

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number One

This first story is an amalgamation of three anecdotes culled from my bits of yellowing notepaper. Most of it is a true story of my first day of teaching.

Funny Places

Schools are funny places – funny peculiar and funny ha, ha.

Funny peculiar – because what sort of person in their right mind – if they had the choice -- would put thirty adolescents in a room with one adult... and then close the door – and repeat the process for 1,000 hours each year – for at least twelve years, eh? Most parents are exhausted from looking after two children for the six week summer school holidays. How would you feel if I told you that you had to carry on looking after your progeny for another thirty four weeks?

And that is why schools are funny ha ha. Teachers and the taught have to survive and thrive. And so, schools are inevitably part of the entertainment industry, aren't they? Each lesson is full of wonder and surprise.....or at least the vast majority are. Like Shakespeare's plays and Dickens's novels there are some boring bits.....but we will skate over those. What remains in the mind of us all, teachers and the taught, are those moments of pure joy, teeth-grinding chagrin, or just plain open-eyed wonder. When you meet in pubs and clubs it is not the challenge of French irregular verbs, or how quadratic equations have helped you through life, or the value of the cosine formula to the wealth of nations, that dominate the conversation. It is what Mr Whatsit did to the waste-paper basket one memorable Friday afternoon and what Miss Thingy said to Darren when he asked her if she had a boyfriend. It is the same the world over.

And it was pure indulgence in nostalgia that engaged me and my five old friends when we met up again thirty years after our year's Post Graduate Certificate in Education course together.

We met in The Babbling Brook, the pub close to the hall of residence, which we had frequented in our student days. But gone was the tile floor, the long bar and the noise of a hundred thirsty students. It was now one of the best eateries in the city of two universities and twenty thousand students. It described itself as a 'gastro-pub'....discreet lighting, printed menus, table-cloths.....and waiters. There wasn't a student in sight, except the waiters just a family of four in the far corner and a couple dining just behind our large round table. We certainly lifted the level of animation.

After the hugs and patting on the back and tucking into Thai curries, boeuf bourguignons and poulet a la Provencales, we launched into the serious business of reminiscing. I started the party going. I think I started the conversation.

'It strikes me that this is a bit like Chaucer meeting his fellow pilgrims at The Tabard in Chiswick six hundred years ago. Didn't they meet 'at nyght in that hostelrye'?'

'They certainly did,' said primary school teacher Ruth....with her well-remembered forthright vigour, 'but I am not walking to Canterbury....with you or anyone else... so here the comparison ends!'

She turned to our oldest friend, Clive.

'You're our Chaucer, Clive. You've got a degree in English and always told a good story. Tell us what you have been up to.....or perhaps tell us about the lesson you remember best.'

Clive Dare, known throughout his life as 'Dan Dare' was indeed our daddy figure, a refugee from the world of City of London finance dealings, who felt he just wanted to do something to be remembered by. Teaching seemed a good idea.'

'Well, as you know,' began Clive, 'I ended up as a Principal, but actually my most memorable lesson was the very first one I ever took....and it came in the year before I joined the Certificate course. I wanted to find out if I could actually teach and so when I left the City I accepted a temporary post to teach English at a small independent boys school out in the sticks, miles from anywhere.'

It was an 'exclusive' school - not in the sense that it was keen on excluding pupils - as one of my subsequent inner-city schools was - but 'exclusive' to any but the sons and occasional daughters of the wealthy – pop stars, city slickers, film stars, TV celebrities, industrial magnates and the like – those who were pro having children, but anti having them around the home. You've all met the sort.

What the kids had in common was that they had indeed been excluded from their original schools for activity or non-activity that the school had disapproved of and finally despaired of. That is why it was exclusive and why there was a job for the totally unqualified like me.'

'I never knew you had been teaching before,' said Ruth. 'Must have been very useful.'

'Actually it was not a very auspicious start....but I learned more in the first forty five minutes teaching at that school than I did on my whole year's teaching certificate course.'

This sounded just the gripping start we needed! A bit of mystery, a trifle of titillation. Clive continued.

