

SCHOLAR'S MATE

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jfs

CONTENTS

	PROLOGUE	1
I	IRREGULAR OPENING	3
II	ISOLATED PAWN	10
III	GAMBIT	30
IV	ZUGZWANG	40
V	ANALYSIS	51
VI	CRITICAL POSITION	67
VII	DESPERADO	77
VIII	CONSOLIDATION	90
IX	WILD	99
X	STRATEGY	110
XI	PATZER	118
XII	EN PASSANT	125
XIII	CAÏSSA WAS WITH ME	131
XIV	EN PRISE	143
XV	LUFT	154
XVI	KOTOV SYNDROME	167
XVII	SHARP	174
XVIII	QUIET MOVE	187
XIX	BREAKTHROUGH	195
XX	PROPHYLAXIS	203
XXI	ABSOLUTE PIN	212
XXII	BRILLIANCY	221
XXIII	PERPETUAL CHECK	233
XXIV	RESIGNATION	240
XXV	BUILDING A BRIDGE	249
	EPILOGUE	254

I

IRREGULAR OPENING

(A chess opening with an unusual first move from White, categorized under the ECO code as A00.)

2011

I am on my way to number 5 Love Lane. In Wakefield. Not for the first time, but this time is different. This will be the last time, and this time I shall not go through that demoralising entrance.

It is Monday January 31, 2011. My birthday. I am 70 years old. As yet I have received no birthday cards, as the postman does not arrive until 10.30 or later, and my wife has not remembered my birthday. She remembers very little these days. I have left her in the safe hands of Suzi, our Croatian charlady, who comes every Monday, cleans the bathroom and kitchen a little and talks a great deal, which Marilyn seems to like. I usually invent an excuse to be out of the house. Today I do not need to. I have a genuine reason.

If I'm honest, as media people, especially football pundits, are disposed to say constantly, if I'm honest I am here to assuage my guilty conscience. Even after all these years, I still think it's my fault. I should have stood up to them, taken the flak, but I didn't. As the poet said: I have something to expiate: a pettiness. I want to atone for this pettiness; this time I want to give him the best chance I can.

I arrive early. I don't want to miss him, and I'm not certain he knows that I'm coming. I drive the accustomed route: A638, says my satnav bully, continue forward onto the A642, turn left into Parliament Street, right onto Back Lane then left into a narrow side-street, some quarter of a mile long. You have reached your destination: 5 Love Lane, WF2 9AG. My tyres crunch on the vestiges of the recent snow, frozen into dirty brown ice in the gutters. I pull up on the double yellow lines partly concealed by the frozen slush and switch off the engine of the Jaguar. I can't remember ever parking on double yellow lines before. I am one of life's conformists. Let's live a little, break a law or two. No car park for me today. I want to make sure he sees me.

No, Love Lane is not as romantic as it sounds. In fact there is nothing remotely romantic about it. It is probably the least romantic part of Wakefield, and Wakefield is, well, Wakefield. Love Lane is neither the venue for a lovers' tryst nor the picnic spot that its name might suggest. For one thing, the view is not good. All I see from my driver's window is a long, blank, high wall, whose length and blankness is relieved only by the small, black door from which, I am informed, he will emerge. Wakefield Prison, the 'Monster Mansion', has none of the grandeur of Armley Gaol, with its pseudo-mediaeval turrets, towers and ramparts and its daunting main gate of stout English oak. As one of my inside contacts once put it so appositely, 'Armley scares the bejzus out of you, but Wakefield just depresses you to hell'.

To give it its due, like Dr Who's Tardis, Wakefield Prison is a good deal more exciting inside than it is outside. A 'Category A' high security unit, it has housed and still houses many very colourful prisoners. No, colourful is too kind. Perhaps I should say famous, or legendary, or celebrated. Let's settle for infamous. The atomic physicist and spy, Klaus Fuchs, served his sentence here in the fifties. Dr Harold Shipman, who murdered at least fifteen of his patients, hanged himself here in 2004. Radislav Krstić, the Serbian war criminal convicted of genocide, has been here since Christmas 2004. Colin Ireland, the so-called Gay Slayer, took such a

pathological exception to homosexual men, especially those with a sadomasochistic tendency, that he lured them back to his pad with the promise of action, before torturing and then killing them. He has been here since 1993 and will remain here until he dies. He is 56. Ian Huntley, the school caretaker whose murder of two little girls appalled the nation, was sentenced to serve at least forty years and incarcerated here until 2008. He is not quite 37. David Bieber, the American son of a headteacher, shot three traffic policemen in Leeds on Boxing Day, 2003, among them PC Ian Broadhurst, whom he first shot in the back, and then in the head, as he lay helpless on the pavement. Bieber will be here until at least 2041, when he may become eligible for parole. He is 44. Robert Maudsley, the British version of Hannibal the Cannibal, alleged to have eaten the brain of one of his victims, is kept here in solitary confinement in a perspex cell with cardboard furniture, watched over at all times by five guards. He is 57. Charles Bronson, who has with full justification earned the title of 'the most dangerous prisoner in Britain', has served several terms here and spent almost all of his adult life in solitary confinement in prisons and psychiatric units. Inexplicably released in 1992 from HMP Parkhurst, **Isle of Wight**, Bronson returned immediately to a life of violent crime and was subsequently locked up here in the 'Hannibal Cage'. Bronson is a self-proclaimed poet, artist and fitness fanatic. A year older than Maudsley, at 58, he can manage 172 press-ups in 60 seconds. I have never set eyes on him, but the very thought of his presence behind these high walls sends a shiver down my spine.

