gasps and wheezes.'

GG slowly raised his head. 'I'm werrit abite Tracy Lane next door.'

'What!?' Genuine surprise from Charlie. 'Then you must be the only person in the world that does. No-one else worries about Tracy. She's in and out of everybody's house all day long. Some evenings, too.'

'Well, our Charlie, I 'ave to tell yer....' He paused not sure whether to spill the dramatic news. 'Tracy's in the family way, my mum says, She's 'aving a baby, and I'm werrit.'

Charlie contemplated this piece of new and perplexing information.

'Well, I didn't know that, Gee Gee. Thanks for telling me. But what's there to worry about? There's plenty of women have babies. If there weren't we wouldn't be here, would we?'

Gee Gee thought about this, took a deep breath and then asked in a low voice, 'Charlie....where do babies come from, anyway?'

Charlie turned slowly towards his pal. He had half-expected this question. Now it had to be faced. He wished he knew. Perhaps as chief he should have known. But he did not. However, he could speculate, and in so doing perhaps gain some time.

'Well, Gee Gee, I think it is quite complicated.... It's possible that there is more than one method. I remember my mum used to tell me they were brought by storks. But I ask you, Gee Gee. How many storks do you see flying over Stubbs Walks, eh?'

'I haven't seen any at all, Charlie. Well, not lately. There was a white bird thing flying over the Lyme brook yesterday. Could have been one. But it wasn't carrying a nappy with a baby in it.'

'I saw that, you twerp. I was with you. It was a seagull.' Charlie shook his head disparagingly.

'Well,' said Gary, 'I was only trying to be helpful. Actually I've no idea what a stork looks like. Do you?'

Charlie gave this some consideration. 'No, not really, but it must be a big thing to carry a baby the size our Ian was when he was born. And, anyroad, all we get round here are blackbirds and crows. They couldn't carry a woolly glove.'

'So, shall we knock them off the list, Charlie?'

'Yea. I think so. Makes no sense.'

There was another pause while both of them collected their thoughts and wracked their brains for a solution.

'Should we ask the girls?' GG enquired sheepishly.

'What! Ask Hattie and Pat. No way. You'd never be sure they told you the truth even if they really knew. We'd still have to make sure. Forget girls.'

'OK,' sighed GG. Another pause.

'I've heard they've been discovered under mulberry bushes,' said GG a bit sheepishly. 'Do you know what a mulberry bush is?'

Charlie shook his head. 'Naw, no idea.' Yet another pause.

Then GG had another try. 'Another possibility I've heard, Charlie... though I can't remember who told me.... is that you can find them in cabbage patches.'

Charlie stared at his friend, wondering if Gee Gee knew some secret he did not. He decided not, and so shook his head emphatically.

'How gullible can you get, Gee Gee. How many cabbage patches can you see in the middle of the city?'

'There's allotments, Charlie! And all those new back gardens. And my Uncle Gareth has got cabbages growing in a box in the outside loo,' Gee Gee countered. 'But I'm not happy with the theory, I must admit.'

'And how many babies have you seen being wheel-barrowed along Castle Street, eh?'

Gee Gee scratched his head. He could see the difficulty but he was determined not to give in too soon. 'Well, I did see Ma Laws pushing a pram along Marsh Parade yesterday - with a cover over what looked like babies' clothes. That's a bit suspicious-like, innit?'

'Gee Gee,' said Charlie shaking his head, 'we all know Ma Laws collects old clothes from neighbours and sells them at Wednesday's market. You and I were both clothed by Ma Laws when we were born. You know that.'

'All right, all right,' said Gee Gee. 'And we did offload all the clothes back to Ma Laws when we grew out of them. If Ma Laws 'ad a baby in a pram she'd sell it, pram and all. She'd sell anythin'. You are right, Charlie. Babies don't come from Ma Laws.'

They both became wrapped in their own thoughts.

Eventually Gee Gee turned to Charlie. 'I 'aven't told yer summat because I don't know what it means.'

'Well tell me now, Gee Gee. We need to know everything.'

