

REGIME CHANGE AT ST. GEORGES.

No more thrashings; no canes were now broken over the backs of howling, brain-damaged young brutes. Now it was party-time, and jolly games with points to be won or lost -- won or lost, I can't remember which. 'Lost' for bad behaviour sounds likely, and likewise for a rumpled heap of clothes on top of your bedside locker. And there were prizes to be had! All this malarkey was organised on a dormitory basis: no longer numbered one to six, but given inspirational 19th century names such as Nightingale, Lister, Shaftsbury -- I can't remember the last three of the six [*Scott, Fry and Wilson, Ed.*], and I can't remember what Shaftsbury was famous for, if I ever knew. From across the room Encyclopaedia Britannica and Google beckon, but I lack sufficient curiosity about the man to get my arse out of this chair on his behalf. No doubt I'll get round to it. Having said that, reading Strachey's "Eminent Victorians", I found whatever his intentions with the book were, I came away with nothing but admiration for Florence Nightingale.

The glittering prizes mentioned, for the winning dormitory, often took the form of a coach trip into Brighton to see a big film, together with a super-doooper, slap-up, greasy-spoon meal at a local caff, courtesy of its kindly owners. The prefects also had such regular treats. This way, you might get to see two big films a year: I know I saw "South Pacific" closely followed by "Gi-Gi" --- I liked only the musical numbers in the first, and was bored stiff by all of the second. Just before "South Pacific" they showed a demonstration of the new CinemaScope; it was of a big-dipper ride and made me feel quite queasy. And I almost forgot: The Ladykillers -- how could I forget that! Two other trips come to mind: a day at the seaside in Littlehampton which coincided with an oil-slick -- Oh my, what a to-do! Cleaning all that gunk off before getting back in the coach! We also had a look around Arundel Castle where I can only remember a boating lake and my first go at rowing.

OK! I fess-up! I was made a dormitory prefect. Unlike the prefect of my earlier experience, I didn't have a tin leg to throw at miscreants after lights-out. I didn't need one because the boys I was in charge of were younger than me and were easily subdued by mild threats and sanctions, even if these only consisted of losing dormitory points. After lights-out in a dormitory, is a very strange time, as anyone who has spent time in hospital will no doubt attest. I was lenient with my charges, only intervening if the various furtive transactions became too overt and threatened to escalate into general festivity; and sometimes a boy would have a tale to tell, maybe gossip and news that needed to be heard out; though if inciting indignation and calls for reprisal, I would have to damp it down, mindful that the duty warden was only just down the corridor. A certain amount of bed hopping went on, particularly in the more senior dormitories, at times quite chaste, at times rampantly sexual.

I have been in a dormitory, though not as a prefect, where a wholesale orgy broke out, and a number of us found ourselves in bed, frothing merrily away, with boys we would not normally have much to do with. The next morning it was if nothing had ever happened. And it never did again.

But as prefect of Nightingale I had my work cut out just getting everyone into bed ready for inspection. And there was one little boy who took a disproportionate amount of my time. From the evidence of parents-day visits, his Mum and Dad were a bit odd. Odd to me in that they were obviously posh, but whether posh posh, or only pretending to be, I can't judge from this distance of time. They dressed 'county', but was that Estate Owner or Estate Manager? However, they were obviously very fond of him, and never missed a visit.

He was small and squat; not dwarfish, more of a pixie or imp. His disability was what is now generally known as 'Down's' Syndrome, though we are now discouraged from using the possessive

apostrophe: just plain 'Down', if you please. This term is now being superseded by Trisomy 21, a biological description. 'Mongoloid' was dropped at a meeting of the World Health Organisation in 1965 at the request of the Mongolian delegate. One sees his point. 'Syndrome' at least reminds us that the condition is a bundle of symptoms that includes 'learning difficulties'. Realising my total ignorance of this topic, I have just consulted Wikipedia and am duly grateful. My first sight of him made a deep impression on me. I was not yet a prefect, and he had only just arrived at the school. I found him forced against a wall, surrounded by a mob of jeering, taunting brats much bigger than himself. "Ere! What's wrong with you, then?! -- Why've you got a funny face?!" No need to come to his rescue: he lifted his head and looked down his nose as if from a great height, and addressed his tormentors in perfectly modulated tones and with the utmost disdain -- "I think you are all very rude." The rabble just slunk away, tail between their legs, nonplussed. A riposte surely drilled into him by his parents for such occasions. He was an amiable, peaceful child as long as he was left to himself. Left to himself, he would stumble around with no discernible direction or purpose, humming and munching on nothing to himself -- "Mmgh mmgh mmgh mmgh mmgh mmgh" --- a sort of rumination in both senses. He seemed entirely happy. But interrupt him in this -- "Come along time for school/dinner/bed" and you would risk the most fearsome rages. Hence the time taken to cajole him out of his clothes, into pyjamas, and into bed. I tried to make it all a game, but as for clothes folded neatly on the locker -- forget it; I did it myself. I don't think we ever lost dormitory points on account of him.

CULTURE CORNER

Films and comics I have already mentioned. Books: under Mrs. Bunkle's tutelage we had an abridged *Great Expectations* and a complete *Autobiography of a Super Tramp* -- the latter for O level; also for O level, Tennyson's *Idylls of a King* and *Henry V*. Extracurricular: *Last of the Mohicans*, *Cloister and The Hearth*, *A Town Like Alice*, probably every single one of *Biggles*, a *Bulldog Drummond*, *Treasure Island*, and another ripping-yarn called *Pieces of Eight*, more buried pirate treasure, this time set in the colonial Bahamas. This was a present from Granny. I re-read it several times (including recent years) and also enjoyed the verse appended to the chapter headings. I've just looked them over and still think they're rather good. The author was a little remembered literary man called Richard Le Gallienne. Modern eyebrows would be raised by the colonial attitudes evident throughout the book. Another curiosity was something I found in St. George's library called "Hell in the Foreign Legion", something that slipped through together with the *Hentys* and *Westermans*. It was a memoir that told it like it was (including a visit to a brothel) and definitely not for children. I was about to pass it on to Neil Carne when it was spotted by a warden. But Mr. Reeves was young and 'progressive' and allowed us older boys to read it provided we handed it over afterwards; after which it vanished from the library shelves, possibly, who knows, ending up on Mr. Reeves' shelves.

