

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 44

Rural Deprivation

It was barely a month after the infamous shooting incident - when, you will remember, young Elsie had been inadvertently shot by a member of his Lordship's pheasant shoot, while snatching a quick fag behind the school hedge along with eight of her classmates. Marcus Brampton, Head of Market Upabit School, was attending an education conference in London organised by his Headteachers Association. The general theme of the conference centred on of the perceived slow progress of support for the large number of secondary schools now popping up all over the country as the post-war baby boom moved inexorably on.

Marcus was becoming increasingly irritated by speaker after speaker berating the government's lack of action in the inner cities – preferring, one speaker pronounced in red-faced anger, those havens of peaceful tranquility, those 200 year throwbacks to a Constable-like serenity, those calm and comfortable rural areas.... so beloved by this country's right wing!

Marcus, in the body of the hall, could contain myself no longer. From his seat he shouted out, *'Rural schools have problems, too! I bet you have never had nine of your pupils shot!'*

That stopped the speaker in his tracks! It also stopped everything else. The speaker gawped. The chairman scanned the large auditorium to trace the intruder. Press photographers stood to get a better shot of what promised to be the picture of the day. His pals on either side of him shuffled their chairs sideways. The rest of the audience looked around, or stood, or talked excitedly amongst themselves.

The chair finally got a grip. He leaned forward, took command of the microphone and in the same action motioned the guest speaker to take his seat, with just a hurried whispered conversation.

The chair cleared his throat, 'Ladies and gentlemen, it is highly unusual for a member of this Association to interrupt a speaker.....our guest will now continue....and I am sure you will give him the applause he deserves.

Some applause....but most of the audience were still trying to identify who it was who was livening up the Conference more than somewhat.....who had offered the possibility of dispelling their growing boredom with a succession of anti-government speeches delivered in the same ranting tones.

Sadly, it was not to be. The Union powers-that-be were having no truck with an incognito from the floor of the hall. What had been meticulously planned would be rigorously carried out.

And so, although people turned in their seats and stared at the interloper, trying give a nod to the author of this splendid diversion, and to indicate their agreement with Marcus's

intervention, the Conference simply moved inexorably on, as conferences do. The speaker just smiled condescendingly and began where he had left off.

However, the press had not forgotten. At the end of the morning session there was a rush to surround Marcus and pin him, metaphorically, to the wall. Marcus was the man of the moment.

'What did he mean about kids being shot?....What happened?.... Did he see himself as a rouble-maker?.... Did he not believe there was inner-city deprivation....What's all this about rural problems?.... What problems....'

'Look,' said Marcus to the throng, 'the shooting incident got me the publicity....and you can root out the story easily....it is well known now all over the county....but what I think you should be investigating is the myth of total rural serenity out there. ... There is severe rural deprivation as well as the inner-city sort.... my kids cannot get to see their favourite football teams....or get to pop concerts or any other kind of event....there is almost no rural transport....and few shops. There is a great deal more suicide in rural areas than you will be aware of, I reckon, and a lot more domestic violence - because of all the frustration....and anyway, the rustic charm that all of you may subscribe to is getting less and less available to those born in the area....their tied cottages are being sold and turned into twee commuter dwellings or second homes...That's the real story....'

Marcus had started something. Never again would the rural aspect be used to counter the inner-city problems. Ministers, civil servants, local councillors and local government officers sought his views and support. The case of the shoot and the shootings had done the trick Elsie's ordeal had led to some good.....at least for the national consciousness....and, as it turned out, for Elsie herself. Marcus did not find this out for twenty years, until one day towards the end of his career she turned up at the school with two children in tow.

'I could not leave the old place without seeing you, headmaster,' she said when she had settled herself and her ten-year old twins in front of Marcus's desk. 'I never did say a big enough thank you for your concern....and for not creating too much of a fuss....just a little fuss'

'Oh? Thank you Elsie, but what do you mean 'just a little fuss?' I can still see the small scar on your cheek. Surely it merited a much bigger fuss?'

Elsie smiled, 'Your involving the press but not making a big fuss over it put the fear of God into Mr. Maltravers, the Head Gamekeeper....and I expect his Lordship was not best pleased either....but the upshot was that the insurance company stopped all their quibbling and doubled the amount of compensation overnight. My mum and dad bought the village shop, me and my three brothers and two sisters all went off to university, as you know, and now we are all nicely placed. I have just come home from Manchester for the weekend. I am a partner in a law firm, with my husband....and doing very nicely...so I have a lot to thank you and the school for....So, once again thank you.'

Elsie and kids rose to go. 'There is one other thing that incident did for me, sir..'

'Right. And that is?'

'I stopped smoking immediately afterwards.....and have never smoked since.....so there you are.....strange are the ways of the Lord....and I don't mean His Lordship!'

'Well, you know, Elsie, Old Ollie Hutchings hinted to me long ago that you might be trying to give up smoking. He said maybe a good shooting would cure everyone of the habit!'

'Sorry to disappoint him, sir....but actually it was the A and E doctor when Miss McCreadie took me to the hospital..... he heard I had been smoking and then insisted on showing me a slide with a picture of a smoker's lung....'thirty five years old, she was,' he said....'

'Do you mean she's dead?' I asked the doctor. 'Yes...one of many.'

'So, there you are, sir.... That's what did it!Not another cigarette from the day to this..... I'm a country lass....but I'm no bumkin!'

'That's just what Mr. Hutchings said!'

'Well, he was right.....I have done very nicely. ...The only downside is the scar where the doc gouged out the pellet.....I'll settle for that.....So thank you again, sir.'

And with that Elsie took her final bow from Market Upabit. Marcus sat for a while, musing....then he stretched and in so doing his eye caught sight of one of the many school photos on his wall....and a lanky Year 10 fifteen year old, with tousled hair, whose perpetual smile shone out at him.

'Jimmy Delafield! Well I never.....I haven't thought about him for many a year.....good job his story never got to the press.....' He laughed at the thought. 'That could have been the end of my promising career.'

'Jimmy Delafield.... a bus.... a drunken fisherman.... A screeaming little girl.... And a copper.'

But the final Tale of the Rural Deprivation trilogy will have to wait a day or so.