'I 'eard my mother tell me dad that Tracy was going to have the baby with a Sicilian operation on her stomach, or summat.'

Charlie grimaced. 'Crikey, Gee Gee. That sounds bad. Who's this bloke Sicilian that's operating? Never heard that name before. There's a Cedric bloke down in Marsh Parade.'

'Yea, and there's Dr. Cecil in Lancaster Road.' Said Gee Gee perking up.

'Right, Gee Gee. That's more likely. A Cecilian operation. That's what it will be. I think you heard wrong.

Gee Gee was very happy that they had appeared to have cracked it. It must be the answer. Tracy's baby will come out of her tummy courtesy of Cecil.

Another pause. Both were thinking that this got them no further in understanding how babies got into the tummy in the first place, and how exactly you got them out.

Charles made up his mind. 'Seems far-fetched to me, Gee Gee. It's only a baby, not an illness. Can you imagine Tracy with a doctor brandishing a great big knife? She'd give him what for.'

'Yea, she would,' agreed Gee Gee, then clicked his fingers.

'Yer know what we've forgotten, Charlie. What about those old nurses that go into houses when babies come along. Mid-somethings. Perhaps they bring 'em with them.'

'What?' said Charlie laughing, 'from cabbage patches or from storks nests? Is that what you are saying? I thought we had chucked those out already.'

'Yes, of course we have Charlie. But they could be from hospitals, Charlie. It's wheer your little Ian came from after all.'

'No,' replied Charlie, 'he was born in the hospital, that's true. And we know that some come out of mothers' tummies. But what we are trying to discover is how he got made. How did he get there in the first place?'

That was a killer question for GG He thought long and hard about this. 'So, what do you think we should do, know-all? You haven't come up with anything useful yet. It's me trying to find an answer.'

Charlie said nothing. He knew Gee Gee was right but he had no convincing theory to offer.

The silence was broken by another musing from Gee Gee.

'Tell me something, Chief. Something has bothered me for a long time.'

'Well, what is it? Spit it out.'

'Why is it that we are taught how to use a potty and find our way to our mouths before we are one year old; and how to stop peeing in our nappies and use a toilet and then to crawl around the house before we are two, and then we are taught to walk and run, throw balls, climb walls, ride bikes and push carts, but never, never does anyone tell us where we came from and how we got there in the first place. Don't you think that's strange? It's very mithering, Charlie.'

Charlie looked at GG in amazement.

'Blimme, Gee Gee, for someone slow like you, you do a lot of thinking. Why are you thinking of this now?'

'I don't know. Sometimes I don't think of anything for ages, and I start dreaming of things. Sometimes I don't hear my mum and dad asking me questions and tellin' me to do jobs, so they get a bit mad at me. But then at other times I can see clearly what has to be done, and I do it. That's why my mum says I am slow.... but I get there. I do get there, Charlie ..... usually. But this baby thing has stumped me.'

'It has stumped me, too, Gee Gee. The answer is staring us in the face. And we will get to know, otherwise there would be no more children in the world..... If it is any comfort, Gee Gee, my sister, Dotty Dot, told me she knows..... but she isn't going to tell me. When I mention it she says, 'You'll find out soon enough, our Charlie,' and then runs off giggling..... And my mum just laughs and says, 'All in good time, Charles'. Well... I haven't got the time. A bomb might fall on me any time, and then I'll never know.

'The war's over, Charlie. And I don't think the Russians or Chinese are going to be bombing Castle Street.'

'You know what I mean. There's something strange going on, Gee Gee, and I intend to get to the bottom of it.'

'Then you'll need expert help,' said a voice behind them. They turned quickly. It was Castle Street public enemy Number 1, Bomber Bates. Two years older and ten years more worldly wise.... with six elder brothers and sisters.

He slipped onto the bench beside them.

Bomber and the Garden Street gang were now in their first year at the secondary modern school. He reckoned that gave him an advantage over the castle Street Kids.

'Yes, at the big school we are into proper science,' he said. 'So, me and the Gang have been considering this mystery.... scientifically. Science begins with observation, you know.'