Meanwhile, motor racing continued to obsess me, and I tried to get a club going, but without success. As part of this attempt, Mr. Reeves, bless him, persuaded a semi-pro racing driver to come to us and give a talk on the subject. I was thrilled, and even more thrilled to receive from him an autograph book crammed with all the top drivers. I'm not exaggerating: Fangio, Gonzales, Ascari, Moss, Hawthorn --- that's just for a start. But here I must admit to one of my life's great regrets. Sometime in the '60s, in between jobs, flat broke, and unwilling to tap friends for a loan, I sold this treasure for £5 to an antique dealer; aside from its intrinsic value, Lord only knows what it would be worth now. While on this painful subject, I have another to fess-up to. Same circumstances. This time, an artist's water colour and sketching box. Edwardian. Rosewood. Contents complete and unused. An absolute delight, and a present from my adored Auntie Lillie and Uncle Jack. I think I let it go for £15, but I

know exactly what this one is worth now, because I saw an identical -- it may even have been the same one -- on "Antiques Roadshow", £4,000.

Back to Chailey. Being now a big boy and prefect, and in full possession of a pair of legs, I was allowed to go on long walks into the surrounding countryside, sometimes alone, sometimes with a pal; and once got as far as nearly to Haywards Heath. One boy I walked with intrigued me; it was one reason for walking with him: -- to get to know him better. He was gentle and dreamy, absent even, but intelligent and had no obvious disability. He just didn't add up. After a short time, I stopped trying to befriend him, as I wasn't getting anywhere. It is only recently that I have got to the bottom of his mystery via an article in the Old Scholars Newsletter. The reason he was sent to Chailey was that he had been knocked over by a car, made a full physical recovery, but had spent several weeks in a coma; when he woke up he had completely lost his memory, and had had to start his life all over again. Alas, an even more recent Newsletter tells me that he has died, but, by his own account, had had a good life -- 'fulfilled' was the word he used. The Newsletter carried a photo of him taken at Chailey. It gave me quite a start: I realised I had taken the photo.

From that you will gather I now had a camera: a Kodak Brownie 127, a smoothly contoured, moulded plastic, space-age job. I still have one. The first of many cameras in my life.

One point of record that is of no importance whatsoever, except it being among my tally of tangential brushes with royalty, is that I spoke to the Queen Mum. She opened our new school hall, and we had been lined up, waiting for ages. She stopped in front of me and said, "How long have you been waiting here?". I replied, quick as a flash, "Not very long, Your Majesty." Repartee. She moved on.

Another point of record, but of some importance to me, was a visit some of us paid to a kindly, cultured old toff, nicely ensconced in a mid-Sussex, period, grade II listed house, with exposed beams, as they say in the trade. He had a fine collection of water colours and prints that we had come to see; one idea being, I suppose, to give us a whiff of high culture. It worked for me, for it was the whole ambiance that I was impressed with: a life devoted to fine things; the library, a jewel-box of beautiful furniture, art, and curiosities. I made a mental note: "This is how I would like my life to be -- at least when I get to the time of life of this old chap." Well, here I am: at the time of life of this old chap, in a 10x10 foot back room of a 1900s terraced cottage near Epping Forest. Any beams exposed ought not to be and would be a source of concern. The room has to double up as boiler room, drying room, workshop, office, and, until recently, photographic studio and darkroom. It is decidedly scruffy and the furniture is awful; it is a housework-free zone. But it has its charms. It is book-lined, full of curiosities, and there is plenty of art in evidence. It is not overlooked. I can see from here: our back garden (but unfortunately next-door's as well), a public school sports field, a park, the River Roding, and -- the M11! However, on the other side of the valley, there is what used to be Claybury Lunatic Asylum with its Victorian water tower, a local landmark. I am content.

Apart from walks, I found another new use for The Common: car spotting. I was well aware that, being in an affluent area, some interesting cars would trundle by on the road to Haywards Heath. There was a slight prominence at one point by the side of this road that gave a good view in all directions, and it was comfortably covered in bracken short enough to see over, sitting up. Perfect for car spotting --- but also for something else. I took another boy with me on these expeditions and we did see some interesting cars. But we were well aware of what our real interest was for the afternoon - each other. He wasn't really a very nice boy in many ways; but he was highly sexed, and playfully imaginative with it. I had some very enjoyable times with him. But here I must state, so as not to raise expectations that may be disappointed, that this was the extent of my career as a 'homosexualist' (as a

friend of mine likes to put it). I can only suppose that I'm inherently bisexual, something I've never lost a wink's sleep over, but, psychologically speaking, I guess I just have too much business with the ladies for me to go down that road. On my last encounter, we had just bumped into each other on The Common, and decided on the spot to find an old 'camp' wherein to have our wicked way. Things were just getting interesting when I heard my name being shouted from afar -- wanted at rehearsal for next day's Confirmation into the Church of England. Arse! (And no, there was never any of that). But talk about negative conditioning!

All these shenanigans, were brought to an abrupt halt by my being kidnapped by Stanmore Orthopaedic Hospital.