'Because I had not applied for the job until the middle of the summer school holidays I did not know which English groups I would be teaching until the staff meeting on the morning of the first day. At the time I thought this was normal....not simply a result of the school's uncanny disregard for administrative niceties....which it actually was!

I never met the Head.... Never....until the day I left. Mr Cesare Insalata was a somewhat remote begowned figure who glided round the building like the school ghost, always glimpsed just disappearing round a corner or up a staircase. His family owned the school. They saw an opportunity in this huge damp and decrepit Victorian pile deep in the west country. The school had first been founded in a Pembrokeshire farmhouse by his Neapolitan great grandfather. He was a refugee shoemaker, who, on his way to America, had paused to catch breath in Haverfordwest, seen a gap for an ice-cream business, and made a killing. Teaching the children of immigrants followed and now a string of independent schools are just a small part of the Insalata empire.

It was the Deputy Head who really managed all the school affairs, except, that is, for the money. He appointed me, found accommodation for me nearby, and met me at the front door at 8.0'clock on the opening day. He greeted me with one hand and gave me my timetable with the other.

'Staff meeting at 8.30am, Dare.... while Mr Insalata takes school Assembly and prayers. Classes begin at 10.00. I'll be available after morning school if you have any questions. I don't expect you will have. You haven't been here long enough.' And with that he was gone.

'Once I had found my locker, which was at the back of store room, and then found my head of department, who was at the back of another store room stuffing what looked like a bottle of Teachers into his locker, I trundled along to the staff meeting perusing my timetable on the way.

I noted that all my classes were denoted B or C and in one case R. Even though I would have liked an A group I thought I could cope with Bs and Cs. But an R Group?....R!!! This was disconcerting. The only R group I had ever come across was in the Billy Bunter books – the Owl of the Remove. I confess I had never understood what it signified.

My new colleagues did not help much, when I raised the matter in the staffroom after the formal staff meeting....taken, as I gather it always was, by the DeputyHead.

'The Remove, eh? So....they've given you one of those? Well I never...tut tut!' This was Joshua Pasternak, my Head of Department....allegedly.... who had announced his intention to retire at Christmas. Many of his colleagues thought he had retired years ago. But no, he was still there.... in body if not spirit. And he thought it was entirely appropriate to end his days with a flourish of taking entirely 'A groups'. Mr Pasternak knew very well that I was down to take the 5th Remove....and I knew he knew!

'Well....how can I best describe the Remove....Hmm...?' Another voice cut in. Someone with authority and know-how, I mused.

'It's not difficult to describe them. They are the sort of boys whose parents don't mind paying fees....and don't mind too much about what they are taught.'

It was an elderly colleague from his armchair....in an academic gown which had once been black but was now a patchy olive green and grey, patinated by age and pipe smoke. I learned later that this was Bertram Catchpole, who had arrived at the school forty years previously after being invalided out of the Great War, and whose passion....and sole interest now....was running the school army cadets.

'....And who don't ask too many questions,' he added, waving his pipe airily in my direction, sending curls of blue smoke spiralling expertly up to the ceiling.

That wasn't what I was looking for, I must confess. I still had no idea what to expect of the boys....and no-one had mentioned the girls at all. I tried another tack.

'Do the pupils care? About their education, I mean?' I addressed the room generally.

There was a sort of shuffling....and clearing of throats.

'Oh yes, some do....and some don't....sometimes....' Not encouraging responses.

Then another voice cut in.

'If you can show them how your subject helps them make money...you'll be fine. Business Studies and Economics are popular. They also like Arithmetic, but are not all that keen on quadratic equations and geometry, I have noted.' Archie Meades, Head of Science....and only qualified science teacher... tapped his pipe out on an ashtray and leaned back contemplatively. He was trying to be positive but his advice was not much help to someone teaching them English literature.

He, too, waved his pipe in my direction. 'Don't give the blighters an inch....or they'll take a mile.' Once again Archie thought he was offering timeless sound advice to a young whippersnapper. But I felt my heart sink a little.

'You should try entertaining them....they like being amused.' This was the contribution of the school's only Historian, Jonathan Swift, also from a sedentary position. 'Frobisher here has no trouble entertaining them, do you Frobe?...They start laughing as soon as Frobe enters the room.'