Bomber was showing a rather superior air. Charlie thought he ought to try to get back some authority, but did not know how. Bomber seemed clearly way ahead of them.

'Yes,' continued Bomber, 'We have been observing dogs and noticing how they chase bitches and leap on them. We reckon that has something to do with it.'

'What!' yelled Gee Gee. 'Are you trying to tell us that our dads prowl around waste grounds waiting to leap on unsuspecting women! I'm not stopping here to listen to this twaddle.'

GG, pushed himself off the bench in a huff. 'It's disgusting. My mum and dad wouldn't be seen dead leaping around Stubbs Walks or on the waste-ground next to our house.' He was nearly in tears now.

'We are decent folk in Castle Street, Bomber, not animals,' added Charlie.

'Don't take on so,' said Bomber holding up his hands. 'I didn't say humans did the same, now did I? You can't deny we are animals, but we are superior animals, so it's not the same, Gee Gee.... My mum say so, and she works in the City General Hospital. She says we make new life like all other animals, so there must be something in it. It stands to reason. So, sit down, Gee Gee. I didn't intend to upset you. This is serious stuff. We're all in it together.'

'In what together, Bomber?' said GG retaking his seat.

'Finding out about life, of course. My dad says there has been so much about death and hate during the war it is about time we thought about life and love and getting on with people.'

Charlie thought it was ironic that Bomber, renowned for his wrestling skills amongst other things, should be talking about getting on with people, but he let it pass.

'Come on, Bomber. Do you know exactly how mums and dads get babies, or not?' asked Charlie.

'Well, maybe yes, and maybe no.... I've heard rumours, mind.... We're doing Biology at school. There's a bottle on the shelf in the lab with a baby's feet, or something like that in it. It looks very small, but it definitely looks like a baby.'

Charlie and GG stared in wonder at Bomber, who was looking straight ahead as though directly at this magical bottle. He had fascinated himself, let alone Charlie and Gee Gee.

'Anyroad,' he said, facing them again. 'we are only cutting up dandelions at the moment, but we'll get round to rats next year and it won't be long after that before we are onto humans.'

'We can't wait two years, Bomber! Can't you give us a hint?' Charlie pleaded.

'Well, perhaps I can. As I say, I don't know everything. But I know - roughly,' replied Bomber carefully, 'I can't say I have all the details. But I can tell you for sure that it involves something called hanky panky. My eldest sister, Ethel, told me.'

'Hanky panky!' cried Charlie and GG.together. 'What the heck's that?'

'I don't rightly know. That's what she told me. I saw her coming out of the air raid shelter with Big Bert. He's doing his National Service and he's on leave again. He was fastening his tunic, and she were a bit red in the face. I didn't like that, so I asked her if she was all reet. 'Perfectly all reet, Brian,' she said. I'm not Tracy Lane. We haven't been up to any hanky panky, you know.'

'Hanky panky,' Charlie repeated scratching his head. 'That's a new one on me.'

'I think it's summat like kissing and smooching behind the bike sheds or in the air-raid shelters,' offered Bomber

Charlie now had a sudden thought.

'Heh, Bomber, did Ethel kiss Bert?'

'How the 'eck do I know! What are you getting at, Charlie? I don't like that language.'

'I didn't mean any harm, Bomber. It's just that Pinkie Pat told me at the weekend that her mum had forbidden her to kiss boys. She said that girls who went around kissing boys were sure to have babies.'

'Blimme!' Gee Gee gulped before Bomber could respond. He was already counting how many times Pat had given him a quick peck. It did not bear thinking about. He could scarcely breathe. 'Blimme,' he croaked again. 'I must be real lucky not to be a dad already.'

The other two stared at him.

'How many times, Gee Gee?' enquired his pal Charlie slowly and deliberately.

Gee Gee took a deep breath. 'Must 'ave been abite three times last week. I tried to run away but she and Hattie collared me. Crikey! I kissed Hattie once, too. I could be swimmin' in babies at this rate! O bloomin' 'eck !'

There was another moment of reflection.

