

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 43

Nine Pupils Shot

Marcus Brampton tells of another episode in the daily life of a headteacher.

Marcus Brampton, Head of the new school at Market Upabit, was quietly interviewing in his office a professional couple, a solicitor and his accountant wife. They were considering sending their eldest son to this new school, which promised so much.... or to the nearby public school which had achieved so much. They were getting along nicely when a youngster burst in through the door, breathless with excitement.

'Sir....sir.' Then a gulp. 'Sir, *Elsie's been shot!*'

Stunned silence. Parents' jaws sagged. What sort of school was this – I would be surprised if that hadn't flashed through their minds! Meanwhile Marcus was busy composing himself.

None of Marcus's pre-headship training nor previous experience could be brought to bear easily on this singular situation. But his experience of leading soldiers in the Territorial Army, did.....He kept his presence of mind.

'O really?' he commented in a languid tone -- suggestive of easy, effective, experienced management of a trifling day-to-day issue. 'I tell you what, go and tell the Deputy.'

He smiled at the breathless young girl.... and then turned imperiously to the two ashen parents. 'Do excuse me for a moment,' he said smoothly retaining the comforting smile 'There has obviously been a bit of an accident. Do excuse me. I won't be long. My secretary will bring you a cup of tea.'

Without waiting for an answer he swept out, calling Jenny for tea before dashing down the field where he could spy a knot of staff and students gathering by the boundary hedge.

The crowd parted for him so that he could survey the scene. Elsie was certainly injured. She was rubbing her cheek and mouthing what might have been obscenities.. But so, it seemed, had eight other students.... all of them either sitting or standing, tended by staff first aiders. There appeared to be another group of people on the other side of the hedge.

A cyclone of thoughts swirled round in Marcus's head. His eyes darted from one person to another and finally fixed on his Assistant Head, Oliver, who was bending over Elsie McCreddie.

'What on earth is going on, Ollie? It looks like the siege of Sebastopol!

Ollie was a dour, unspectacular Yorkshire man.....never flustered, always reassuring.

'Nothing to worry about....much....Headmaster. Quite simple really.... though not something they teach you at university.....It seems that a pheasant-shooting party was crossing the

field on the other side of the school boundary hedge.... Those gentlemen over there.' He waved a hand at the tweed clad, rather forlorn group clustered round the hedge.'

'It seems that they were proceeding in a regulation straight line with regulatory intervals between guns and a keen sense of excitement....well that's what His Lordship's gamekeeper Maltravers there tells me.'

Oliver rubbed his nose contemplatively. 'Left-hand Charlie, one of the paying 'guns' appears to be a bit of an amateur at game-shooting. He heard a rustling in the bushes and without thinking, he let off one of his barrels in the general direction of the bushes here.'

'Good Lord, how utterly stupid,' said Marcus. 'And what a terrible co-incidence that our kids were passing along the hedge.'

'Er....not so much a co-incidence, Headmaster. They were the cause of the rustling noise, you see.'

'Rustling noise? How did they make a 'rustling noise?'

'Hmm....best not go into much detail just here, Headmaster....the fact is that as well as doing....that....they were also smoking.....eight smokers and one look-out, Elsie's little brother, Cyrus.'

'Not a very good look-out, then.'

'No, not at all. Seems he was smoking, too....further along the hedge.'

Marcus turned to the senior first aider.

'I take it they are all OK, Sally?'

'Well, as right as anyone can be when they have been peppered with full-bore shot. But only superficial injuries. Only poor old Elsie seems to have a piece of shot embedded in her cheek. I am taking her off to Eastborough Hospital now.'

Marcus turned to Elsie who was holding her cheek. 'Well, Elsie....that's a bit of extreme punishment for smoking, isn't it?'

'Not what you would expect, sir. It's usually a detention. I hope it doesn't become regular.'

'Well, it won't.... if you stop smoking, Else.'

'Hm!... I'll try, sir.... I promise.'

'In that case, I'll just keep shooting as a back-up punishment, Elsie....Now off you go with Miss Blount...and get yourself put right. I will get in touch with your mum and dad.'

He watched teacher and student trudge across the field.

'Not much gets Elsie down, Olly.'

'You are right there....nothing short of two barrels of shot!'

'Hey there!' A voice hailed them from the other side of the hedge. It was My Lord's gamekeeper.

'Is it all sorted now?... We need to crack on.'

Marcus knew he had to restrain himself. His Lordship was a powerful force. Marcus eyed the gamekeeper. The gamekeeper glared back.

'You have just shot nine of my pupils, sir..' said Marcus very deliberately.

'It's all right,' came the breezy answer. 'We're insured!'

Marcus spluttered. He could hardly believe his ears. 'That's not the point, is it...some idiot could have committed a crime or at least a serious piece of negligence. Don't you think some apology is called for.....for, for your thoughtlessness?.... I expect His Lordship will be hearing from the kids' parents....or the police, in due course.'

'I say, that's a bit heavy, headmaster. I did not expect that type of attitude.' With that he wheeled away and led his posse across the field to the far woods.

Marcus stood watching them. He was speechless. Ollie sidled up to him

I shouldn't take it too badly, Marcus. You will get used to the ways of the country in time. Neither the police nor Elsie's dad will press charges, you know.

'But they must.....it's terrible.....more than just negligence....it/s gross negligence...they have to do something to bring some consideration of others into it....'

But Ollie was right. A sergeant called on Marcus a day or two later.... A 'courtesy call', he explained. The Super wanted Marcus to know that he had reprimanded the gamekeeper, who had taken the admonishment 'very gracefully'.....no need for His Lordship to be bothered with it....d'you see?.....and, by the way, Elsie's dad doesn't want any further action, either....he works on the estate, you see.....and His Lordship's insurers will see him OK.....best not to interfere, sir.....right?...so I'll be off now....thank you for seeing me...I will tell the Super everything is fine....good morning.' The policeman saluted and turned on his heel before Marcus could gather his breath...'

Marcus just sat there. Ollie popped his head round the door.

'OK, Headmaster?....There really is nothing you can do....or ought to do....this community is older and stronger than you and me....you'll come to appreciate its funny...er... 'traditions'....eventually!'

Marcus sat for a long time tapping his fingers together. At last he snapped out of his reverie and smiled to himself.

'I don't suppose I would feel half as bad about it if the solicitor and his wife had stayed. They did not even wait for the tea!'

There was a sequel to this episode....but it will wait till another Tale.
