

The Big Break-Out from St Mary's.

St Mary's Infants and Junior School was more than a place of learning. It was another home, a cosy haven, stiff with discipline but warm and comforting.

Without doubt my favourite teacher at St Mary's was Miss Morgan, my Form 2b mistress, who took an interest in me from the moment I told her, quite truthfully, that I liked poetry. But if Miss Morgan was my favourite teacher, Mr Blyth, the deputy headmaster who was famous for his accuracy in chalk throwing, was my least favourite. Yet both had a role to play in the incident that nearly cost me my place at my beloved St Mary's.

At the time, my mother and I were staying with Aunt Elsie and Uncle Ted. It all started, harmlessly enough, with a few verses of a poem that Miss Morgan decided to recite to us in the middle of a geography lesson.

'Can anyone tell me who wrote that beautiful poem?' she asked at the conclusion.

There was a silence for several seconds. Eventually a hand shot up and one of the girls suggested Tennyson, but she was wrong. Another offered Coleridge and a third put forward Masfield.

The names of poets were being blurted out in a cascade – Whitman, Longfellow, Browning, Keats. With each wrong answer Miss Morgan became angrier.

'Surely one of you knows who wrote that lovely poem,' she said, almost pleadingly. She turned and looked at me.

'Do you know Ronnie?' she said.

I could see that she was praying that I would not let her down. My mind was racing and just as I was about to admit my ignorance, it struck me that my fellow pupils had named every well-known poet except one – William Wordsworth. It was worth a guess.

'Wordsworth,' I said.

Miss Morgan permitted herself one of her rare smiles. She looked round the class and waved her arm in my direction.

'Now here's a boy who knows and loves his poetry,' she said. 'Here's a boy who will go far. Well done, Ronnie.'

At once a sense of shame overwhelmed me. I knew I had taken the credit for something to which I was not entitled. Worse still, I had deceived Miss Morgan.

Thinking about my act of deception I forgot what time of day it was and walked out of the school gates.

A loud shout of 'Oi! You!' disturbed my thoughts. I looked over my shoulder and saw two of the senior boys running towards me, waving their arms. I did not know why they were after me, but I did not intend to stay to find out. I sprinted off as fast as I could.

But within a few seconds the boys pounced on me. Taking an arm each, they began to drag me back in the direction of St Mary's.

'What's up?' I gasped. 'What have I done?'

'Running away from school,' said one of my captors, prodding me in the back with his knee to keep me moving.

'But it's going home time.' I said. 'I was going home for my tea.'

'It's not going home time,' said the other boy. 'It's only playtime. There's two more lessons yet. Mr Blyth'll kill you.'

The full horror of my situation dawned on me. Running away from school was a major crime.

Playtime had just finished as I was marched through the school gates. There was an odd silence as 150 pupils waited to see how my crime would be punished.

Mr Blyth stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the junior section. As I was led towards him I felt like a human sacrifice.

‘You know what you’ve done don’t you?’ said Mr Blyth.

‘No Sir.’

‘Yes you do. You left the precincts during school hours without permission.’

He made it sound as if I’d masterminded a mass break-out from Alcatraz.

‘This is a very serious business,’ he continued ‘What do you think would happen if every boy and girl at this school did what you just did?’

‘I don’t know Sir.’

‘We would have an empty school, wouldn’t we? And if the school was empty, all the teachers would be out of work, including me. I wouldn’t like that very much.’

Mr Blyth smiled and looked around the assembled pupils to signal that he had made a joke. Dutifully, everybody roared with laughter.

‘Right,’ said the deputy head, ‘You will stop in school tonight to make up for your absence this afternoon. Report to me as soon as the bell goes.’

At the end of lessons I went to Mr Blyth and began my detention.

As I sat in the classroom there was not a sound in the building and soon my boredom brought on tiredness. I rested my head on my folded arms and fell asleep.

A screaming voice woke me up. It was shouting ‘Ronnie!’ and it awoke me with such a start that I kicked over the desk and the contents of the ink well went all over my face. There was another screech of ‘Ronnie!’ and I scurried to the window.

Looking out, I saw my mother standing alone in the middle of the playground. She was waving her handbag round her head.

‘Ronnie!’