'Bomber, have you ever heard of someone becoming a father while at primary school?' asked Charlie. He was responding to his urge for logic and reliable information

Bomber thought hard. It was not clear whether this was to give some thought to his answer, or for dramatic effect. Eventually he nodded sagely a couple of times and turned to Gee Gee.

'No, in my view you are too young, Gee Gee. You have to be at secondary school at least. Me and the gang 'ave kissed lots of girls in primary school and we don't 'ave any babies.'

Gee Gee let out a sigh of relief.

'Mind you,' added Bomber, hedging his bets, 'I'm not saying it could never happen. I expect you would have to ask an expert to get a proper answer. But I could give you a bit more information from Ethel. It's a bit hush hush so it'll cost you though. A penny up front – each. Can't say fairer than that. Take it or leave it.'

Charlie and Gee Gee looked at each other. Neither was convinced that any information from Bomber was worth as much as one penny. Charlie made the decision.

'I think we'll leave it, Bomber. Maybe tomorrow – after school.'

Bomber shrugged. 'Suit yerself, but you may regret it.'

Lost in their own thoughts they watched him saunter down the Walks towards his Garden Street Gang headquarters.

'Blinking heck, crikey and blimee,,' Gee Gee was muttering to himself, vowing never to meet up with Pinkie ever again. It had been too close a shave, he thought.

'We are no nearer the truth than an hour ago', Charlie was thinking. 'You can't really believe Bomber.' But there was no other tenable theory on offer.

'Right,' he said, standing up. 'At school tomorrow, Gee Gee, you and I will ask Miss Jones straight out.'

Gee Gee was less sure. He tried to keep his head down in class, in case he went into one of his reveries.

'You can do eet, Charlie. Leave me out. You have a way with words. And Miss Jones likes you. And don't forget to ask if primary school kids can have babies.'

'Yea, well, maybe.'

The opportunity to tackle the baby question came late in the afternoon. There was no chance in Arithmetic with Mental Martin nor Music with Tin Pan Allen, but afternoon English with their class teacher, Miss Jones was ideal.

Megan Jones was just the best thing that had happened to Charlie, Gee Gee and the rest of 3A. She had moved into the midlands at the beginning of the war, with her South Wales mining engineer father and textile designer mum. She was now fresh from training college, back home in their city, and she was all theirs. This was her first year, and 3A her first form. She was open, enthusiastic, and still had a Welsh lilt that Charlie adored.

So Charlie waited patiently while Miss Jones entertained them with variations of punctuation for '*The cat sat on the mat. It lapped its milk.*' And then came exercises in singulars and plurals and Past and Present verbs. None of it was of particular interest to Charlie as he found he could do all the exercises easily. Words were child's play. Babies were not, so Charlie bided his time.

At last, Miss Jones tired of leading from the front. 'Now, class, let's see what questions you have today.'

Charlie put his hand up. 'Can we ask any question we like, Miss?'

'Certainly, Charles. I would welcome a range of different questions.'

'Well, Miss, how do you get babies?' There, he had done it.

Gee Gee at the back lowered his head to the desk. The class gasped. Hattie wondered what Charlie was up to, and Pinkie Pat suddenly took a elated interest.

Miss Jones took it in her stride.

'Excellent question, Charlie. Come out to the front and you and I will demonstrate together.'

Charlie stared open-mouthed. 'You and me, Miss?'

'Yes, Charles. Come out here and we will do it together.'

Do it?' Charlie whispered, rising out of his seat. 'Together?' He wished the ground would open up and he could disappear down the hole, but nothing came to save him.

'Now,' said Miss Jones handing Charlie the chalk, 'write 'baby' on the blackboard so the whole class can see.' Charlie looked at her and wrote 'BABY' slowly in bold capitals.

'Right,' continued Miss Jones with her round shiny face and boundless enthusiasm and even more plentiful innocence. 'Now, Charles, how do we get babies?'

Charlie panicked, 'I was asking you, Miss! I'm sure I don't know.'

Miss Jones looked sympathetically at him. 'Well, that's a pity. I thought you of all people would have worked it out.'

