

## Boy 11

Following an accident in the family's first car in the Christmas holidays, when Roald's almost entirely severed nose had to be sewn on by wonderful Dr Dunbar, it's back to school in Weston-super-Mare. Roald is now nine and a half!

### Captain Hardcastle

We called them masters in those days, not teachers, and at St Peter's the one I feared most of all, apart from the Headmaster, was Captain Hardcastle. This man was slim and wiry and he played football. On the football field he wore white running shorts and white gymshoes and short white socks. His legs were as hard and thin as ram's legs. The hair on his head was not ginger. It was a brilliant dark vermilion, like a ripe orange, and it was plastered back with immense quantities of brilliantine. The parting in his hair was a white line straight down the middle of the scalp. On either side of the parting you could see the comb tracks running back through the greasy orange hair like little tramlines.

Captain Hardcastle sported a moustache that was the same colour as his hair, and oh what a moustache it was! A truly terrifying sight, a thick orange hedge that sprouted and flourished between his nose and his upper lip and ran clear across his face from the middle of one cheek to the middle of the other. It was curled most splendidly upwards all the way along as though it had had a permanent wave put into it.

Behind the moustache lived an inflamed and savage face with a deeply corrugated brow. 'The world is a dangerous place,' it seemed to be saying, 'and small boys are insects that will turn and bite you if you don't get them first and squash them hard.'

Captain Hardcastle was never still. His orange head twitched and jerked perpetually from side to side, and each twitch was accompanied by a little grunt that came out of the nostrils. He had been in the army in the Great War and that, of course, was how he had received his title. But even small insects like us knew that only a man with little else to boast about would hang on to it in civilian life.

Rumour had it that the constant twitching and snorting was caused by something called shell-shock but we were not quite sure what that was. We took it to mean that an explosive had gone off very close to him with such an enormous bang that it had made him jump high in the air and he hadn't stopped jumping since.

For a reason that I could never properly understand, Captain Hardcastle had it in for me from my very first day. Perhaps it was because he taught Latin and I was no good at it. Perhaps it was because already, at the age of nine, I was very nearly as tall as he was. Or more likely, it was because I took an instant dislike to his giant orange moustache and he often caught me staring at it with what was probably a little sneer under the nose. I had only to pass within ten feet of him in the corridor and he would glare at me and shout, 'What's so funny, may I ask? What are you smirking at?' or, 'You, what's-your-name, get on with your work!' I knew it was only a matter of time before

he nailed me good and proper.

The crunch came during my second term, during evening Prep. Every weekday evening, the whole school would sit for one hour in the Main Hall, between six and seven o'clock, to do Prep. The master on duty for the week sat high up on a dais at the top end of the Hall and kept order. When Captain Hardcastle was taking Prep, his small milky-blue eyes would rove the Hall for the full sixty minutes, searching for trouble, and heaven help the boy who caused it.

The rules of Prep were simple but strict. You were forbidden to look up from your work, and you were forbidden to talk. In extreme circumstances, and I never knew what these were, you could put your hand up and wait until you were asked to speak but you had better be awfully sure that the circumstances were extreme.

During Prep every boy sat at his own small individual wooden desk, with a sloping wooden top which had a flat strip at the far end with a groove to hold your pen and a small hole in the right-hand side in which the ink-well sat. The pens we used had detachable nibs and it was necessary to dip your nib into the ink-well every six or seven seconds. Ball-point pens and felt pens had not then been invented, and fountain-pens were forbidden. The nibs we used were very fragile and most boys kept a supply of new ones in a box in their trouser pockets.

Captain Hardcastle was sitting up on the dais, stroking his orange moustache. His eyes roved the Hall endlessly, searching for mischief. Disaster struck when I foolishly stubbed the tip of my nib into the top of the desk. The nib broke. I knew I hadn't got a spare one in my pocket. There was another half-hour of Prep to go and I couldn't sit there doing nothing. Nor could I put up my hand and tell Captain Hardcastle I had broken my nib. I simply did not dare.

I glanced to my right. The boy next to me was called Dobson. He was the same age as me and a nice fellow. Dobson's desk was almost touching mine. I thought I would risk it. I kept my head lowered but watched Captain Hardcastle carefully. When I was fairly sure he was looking the other way, I put a hand in front of my mouth and whispered, 'Dobson.....Dobson...Could you lend me a nib?'

Suddenly there was an explosion up on the dais. Captain Hardcastle had leapt to his feet and was pointing at me and shouting, 'You're talking! I saw you talking! Don't try to deny it!'

I sat there frozen with terror.

Every boy stopped working and looked up.

Captain Hardcastle's face had gone from red to deep purple and he was twitching violently.

'Do you deny you were trying to cheat? You were asking Dobson for help with your work. Of course you were cheating. Why else would you be speaking to Dobson? I take it you were not inquiring after his health?'

'I...I have broken my nib, sir,' I whispered. 'I.....I was asking Dobson if he c-could lend my one, sir.'

'You are lying!' cried Captain Hardcastle, and there was triumph in his voice.

'I always knew you were a liar! *And* a cheat as well! I am giving you a Stripe! These were words of doom. Here I must explain the system of Stars and Stripes we had. For exceptionally good work, you could be awarded a

Quarter- Star. If you got four Quarter-stars, you had completed your Star. For exceptionally poor work or bad behaviour, you were given a Stripe, and that automatically meant a thrashing from the Headmaster.

For the remainder of Prep I sat at my desk and did nothing.

The following morning, as soon as prayers were over, the Headmaster called for Quarter-Stars and Stripes. I was the only boy to go up. The Headmaster said, 'Come and see me in my study as soon as this is over.'

Five minutes later I entered the sacred precincts where the Headmaster lived. 'What have you got to say for yourself?' he asked, his white shark's teeth flashing dangerously.

'I didn't lie, sir. And I wasn't trying to cheat.'

'Captain Hardcastle says you were doing both,' the Headmaster said. 'Are you calling Captain Hardcastle a liar?'

'No, sir. Oh no, sir.'

'Captain Hardcastle is an officer and a gentleman. For talking in Prep, for trying to cheat and for lying, I am going to give you six strokes of the cane. Bend over.'

I was frightened of the cane. It was a weapon for wounding. It lacerated the skin. It caused severe black and scarlet bruising that took three weeks to disappear, and all the time during those three weeks, you could feel your heart beating along the wounds.

I braced myself for the first stroke. *Crack*. It was like a rifle shot. For a few seconds I felt virtually nothing. Then suddenly came the frightful searing agonizing unbearable burning.

I bit into my lower lip. I was determined not to make a sound, for that would only give the executioner greater satisfaction. I was counting the strokes, and as the sixth one hit me, I knew I was going to survive in silence.

Small boys can be very comradely when a member of their community has got into trouble, and even more so when they feel an injustice has been done. When I returned to the classroom, I was surrounded on all sides by sympathetic faces and voices, but one particular incident has always stayed with me. A boy of my own age called Highton was so violently incensed by the whole affair that he said to me before lunch that day, 'You don't have a father. I do. I am going to write to my father and tell him what has happened and he'll do something about it.'

'He couldn't do anything,' I said.

'He will,' Highton said. 'My father won't let them get away with this.'

'Where is he now?'

'He's in Greece,' Highton said. 'In Athens. But that won't make any difference.'

Then and there, little Highton sat down and wrote to the father he admired so much, but of course nothing came of it. It was nevertheless a touching and generous gesture from one small boy to another and I have never forgotten it.