It is after ten. He is late. Ah! The small black door moves, then opens inwards. A uniformed officer emerges, followed by a morbidly pale man, in his forties, below average in stature, his mid-brown hair cut severely short and greying at the temples, carrying a green sports bag. The officer speaks to the man, who appears not to hear him, then walks away from the door towards the main road and me. I get out of the car and walk round to open the passenger door. I am sure he sees me, but his face is expressionless, as always, the gaze blank, eyes red-rimmed behind the round spectacle lenses. He does not acknowledge my presence. He never did. I step into his path and halt him on the narrow pavement. I do not speak. Nor does he. Of course not. I motion him to get in. He looks around, as if checking for a better alternative, then complies. George Campbell, released on licence from Wakefield prison after serving twelve years for the brutally violent murder of his own father, gets into my car, clutching his green sports bag as though it contains

his life savings, and fastens his seatbelt. A nursery rhyme runs through my head, insistent:

*Here we go round the mulberry bush,
The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush.
Here we go round the mulberry bush,
On a cold and frosty morning.*

I remember. They say it is what female inmates used to sing as they exercised around the mulberry tree in this prison yard. They say that this is where the rhyme originated. It is a good story, but almost certainly not true. The mulberry tree is still there, flourishing, but the women are not. Now there are only monsters.

My passenger and I do not speak. We do not even look at each other. I drive back to Sheffield in our silence. All the way down the M1 the mulberry bush goes round in my head. It seems fitting, and it reminds me of childhood; it reminds me of the first time I met George Campbell.

•

1978

A small boy sits opposite me, looking down at his feet, his satchel still swinging from his shoulder. His blazer is buttoned up wrongly, which gives him a lopsided look. His national health spectacles are bent, so that one lens sits higher than the other. He is scruffy, with greasy, unruly hair, but I am used to this; many of our pupils come from a deprived area of the city. He is twelve years old and I note that he is tiny for his age.

‘Good morning, George,’ I say.

George does not acknowledge my greeting. He does not look up. I turn to the third point of our triangle, Angela Davis, the First Year Tutor.

‘I’m sure you’ll have lots to do, Miss Davis. George and I are just going to have a little chat. Aren’t we, George?’

She shakes her head vigorously. I nod firmly, walk over to the door and hold it open for her. She leaves, but not without giving me a look that speaks volumes: ‘On your own head be it; I wash my hands’.

I study the back of the boy’s head and his grimy shirt-collars, contemplating my next move.

‘Let me take your satchel, George.’

Not a flicker from the boy. I take the satchel and place it by the side of his armchair. He picks it up and puts it back on his shoulder. I am back in my seat now. He is looking out of the window onto the staff car park. I turn my head to see what he is looking at. Nothing.

George is here because I am following up, as I promised, a concern raised in ‘any other business’ at last night’s staff meeting by Gordon Peck, master in charge of woodwork and an old stalwart with thirty years’ service at the school. Colleagues listen to him, because he makes a lot of noise.

‘Something has to be done about George Campbell. It’s got past a joke now. Colleagues are spending more time on him than the rest of the class put together.’

And so on. I won’t bore you with the rest. His tirade was greeted with a mixture of nods and murmurs of approval from one half of the staff and eye-rolling from the other half. Angela Davis raised her hand:

‘He’s one of mine, in 1R. I am forever . . .’

I looked at my watch. It was 5.40. I cut her short.

‘Let me intervene, Miss Davis. It’s been a long day, and a long meeting. You and I will talk about this first thing in the morning.’ I shuffled my papers and put on my best reassuring smile for the assembled staff. ‘We’ll deal with it, I promise.’

Undaunted by the minor slights over the satchel and the good morning, I try again: ‘Just you and me now, George. Nothing to worry about. You’re not here to be punished or told off. I just want to chat.’

Again nothing. The boy’s expression remains blank. He adjusts his satchel, continues to look out of the window, eyes clouded and unfocused. I try asking him how he’s finding it at the school, whether he has made any new friends, which lessons he likes best, how many brothers and sisters he has, what he likes doing in his spare time, all to no avail. I am uncertain whether George is very shy or just downright rude. My pride is hurt: I’m supposed to be good at this; at least that’s what it says in all my references: highly experienced and skilled in dealing with difficult children, forms positive and trusting relationships, demonstrates empathy and communicates well with children of all ages and backgrounds.