I pushed open the window and shouted, ‘I’m up here, Mam!’

My mother took a step back. ‘What are you doing up there Ronnie?’

‘I’ve been kept in after school.’

‘Kept in after school,’ she howled. ‘Do you know what time it is? It’s gone seven ‘o’ clock. I’ve been worried to death about you.’

My mother’s shrill cries brought the school caretaker running from his house outside the school gates.

‘What’s up missus?’ he asked ‘What’s all the noise for?’

‘What’s up?’ said my mother. ‘I’ll tell you what’s up. They’ve got my Ronnie locked up in there, that’s all. And look at his face,’ she continued, pointing up to the ink stains round my eyes. ‘They’ve been beating him up. His face is covered in bruises. He’s black and blue.’

‘No they haven’t mam,’ I shouted, ‘It’s only ink,’ but it was plain to see she preferred the worst possible interpretation.

The caretaker released me from captivity and my mother led me back home. When we got there she relayed the story of my detention to Aunt Elsie

‘I’d have it out with them at that school if I were you, our Madge,’ said Aunt Elsie.

‘Don’t you worry,’ said my mother. ‘They’re going to feel the sharp end of my tongue, I can tell you.’

The following morning, my mother escorted me to school. We entered the assembly hall and my mother spotted Mr Blyth standing by the door leading into classroom 2b. She wasted no time with opening pleasantries ‘What happened to my Ronnie last night?’ she demanded.

Mr Blyth spread his arms airily 'It was all a mistake, Mrs Bassett,' he said smiling sweetly 'I just went home and forgot that I had left him in the classroom. I'm ever so sorry, but it's easily done.'

'That's the daftest thing I've ever heard,' my mother yelled. 'Anything could have happened to the boy. There could have been an earthquake for a start.'

I could not follow my mother's line of argument with that last observation and it was plain Mr Blyth did not understand it either. 'Now come on Madge,' he said, 'Calm down.'

It was then my mother did something that really surprised me. She swung her fist up and punched him in the face. Her thin, blue-veined fist bouncing off Mr Blyth's jaw like a dried pea off the skin of a kettle drum 'Don't tell me to calm down,' she said, staring at him..

There was a burst of startled 'oohs!' and 'aahs!' from the pupils who had crowded into the assembly hall. Mr Blyth threw back his head then looked straight at her. This time he didn't call her Madge. 'I am afraid you will have to take your son home Mrs Bassett,' he said sternly 'I don't think we can keep him at this school any longer. He's obviously a bad influence here. And so are you.'

My mother turned and strode off, pulling me with her. As she reached the door leading from the assembly hall, she shouted over her shoulder, 'I'll bet you wouldn't have done this if his father had been alive.'

We went home and after tea, Aunt Elsie said to my mother 'Now then Madge, what are you going to do about that school?'

'Nothing I can do now,' said my mother. Her fighting spirit was spent.

'Why don't you go back and have another word with them? He might be a little more sympathetic.'

'No use,' she said 'There's no soft spot to Bill Blyth, especially when he's been made to look stupid.'

Uncle Ted laughed, 'Well, he's changed then,' he said 'During the war he had a number of soft spots. Especially for the girls. If some of the old squaddies in this town knew what he got up to with their wives and girlfriends when he came home on leave, they would knock his teeth in.'

At this point I glanced across the table at Aunt Elsie. There was an expression on her face as if she was recalling things that had not entered her mind for years.

After a long silence she got up from the table and picked up her coat and hat.

'I'm going round to that Mr Blyth's house to have a word with him about all this,' she said. 'You never know your luck – he might change his mind.'

She was gone for more than an hour and when she returned her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. She looked years younger.

'What did he say?' asked my mother puffing nervously on yet another Woodbine.

'He says you'll hear no more about it. And Ronnie can go back to school tomorrow,' said Aunt Elsie.

'How did you manage to get him to change his mind?' said my mother.

'Quite easily,' said Aunt Elsie. She was smiling reflectively as she removed her coat and hat, 'Let's just say the ghosts of the past are bound to come back to haunt you – sooner or later.'

I had no idea what she meant, but I didn't particularly care. I was glowing in the knowledge that the following morning I would resume my rightful place in that earthly paradise, Class 2b at St Mary's.