

Barfield School

One

The classroom door burst open and in marched Ron Cooper. Michael hadn't heard a knock and he was sure there hadn't been one.

'Hey, you!' Cooper barked, pointing an imperious forefinger at a boy sitting in the middle of the second row.

'Wipe that stupid grin off your face, lad, and sit up straight! Where d'you think you are? At home watching telly?'

The boy spun round.

'No, I mean you, you idiot.' The finger was waggled with simulated impatience. 'What's your name, boy?'

'Me sir?'

'Yes, you sir. I'm talking to you, you half wit!'

'Higgins sir.'

'Stand up when you speak to me!'

Higgins shot up. It was as if Cooper's command had triggered some jack-in-the-box-like spring sunk into the seat of his chair.

'Mr Morgan, the headmaster would like to see you at break,' Cooper announced, hardly bothering to lower his voice, his glowering face still half turned towards the boy. Without one word more he stormed out with the same studied theatricality as he'd swept in.

‘OK. You can sit down, Higgins!’ Michael said gently. Though it was obvious that this intrusive display of gratuitous authority was yet one more calculated attempt by the deputy head to reinforce the reputation of fierceness he had among the pupils, Michael suspected it was also his way of expressing contempt for the more enlightened approach followed by young teachers like himself; but the indignation he felt was prompted just as much by the retrograde effect this sort of random victimization might have on the boy. Higgins was not the easiest of pupils to manage, and Michael was even tempted to think that he might be suffering from some form of emotional disturbance which could be affecting his concentration; however, he’d recently had proof he was a good, sensitive lad at heart, and had been congratulating himself on having obtained a kind of co-operation based on a still tenuous strand of respect. So, what it suited Cooper to have seen as nothing more than an imbecilic grin was simply Higgins’s way of demonstrating to his young French teacher that he was doing his best to show interest in his lessons. One thing Higgins reacted against – and this with his own special brand of obdurate tenacity - was what he considered to be an injustice; and what was more unfair than this type of adult bullying which he was probably all too exposed to at home, and which Michael himself - though he did have the excuse of mitigating circumstances - had been guilty of not long ago?

It had all happened at the beginning of this new school year. Several times during their first lessons Higgins’s restless determination to reject his teacher’s efforts to encourage his participation in the process of learning French had reached such an uncontrollable paroxysm that, without the slightest warning, he pushed his chair gratingly back, stood resolutely up and, gazing out of the window next to him, announced to the rest of the class in his broad Yorkshire accent, ‘I can see seagulls on t’ football pitch.’ A chorus of loud guffaws had followed. The first time Michael had ordered him to move to a vacant desk in the middle

of the second row in the hope that the simple expedient of increasing the distance between pupil and window would significantly reduce the likelihood of any future repetition. It had the opposite effect. Each time he'd told him patiently but firmly to sit down and look at his text book. The boy had grudgingly obeyed. But the final straw was when it occurred three times during the same lesson. Michael had lost his self control, marched up to the boy and given him a solid clip round the ear. In a fit of rage Higgins's had seized his book, flung it across the classroom before lapsing into a deep sulk.

'Right. You'll stay behind at the end of the lesson, my lad. I want to have a word with you!' he'd simply said. Higgins had glared at him with sullen dissent.

The end of lesson came, the class filed out and the boy trudged out to the front. He was the first to speak.

'You shouldn't hit people smaller than yourself!' he declared, his eyes blazing with defiance.

'What did you say, lad?' He'd heard perfectly well the first time but his question was intended to grant the boy a chance to moderate the tone and wording of this undisguised challenge to his authority while giving himself a second or two to think.

'You shouldn't hit people smaller than yourself!'

The words were spoken with the same dogged determination. It flashed through Michael's mind that this might justify a second slap, but he was lucid enough to see it would probably be the cause of an irretrievable breakdown between them.

It wasn't the first time he'd been brought to ponder on the fact that a show of physical force by a teacher could in no way be a solution to establishing a mutually respectful relationship with his pupils. His memories of that first time were still painful. It had been during the second term of his teacher training course when student teachers had each been appointed to schools where they could observe seasoned teachers at work and gain direct teaching experience by taking classes alone. Michael had been assigned to

a traditional boys' only grammar school where a 'streaming' system was in operation: pupils were placed in 'A', 'B', 'C', or 'D' classes according to their level of ability. Usually he was given easy 'A' or 'B' forms where pupils were eager to learn and class discipline never posed any great problem. However, there had been one notable exception: trainee teachers had to present a second teaching subject as part of their course and, as Michael had chosen English, he had regularly sat in on the lessons of a 'D' form of fifteen year olds. He remembered asking himself at the time if the 'D' didn't stand for 'dustbin'; for it was a motley class of low academic achievement where some thirty pubescent youths were dumped together as so much waste. He couldn't help feeling undercurrents of resentment, hopelessness and low self esteem. However, their regular English teacher was extremely gifted in his ability to understand and communicate with his pupils. It made Michael realize that a good teaching *rapport* is a mixture of sincerity, empathy and vocation. The lessons took the form of class discussions – so many question and answer sessions where pupils could give vent to their problems and frustrations. Michael was struck by the trust they had in their teacher, the involvement they showed in his lessons, the frankness with which he answered their questions, and the resulting atmosphere of respect that reigned. One day the teacher suggested that Michael should take them alone. It was a total disaster. The minute he stepped into the classroom he knew they were determined not to give him the slightest chance. Their sole motivation was to make this student teacher suffer for the humiliation the system had forced on them by creating a riot from the start. Perhaps things have changed since then, but in those days teacher training courses did not include advice on how to establish and maintain classroom order. Teachers were simply expected to learn from hard experience. Michael's reaction to this collective aggression was to give those he considered to be the ringleaders a violent swipe across the face. It only made matters worse: such was the racket that a teacher

from the classroom next door had to come and re-establish order. The class was immediately taken from him. It had served as a mortifying yet salutary lesson.

So, it must have been this humiliating experience along with one of those vaguely understood bursts of spontaneous empathetic feeling we are all at some time or other seized with that prompted him to say, 'O.K. Higgins, you're right. I'm sorry I hit you. I promise it won't happen again. And I hope this won't stop us from being friends.'

It briefly occurred to him that it might be dangerous for a teacher to expose such emanations of the heart so nakedly to a pupil; but the boy's reaction had not disappointed him. His face had lit up, they'd shaken hands, and since then the seagulls on the football pitch had gone unnoticed. Moreover, this morning as they crossed paths in the corridor he'd been considerably gratified when Higgins greeted him with a cheery, 'Hello, sir! Did you see that programme about France on telly last night?' He'd taken this as a sign that he hadn't associated Deputy Head Cooper's loutish weight-throwing with teachers in general, and that there had been no resulting deterioration in the relationship of respect he was congratulating himself on having established with his pupil.