'Yes,' said Frobisher looking up from his marking, 'I do seem to have the ability to stimulate hilarity....even though there is not much fun in Vergil's 'Aeneid' at their level, I must admit They keep on demanding the racier.....I would call them 'vulgar'.... Catullus poems – the ones towards the back of the anthology. They do like the Lesbia poems....but I have given them up now....since young Brace started writing his own.....and selling them.'

'You should admire their ability to turn anything into cash, Frobe. It's what pays our wages! And that's what they will be doing all their lives, isn't it?. When it is announced that another one of the Remove has made his next billion in computers, steel, or potatoes, you can pat your self on your back, Frobe, and say it was all down to Lesbia's thousand kisses....'

'It's not her kisses that worry me, Swift....no, I don't mind the kisses....but....'

The bell went and Catullus's more salacious adventures would have to wait.

All of that was something I had to digest for the future Right now it was not the Fifth that I was kicking off my teaching career with for the first period on that first day. It was 4C. The phrase '4C English' has more brooding menace than 'Year 10 English Mr. Dare's Group', I think...even though both are classes of twenty-odd 15 year olds.

Most of 4C were destined for next year's 5th Remove, I was sure. But for the time being there was faith and hope. Charity would be a bonus. I fancied my chances. I was, after all, a Territorial Army officer, and I had fought my corner in the City. And I could still remember how the best of my own teachers had gone about their job.

'Off to feed the wolves you go, Harrison,' chuckled one colleague, waving his hand in the direction of the staffroom door.

I smiled back at him, ignoring the fact that Mr Thingamajig had used my predecessor's name.

On my way to the classroom I decided that making an impact was the right thing to do. It had worked well enough when I was a pupil, and it did now....initially. They were sons of the great monied middle class and so fell dutifully silent and watchful when I burst in and, as purposefully as I could manage, strode to the teacher's desk.

They settled back and awaited events, as all classes do when a new teacher arrives. They were eager to test out this new victim. I could sense that immediately. But I felt well enough

prepared... just as I had done on a hundred practice night attacks on Territorial Army exercises. But I also knew that even the best-laid plans do not survive the first encounter with the enemy, so I remained alert.... or rather, wary

I had already decided that to break the ice and gain some breathing space I needed to learn their names. I remembered that this is what teachers had always done. It seemed a good idea, the sort of thing you should do on your first day.

So, having inscribed all their names in neat rows I had drawn in my notebook and after handing out a set of readers, I told them they were going to read around the class. I would, randomly, indicate who was going to read next and when - so they had better pay attention.

They did.

All went rather well for the first fifteen minutes. R.M. Ballantyne's '*Coral Island*' was as good a book as any for fifteen year olds – and in any case it was the only full set of readers left in the department store cupboard. Boy after boy and occasional girl read a paragraph with varying interpretations and mixture of unlikely accents, designed no doubt to test the new teacher's patience level and stickability. But I was not going to succumb to intimidation. Each reader's efforts were applauded by 'sir'. I was in front by a short head, I reckoned.

Then as I moved to the other half of the class I noticed out of the corner of my eye one lad on my left, who was clearly in a world of his own, staring into space and not at the page.

'You, boy, name?' The boy shot upright, blinking at the unexpected attention.

'Thorpe, sir. Frank Thorpe.'

'Right, Frank Thorpe. You read next!' I was quite pleased with my authoritative tone.

Frank peered at me and then glanced down at his book, slowly picked it up and -- by sheer chance -- started reading at exactly the right spot. He ploughed on for a second or two, not knowing whether he had got it right or not, and then stopped after one sentence and looked up at me. We stared at each other....while the rest of the class stared at both of us. Gradually it dawned on Frank that he had got it right and a smile began to form.

I broke first. 'Nearly got you that time,' I said.

Frank took this in, but just for a moment. He put his book down on the desk and eyed me from under a shock of tousled hair.

