

## Worms

*Gervase Phinn*

‘Miss, who’s that funny man at the back of the classroom?’ The speaker was a small, stocky boy of about nine or ten with a shock of thick, red hair.

‘That’s not a funny man, Oliver,’ replied the teacher smiling and colouring a little, ‘that’s Mr Phinn.’

‘Well, who is he, miss?’ asked the child.

‘He’s a visitor, come to see how well we are getting on.’

‘But what does he do, miss?’ persisted the little boy staring intently at me with clear quizzical eyes,

‘He’s just sitting there not doing anything.’

‘That’s because he’s an inspector—’

‘A policeman!’ whispered the child excitedly.

‘No, Oliver. Mr Phinn’s not a police inspector. He’s a school inspector and....’

‘And he just sits and watches people then does he, miss?’

‘Well, yes, he does, but he has lots of other things to do.’

Mrs Peterson took a slow, deep breath. ‘Mr Phinn listens to children read, for example.’

‘Listens to children read?’ Oliver repeated shrilly. ‘And does he get paid for it, miss?’

‘Yes,’ replied the teacher wearily, ‘he does get paid for it, Oliver, but come along now, settle down, there’s a good boy.’

Oliver returned to his desk, all the while staring intently in my direction. He then shook his head like an old man despairing at the excesses of youth, before commenting, ‘Nice little number that.’

‘Oliver!’ snapped Mrs Peterson, her eyes becoming suddenly cat-like, ‘will you stop doing that with your pencil, please? I have told you once and I don’t want to have to tell you again. We do not want a repetition of last term and the incident with the wax crayon, do we?’

‘No, miss,’ answered the child brightly.

‘Oliver managed to get a piece of wax crayon lodged in his ear, Mr Phinn, and we had the devil’s own job to get it out, didn’t we, Oliver?’

‘Yes, miss.’ There was no trace of contrition in the cheerful voice.

‘When I asked him what he was doing pushing a wax crayon in his ear, do you know what he replied, Mr Phinn?’ I shook my head. ‘He replied, “To see if it fitted.”’ The teacher pursed her lips and a pair of hard, glittery eyes rested on the child. ‘Now then, Oliver, you can perhaps remember what I said Mr Phinn does for a living?’

‘Not a lot by the sound of it, miss,’ replied the child seriously.

The teacher sighed. ‘Can you remember what I said his job was called?’ she asked sharply.

‘Yes, miss. He’s a suspecter.’

Mrs Peterson shook her head, shrugged and mouthed in my direction, ‘There’s always one!’

‘Now children, because it is a Monday, we start the day as we normally do with “Newstime”.

And we love “Newstime”, don’t we?’ The class remained impassive. Mrs Peterson turned in my direction. ‘It’s an opportunity, Mr Phinn, for the children to tell us what they have been doing over the weekend. This week, let me see whom I shall ask.’ She scanned the classroom. ‘Portia, would you like to come out to the front and tell us what interesting things you and your family have been doing over the weekend?’

A large, moon-faced, rather morose-looking girl with hair in enormous bunches and tied by large crimson ribbons, rose slowly from her seat and headed sluggishly for the front. She stared motionless at the class as if caught in amber, a grim expression on her round pale face.

‘Come along, then, Portia,’ urged Mrs Peterson.

‘Nowt ‘appened, miss,’ the girl answered sullenly.

‘Something must have happened, Portia. Did you go anywhere?’

‘No, miss.’

‘Well, what did you do all weekend?’

‘Watch telly, miss.’

Mrs Peterson sighed, ‘now come along, Portia, there must be something you can tell us all?’

‘Miss, we found an ‘edge’og on our lawn on Saturday and it were dead,’ the child announced bluntly.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Peterson, pulling a dramatically sympathetic face.

‘My dad said it were probably next door’s dog,’ said Portia. ‘It’s allus killing things that dog. My dad says it wants purrin’ down. It’s a reight vicious thing. It bit ‘im when he was fixing t’fence and last week it chased this old woman who were collecting for the RSPCA right down t’path. We could hear t’screaming from our back room.’

‘Dear me, it does sound a rather fierce creature, Portia,’ said Mrs Peterson.

‘It bit ‘er on t’bottom by t’gate. All her little flags were ovver our garden. My dad said she wouldn’t be coming back in an ‘urry!’

Mrs Peterson sighed wearily. ‘Now, let me see, who else. Oh, come on then, Oliver. I can see your hand waving in the air like a palm tree in a tornado. Come on down to the front and tell us what interesting things have happened to you during this weekend.’

Oliver scampered to the front excitedly, drew himself up to his full height and proclaimed in a loud and confident voice: ‘Miss, some white worms came out of my bottom yesterday.’

Mrs Peterson screwed up her face as if she were sucking a lemon. ‘Oh dear me, Oliver. I don’t think we want to hear about that.’

‘My mum’s going to the chemist’s today to get some pink stuff to get rid of the white worms that came....’

‘I think we’ve heard quite enough about the white worms, thank you, Oliver. Is there something nice you can tell us about?’

‘But, miss, my mum said lots of people get them. When she was a girl she said that all her class...’

‘Yes, well, Mr Phinn’s not travelled all the way from Fettesham to hear about white worms, have you, Mr Phinn?’ I smiled faintly and shook my head. ‘I’m sure the medicine will work wonders tonight.’

‘But, miss, when I first saw these white worms they sort of wriggled and —,

‘*Oliver!*’ snapped Mrs Peterson with such a wild gleam in her eye that she looked like a cat ready to pounce. ‘*Enough!* Back to your place, please.’ Then, turning back to Portia she said, ‘Perhaps the hedgehog ate something which didn’t agree with him. Does anyone know what the hedgehog’s natural food is?’ asked Mrs Peterson, addressing the children.

‘Worms!’ exclaimed Oliver, grinning widely.

### **Portia**

Towards the end of the morning I took the opportunity, whilst the children were writing, to look at the exercise books. Portia was writing carefully in large, clear rounded letters as I approached, but on catching sight of me, she froze, dropped her pencil and stared up like a terrified rabbit in a trap.

‘May I look at your work?’ I asked gently. She slid the book across the desk, all the while staring and blinking nervously. She had written the date at the top of the page in bold writing and then underneath in four large capital letters the word ‘EGOG’.

‘What does that mean?’ I asked

‘‘Edge’og!’ she replied, looking at me as if I was incredibly stupid. Try as I might, I just could not get her to speak to me above the single word so I tried another tack, to re-assure her that I was really quite friendly.

‘It’s a lovely name, Portia,’ I said. She eyed me suspiciously. ‘You are named after one of the most famous characters in a wonderful play by William Shakespeare. Portia was a very clever and beautiful woman.’ I was just about to launch in to a rendering of ‘The quality of mercy is not strained’ when Mrs Peterson approached, bent low so her lips were nearly in my ear and informed me in slow and deliberate tones that ‘The name is spelt “P-O-R-S-C-H-E” not “P-O-R-T-I-A”, Mr

Phinn. Her father told me, when I asked him about the unusual spelling on Parents' Evening that he always wanted a Porsche car but couldn't afford one. She's the next best thing.'

Mrs Peterson shook her head, shrugged and mouthed: 'There's always one!'