She turned to the class. 'Now, I am sure one of you can tell me how to get babies.'

Stony silence, reddening faces.



'Class! Don't let me down.' She tapped the board. 'Let's say you have one doggy here, for example.' She sketched out a little line drawing of a hairy mongrel. 'And another doggy here.' Another drawing was scribbled next to the first. 'That's two of them So, how would we get doggies?'

William Kidd was the first to break the silence. 'Excuse me, Miss. Is one a dog and one a bitch?'

Miss, puckering her brow, replied, 'Well, I don't see that it matters, William.'

'It does matter, Miss!' cried William, turning to the whole class. 'If she dunner know 'ow to get doggies she ain't going to know how to get babies.'

'No she ain't.' Chorused the whole class.

Martha, who came from an extreme religious sect went further. 'I don't think I should stay and hear this, miss. I am going to tell the Headmaster. And made for the door.'

Miss J stared from side to side in bewilderment. Then pushed herself in front of the door preventing Martha from leaving. 'Martha. I don't know what is going on, but sit down and if you have any cause for complaint at the end of the lesson I will personally accompany you to the Headmaster.'

A little hesitation, but as Martha really liked Miss Jones she returned to her seat, while Miss Jones turned back to the blackboard.

Charlie was now sick with disappointment. He had had high hopes of Miss Jones. It seemed as if getting babies was far more complex than he had ever thought.

'Well,' she said, leaning against the board to steady herself. 'Well. I'm sure I don't know what has got into you all. I will show Charles here how you get babies and you can all watch.'

Martha screamed and then fell back in her seat in an apparent dead faint, but Hattie next to her could see Martha's right eye was open and Martha was looking as eager and expectant as the rest of the class.

Charlie, standing close to the board and to Miss Jones, took a step back just in case he was supposed to participate in the demonstration. He thought his knees would buckle. He did not know where to look. The rest of the class was buzzing. History was about to be made at Coronation Street County Primary.

'Goodness me,' cried Miss Jones, 'It's not difficult.' And with a quick flourish of white chalk, she completed the task. '

You simply knock off the y like this, and add -ies, like this. There you are. That's how you get 'babies'. Couldn't be easier, could it?'

Total silence from the class. Disappointment that the knowledge they craved was denied them yet again; relief that neither Charles nor they were going to be embarrassed.

'You can all do this. Freda, give me one example'

Freda was grammar school material. 'Body becomes bodies, Miss'

'Quite right. And you, Harriet.'

'Lady turns into ladies, Miss'

'Excellent. And now what do you want, Boris?' Boris, who strove to be the class idiot, had thrust his hand up.

'What does 'willy' become, Miss?' He was hoping to trap Miss into saying 'willies' in front of the whole class, and looked around for laughs, but got none, except from his crony, Jake, who found it expedient to snigger at everything Boris said. His other classmates were all conjuring up their own words. Boris had no audience.

'Well, Boris,' said Miss Jones after a pause and a smile breaking out on her lips. 'Well, Boris, William over there is known by you all as Willy. If there were two Williams in the class we would have two what, Boris?'

Boris stared at Miss and Miss stared at Boris.

'Come on now, Boris. It's unlike you to be silent. Two what?'

'Two Williams, Miss?'

'Precisely, Boris. Two Williams, one called Willy and the other Billy. Right? You might say there are two 'Billies', right?'

'Yes, Miss,' conceded Boris now anxious to move on in case Miss pressed him further.

Charles still standing next to Miss whispered, 'Well said, Miss. I think you've won that one.'

'Thanks, Charles,' she whispered back. 'Avoiding confrontation is worthwhile. 'Discretion is often the better part of valour' people say. Remember that.'

The bell for the end of the school day rang. Miss Jones could hear an excited class disappearing down the corridor practising their plurals.

'Nappy becomes nappies.' 'Oldy turns into oldies.' 'Ferry becomes ferries.' 'What's a ferry?' 'It's one of those sissy girls in short dresses in Santa's grotto in Lewis's store, stupid.'