'Yes, sir. 'Nearly', sir.....but not quite. You see, I'm smarter than the average teacher!' (a phrase I vaguely remembered from an American cartoon film)

I should have been outraged at such insubordination, of course. There was a marked silence while the class took in a collective breath. Then I could hold it in no longer....I just guffawed. I thought it was genuinely funny. I started laughing uncontrollably. After a short pause the rest of the class joined in - even Frank himself. It was a priceless answer.

Frank was quite right. Most of the boys in that class were indeed '*smarter than the average teacher*'.

So I knew I had to be on my guard the whole time....and I definitely had to give the impression at all times that I was certainly 'not average'. My resolve was tested immediately.

'What a goon!' I heard a high-pitched voice from behind me. It cut my laughter short and I swung around and pointed my finger at the culprit. Then I slowly lowered my hand when I saw that it was one of the only three girls in the class...elegant, classy, shapely and made-up to look ten years older. She was leaning back stretching her blouse tightly, head slightly on one side, obviously daring my next move. I changed tack

'Now, young lady, I am pleased to meet you. And what is your name?' I spoke quietly and, I hoped, disarmingly. She was certainly not expecting this approach. She thought for a moment, but I hadn't given her any opportunity for a witty response.

'Lizzie,...(I raised one eyebrow)...*sir*,' she added

'Lizzie, eh? That's not a proper name, is it?' I suggested. 'What name were you born with? Elisabeth with an 's', or Elizabeth with a 'z', or Lisa, or Elspeth? Which is it?'

Lizzie hesitated. She had been addressed as Lizzie for as long as she could remember. No-one had challenged her appellation before.

'With an 's' or 'z'. Whatever you like,' she answered eventually. 'No-one ever calls me Elizabeth anyway.'

I decided to carry on with the soft-soap approach, ignoring her initial provocation for now.

'Well,' I said in my smarmiest tone. 'we'll have to discover which, won't we, Elisabeth. That would be nice, wouldn't it?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'If you like.' Lizzie didn't really care which letter it was since no-one used the name.

'It's a cissy name anyway – a bit like Clive, I always think.'

The boy next to her, who looked suspiciously as though he had his hand on her bare knee, sniggered sarcastically.

This time my hand went up fast and straight...my finger pointed and wagged up and down menacingly, in a distinctly 'j'accuse' posture.

'And who might you be, then?'

He moved his head trying to stare into my eyes, aiming to communicate to me that he was not used to being treated in this manner, but I kept my finger wagging in front of his nose.

'Your name?'

'Paddy.' There was a marked Irish lilt and a noticeable grudging reluctance to engage in conversation. I sensed danger! Attack is the best form of defence being my credo I raised my voice just a little.

'Paddy! That's not a proper name either, is it? You were baptised Patrick, weren't you?'

'Yes, but I don't use it.'

'Well you do in my class, Patrick. Shortening names is a form of idleness, and we will not tolerate idleness will we, Patrick? Eh?'

Before he could answer I leaned on his desk and peered straight at him.

'So, what is your name?'

'Patrick,' muttered Paddy very sotto voce.

'Louder!' I raised my voice.

'Patrick,' croaked Paddy.

'I can't hear you. Louder still!'

'PATRICK!' screeched Paddy.

'Cor blimme,' breathed a shocked voice from behind.

I swung round and pointed my still-wagging finger at the perpetrator. 'And you! Stand up, boy! What's your name?'

A little boy with large round spectacles shot up out of his chair.

'MICKRICK!' yelled the terrified youngster.

Collapse of the rest of the class. Victory for sir. I never had a moment's trouble from that class for the rest of the year.

Patrick, inevitably, became a minor punk rock star. Michael took over his father's wholesale fish company and Lizzie....she never did answer to Elizabeth except in my classes....well, she told me during the year that she had no intention and no need to do any homework or indeed any work at all.

'You see, sir, I am going to be a model, an actress and then marry a lord'....and she did all three. The lord was forty years older than Lizzie and after eighteen months succumbed to the pace of her living and loving. At his funeral she is reported as saying that 'He died a very contented man, with a smile on his face.'

She put a smile onto many people's faces, did Lizzie. She and the rest of 4C taught me that teaching is a funny business and schools are funny places.
