

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number nine

Hope Springs Eternal



A number of my 'contacts' have already sent me stories and ideas for future Tales. The concept of 'and friends' is alive.

Only one poem received so far...but a delightfully witty one by our friend Jill, that I am sure you will be as taken with as I was. So, it is set out in full below.

Mary and I got to know Jill and Bob way back in the 1960s when Bob and I had the good fortune to become colleagues at a grammar school in Leicester, where, incidentally and irrelevantly, our illustrator, Mike, had once been School Captain. (And, to continue the irrelevant coincidence, where his brother, also a recipient of the Tales, had been a senior prefect, and where, just to complete the range of coincidences, their father was Deputy Head –

who, amongst many distinctions, taught the Attenboroughs there in days gone by.

There is another coincidence. Jill, the poet, gave birth to a son in the same ward as my wife, Mary, just minutes before our eldest son was born. Mary recalls that Jill beat her by less than ten minutes, but remembers Jill getting the last place in a delivery room. Mary was on her way to another but gave birth in the corridor of the Royal Infirmary, Leicester.

Our illustrator did this one for an earlier Tale about Evie and her worry about sex education. but it arrived too late. It deserves publication and it is relevant.... sort of...here.

All that is background to today's Tale, which began when I got to school on the morning of 26th November 1969 the great birth day. I knew that Mary had been taken in to the Royal before I left home. Birth was expected in the afternoon but because of various concerns she had been whisked off when the birth pains began.

As soon as I got into school I sought out the Head in his study. Like so many grammar school heads of the 1960s he was elegant, academic, oldy worldy.... and had been in post for decades. The school was his life. He even lived in the School House in the middle of the campus. Before school each day, he and the deputy and the odd head of department....from amongst those who had also been at the school for thirty years or so.... would meet for a few moments before going down to the School Hall for morning Assembly. The notion of a young...ish... member of staff, who had been at the school for barely a year, bursting in on the meeting with just a peremptory knock was unheard of....quite upsetting. It disturbed a revered routine. It was a shock to their equilibrium.

'Sorry, gentlemen. Could I have a word, please, Headmaster?' I enquired. 'Alone?'

Now, I don't know why I had uttered a quiet but conspiratorially-sounding request to speak 'alone' ...maybe as an about-to-be father I harboured old-fashioned concepts about the sanctity, mystery and confidentiality of birth. Or maybe it was a bit of panic. Anyway, I insisted on the esteemed gentlemen being ushered out before my private conversation with the Almighty.

I was not asked to sit. There was a brief pause before the Beak addressed me.

'I cannot imagine what has precipitated this extraordinary intervention, Lowe, but I can see it is important. Tell me what is troubling you. I give you my word that it will be kept confidential.... except from the deputy and senior men of my choosing, of course.'

I did not take any notice of the irony of this kind of managerial confidentiality at the time. I just wanted to get my earnest request in. And I was just beginning to sense that perhaps I was not giving enough thought to how one should frame such novel requests as I was about to make. So I gulped and launched into it.

'I would like the afternoon off school to go to see the birth of my son, sir.'

To understand the depth of the silence that followed, you need to understand that at that time a teacher simply did not leave a class, and certainly not the school premises, without being close to death, or victim of a kidnapping.

The Head leaned forward across his desk.

'Let me get this straight....you are asking for time off school to go on a hospital visit..... to do what?.... See a birth? Do I understand you correctly?'

I gulped again.

'Yes, that's right, sir. It's the new thing.....allowing fathers to be there at the birth of their child....It will be a wonderful.....'

I got no further.

'What an extraordinary state of affairs, Lowe. I am deeply disappointed that you take the view that attending the birth is more important than your classes...'

I was about to protest that I always had my teaching at the front of my mind, but he held up a restraining hand.

'I cannot imagine what on earth a Head of the English Department could possibly do to aid the birth, Lowe. Your wife is perfectly able to do the job on her own....without any help from you....womenfolk have been doing this for a few years now... over a million at a rough guess. I think you should review your priorities.'

I stood there, rocking back and forth....lost for words.

The Head continued, 'But I am a reasonable man, Lowe, and perhaps social expectations are moving at a faster pace than I can catch up with....so what I am prepared to do.... and this is a first for this school in its four hundred year history.... is to allow you to leave at the end of the school day at four o'clock and excuse you from this afternoon's staff meeting....but please do not tell anyone. I would like to consider in some depth what this change of policy might mean for the future of the school. I do not usually make decisions of this magnitude so speedily. We will treat this act of magnanimity as, shall we say, an 'experiment'.

With that he waved me out.

In the event I got to the hospital half an hour after the birth, as did Bob.

It was another twenty years or so before dads got the paternity rights that they enjoy today. But I vowed there and then that if I ever became a Head I would make it a norm to give impending fathers a day off, under my power to sanction staff occasional absence, to allow them a bit of bonding time. I little thought that when the time came, one of the first members of staff I gave a day off to was..... me! On the birth of my second son in Peterborough. I got there in time to be present at the unfolding.

And there was another coincidence at this birth, too. Giving birth to her son in the next bed to Mary was an ex-student from my school, who had studied A Level Law with me in school lunch hours a year previously.

It is not that Mary makes a habit of coincidences. By definition they coincide. They just happen.

High Hopes

For young Fred Jones his parents had great schemes,
he'd realise their ambitions, all their dreams,
the heights they'd never reached; that far-off goal
he'd claim by climbing up life's greasy pole;
the world his oyster, pushed by mum and dad,
achieving fortune they had never had.

He'd be so famous, clever, high of rank;
a High Court judge, a statesman – head a bank.

A Method actor, athlete, polyglot;
success assured, they smiled into his cot.
Admiringly the neighbours would all say,
“We know that boy will reach the top one day.”

So sadly they received his school reports,
each full of ‘failed’, of minuses and noughts.
No Einstein he, Fred couldn't do the sums,
(not much to boast to other dads and mums.)
Writing no better, their son just couldn't spell.
How might he earn his living? Hard to tell.

Intensive coaching failed, for no tuition
could bring his brain to Mensa-like fruition.
In spite of all encouragement and threats,
promises of dogs, stick insects and other pets,
he fell far short of heights his parents planned,
and obstinately, his head stuck in the sand,

condemned them to embarrassment, despair
so disappointed at their son and heir.
Bad at all sports, he couldn't hit a ball,
athletics had no use for him at all.
The Joneses could do nothing more for him -
but glory be, he flourished in the gym!
Discovered horizontal bars, and ropes
and on them built up all his hopes -

realised his dreams, became a steeple jack,
balanced on roof tops, scaled a chimney stack.
And neighbours, craning necks, were heard to say,
“We knew he'd reach the very top one day.”