Voices faded into the distance. 'Navy, navies, right?' 'A Cockney becomes Cocknies.' 'Yes, good 'un that!' And then the voices disappeared altogether.

Miss Jones collected her belongings and then noticed Charles still standing there.

'Oh, hello, Charles. What are you still doing here? Do you want to ask another question?'

Charles did. But looking up at Miss Jones's round shiny face, blue iridescent eyes, radiant smile and mass of golden hair, wild horses would not have dragged the question out of him at that moment.'

'The bell's gone, Miss. It'll wait.

Gee Gee and Charles escaped as fast as they could, back towards Stubbs Walks.

'That wasn't much good, Gee Gee.'

'Telling me, Chief! We're no better off. What are we going to do now? Give up?'

'Never,' breathed Charlie, 'Never,' and marched resolutely on.

They came to St Paul's Church. It towered over the Walks. They knew it well. 'Every flippin' Sunday morning,' Gee Gee complained. 'And Sunday School every first Sunday in the month. But for the moment Saint Paul was a potential saviour to Gee Gee. He suddenly stopped and grabbed hold of Charlie's arm. 'Charlie, should us see if the church is open?'

'What do yer want to go into church for? Your mum has a big enough job dragging you there every other Sunday, Gee Gee. Have you suddenly become religious?'

'We've tried everything else. This is the house of God. No harm in seeing if God's at home. I often think a lot when we are in church.'

'Well, no harm in it,' said Charlie. 'Let's give it a go.'

The boys lifted the heavy latch and slipped inside, making their way to their usual Sunday pews next to one another, and kneeling together.

'We'll say a prayer, Charlie. Like we always do. It's like asking, 'is anyone there?' the vicar says.'

They said their prayers – Gee Gee intoning the Lord's Prayer, as it was the only one he could remember, and Charlie muttering a favourite hymn from 'Songs of Praise' in the seat shelf in front of them.

'What now, Gee Gee?'

'Well, I see no harm in carrying on asking God for some answers. He made man in his own image so 'e ought to have some advice for us, I reckon.'

'But he made man from Adam's rib, not even a woman's rib,' whispered Charlie. 'I don't think that's the modern way. It's the sort of thing they do in all those old writings, like the Bible and those Greek myths Miss Jones reads us.'

'Didn't Eve do something suspicious in the Garden of Eden? A bit of hanky panky perhaps?'

'Hanky panky! All she did was eat an apple, Gee Gee'.

Charlie thought about what he had said. 'God told her not to, for sure, Gee Gee, but I don't think having a baby is a likely punishment for eating an apple. You and I, we've scrumpted a few apples in our time as you well know, and we've still got our ribs and we haven't got any babies.'

'Well,' said his friend, 'I'm fed up with all the mystery and all the contradictions. I'm going to try contacting God.'

But as he muttered the first word the vestry door opened and in walked Reverend Tindall carrying a pile of Bibles.

'Blimme,' said Gee Gee impressed, 'That's quick!'

The vicar stopped and eyed the two small boys.

'Hello, Charlie, and you Gee Gee. Nice to see you here on a Monday. What's the reason, eh?'

He suspected it might have something to do with Charlie's dad, still suffering the effects of war. Mrs Short popped in occasionally to sit quietly in front of the altar. He knew just how much strength she got from the trappings and tranquillity of his church. He was not surprised to see Charlie. Probably Gee Gee was there as his pal. He was not, therefore, prepared for Charlie's directness and the peculiarity of his request.

'Vicar, do you know anything about getting babies?' Before the Reverend's eyes had blinked Charlie had rushed on. 'You see, Gee Gee and I wonder why we have been taught to walk, to eat, to drink, to run, to climb, but we are never told how to get babies. Why not, Vicar? If it is important we should be told, shouldn't we?' But the vicar was not yet over his astonishment, so Charlie continued.

'But I don't expect you will know anything about it being a vicar. You'll have to go along with all that Bible stuff.'

Charlie stopped abruptly, wondering if he had gone too far in bringing into the open the obvious restrictions on the reverend's worldly knowledge.

Reverend Tindall sat down next to the kneeling boys, placed the Bibles on a seat.

'Sit down,' he said, 'I think you need to be comfortable to think about what I have to tell you.'

They sat facing their vicar.

'Charlie, Gee Gee - I understand your frustration and admire your quest for truth, I promise you. You are right, I am a representative of God on earth, and my task is to interpret what God says to us. But I am also a father and grandfather, so you have come to the right person.'

The boys looked expectantly at each other. 'At last!' both thought.

Reverend Tindall gathered his thoughts. 'Boys, you have learned just at the appropriate moment all the things you need to know in order to make the next step in life. That is how it should be. So, now I will tell you all you need to know at your age about the birth of babies. The detail will come later, when

you need to know, right?. You can play a bit of football now, but you don't expect to dribble like Stanley Matthews, do you?'

'No,' said Charlie....'Perhaps not yet..'

'So, listen to this..... You've seen seeds put into the ground that grow into flowers. Well, babies come from a seed planted in your mum's tummy by your dad. You do not need to know how at this moment. That's the Stanley Matthews bit... Is that clear?'

They nodded, a little reluctantly. Both knew what they had in their pants and what it felt like. And they knew, roughly, what Pinkie had in her knickers, but had no idea what she felt. It seemed that no-one wanted to talk about it and did not want them to know about it. Well, at least the Stanley Matthews bit made sense. They would have liked more, but what the vicar said was absolutely clear.

'Then the seed grows in your mum's tum for nine months. I expect you will have seen ladies with big tummies?'

They had.

'Then the baby enters the world between the mum's legs or sometimes out of the stomach. That's it. That's all you need to know at this moment.'

'Ah, that's the Cecilian operation?' said Charles knowingly..

The vicar was nonplussed... then it dawned.

'I think you mean a 'Caesarian operation' Charles,' he suggested. 'It's called that because the great Roman general and emperor, Julius Caesar was born by that method, and the name has stuck.

'Blimee,' said Charles. 'An emperor born that way!'

The boys were gobsmacked. This was definitely something Bomber and co would know nothing about.

The boys stared at the vicar. Eventually Charlie whispered, 'Being born by any method sounds very painful, sir. How did my mum put up with me hurting her like that?'

The vicar smiled. 'Charlie, you and Gee Gee could not hurt anyone. Just take it from me that God plays his part here. He will ease any pain. But just you two remember what your mums have to go through, and most women in the world. What we men can do is to understand the pain they bear and give them the help they need, eh? We can do that, can't we?'

They surely could.

Fortified by the wisdom of the reverend, Gee Gee put his hand up as he was used to, 'Excuse me, vicar, Can....er... primary school kids have babies?'

'No, Gee Gee. You can be sure of that.' A burden fell from GG's shoulders.

'A really good bloke, old Tindall. Fancy him knowing all that,' said GG, after they had left the church and walked slowly into Stubbs Walks. Charlie was really pleased for his friend.

Bomber and the Garden Street Gang were waiting on the bandstand wall by the cannon.

'You've taken your time, Charlie and Gee Gee. Have you got your penny - each?'

'No need now, Bomber, replied Charlie. 'We took your advice and consulted an expert, see. So we've got all the answers we need now, thanks.' He tried to look smug and succeeded. Bomber was, for a brief moment, lost for words.

'Ave yer? Well, spill it out and we'll tell you if its any good.'

Charlie suddenly felt happier than he had done for weeks. It was all falling into place. He recognised that 'knowledge is power'. He would not express it like that for many years, but he felt it in his bones, right now.

He leaned against the bandstand and crossed a leg nonchalantly. It was all instinctive.

'Bomber, get this - with the expert we have got behind us we don't need you to tell us whether our information is any good or not. Ours is hot stuff, Bomber, the best, and it comes at a price.'

'Oh aye?' said Bomber suspiciously. 'What price?'

'You can have it all for a guarantee of half-an-hour use of the goal-posts every afternoon between four and five o'clock, or instead – you can have it for a penny and a ha'penny up front – EACH of you. I can't say fairer than that, Bomber. Take it or leave it.'

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