Res non verba, I resolve, remembering my old school motto: ‘Let me see your specs, George. They’ve gone a bit wonky. Mine are always doing it – I’ll fix them for you.’

No movement from George, no change of expression. I reach over and remove his glasses. He flinches a little, and the red-rimmed grey eyes blink furiously for two or three seconds, but he does not resist. I rummage amongst the jumble of paperwork on my desk to find the little screwdriver I keep handy for such occasions. I bend the frame back into shape as best I can, use the tool to tighten the arms and then polish the grubby lenses. I hand the glasses to him. He does not take them from me. I rest them gently back on his nose and curl the earpieces round his ears. I am unable to resist re-buttoning his blazer. He says nothing.

‘Thank you, George. I’ve enjoyed our little chat,’ I say, realising just how ridiculous that sounds to me and probably to him. ‘We’ll talk again soon, and you can tell me how it’s going.’

I walk over to the door and hold it open for him. As he walks out, he catches his satchel strap on the door handle. I unhook it for him. He continues with neither a word nor a glance.



2011

I pull into my driveway and switch off the engine. I turn to my passenger:

‘George, you’re going to stay with my wife and me for a while, until we find you a place of your own. Is that okay?’

There is no reply, no gesture of acquiescence or refusal. Not that I expected any. I get out of the car and walk round to open the passenger door. George fumbles with his seatbelt, and I resist the temptation to help him. Finally he releases the buckle and gets out of the car. He follows me into the house.

Tuppence, lying in ambush behind the glass recycling bin, examines George for signs of clear and present danger to his regime, concludes there are none and returns to his hobby of stalking small birds.

Marilyn, surprisingly, is not disconcerted by our arrival together. Has she remembered that I have warned her about the guest? No. She thinks it is my old friend, Jürgen, and speaks to him in broken German. She goes off to put the kettle on. Suzi breaks the ice in her inimitable manner, haranguing George with a multitude of questions to which she fortunately does not appear to require any answer. Marilyn returns from the kitchen having forgotten what she

went in for. I leave the three of them together. Good luck to them all. I suddenly feel very tired. I retreat to the kitchen and open the birthday cards from my son and my sister. His is the typical ageist 'humorous' card, but with thankfully no mention of a milestone 70th birthday. Perhaps he is being tactful, perhaps he does not know my age. Hers is a picture of a dog, with warm wishes for a speedy recovery. She must be psychic. I make a pot of tea.

II

ISOLATED PAWN

(A pawn with no pawn of the same colour on an adjacent file.)

1978

To the annoyance of his Year Tutor and the Head of Pastoral Care, I took a special interest in George Campbell from that morning when I had my first brush with him. He was a challenge I could not ignore. I made enquiries at his primary school and discovered that he had appeared perfectly normal until the age of nine, when suddenly he had refused to either speak or write in class. Prior to that, he had made above average progress in school.

I called in the local authority child psychologist, a freckled, sandy-haired young man overburdened with a huge caseload, who was already aware of George. He had diagnosed the boy's problem as 'elective mutism' and bombarded me with catchphrases such as 'inherited predisposition to anxiety', 'sensory integration dysfunction' and 'hypersensitivity of the amygdala'. He told me that sufferers typically had difficulty in maintaining eye contact, especially with adults, were reluctant to smile, worried a lot, were often depressed, and had difficulty in expressing their feelings. As to a cure, or even to effective treatment, he was less forthcoming. It seemed that the boy would just have to grow out of it. It was his choice not to speak, after all. I placated Gordon Peck by assuring

him he was not expected to teach the boy anything, but merely to accept him in the room and keep him safe. I explained, lying through my teeth, that he was under the supervision of the school psychologist.

Peck was unimpressed: 'These psychos and therapists are all the same, if you ask me – it's the emperor's new clothes!'

I decided to visit the boy's home. Diplomatically, I invited Angela Davis to go with me. We walked to the house, only 400 yards from the school. On the way, Angela explained to me that George was the eldest of five children, that his mother was known to the police as a shoplifter and his father was long-term unemployed, a drinker, and from time to time missing from the family home for weeks. The family was well known for the frequency with which police were called out to 'domestic incidents' and late night disturbances. There was also an Uncle Cameron, who Angela thought was Mr Campbell's brother.

The front door of number 27 Khartoum Street led directly into the kitchen. Mrs Campbell stood in the doorway, arms folded, waiting for us. She had a broad stain on her cheek, either a bruise or a faded birthmark. Two mugs of instant coffee stood cooling by the sink. I asked her whether we were expecting her husband to be present, and she gave me a meaningful look, as if to say it was a stupid question. Our discussion was short. She was not surprised that George was silent at school; he had stopped speaking to her ages ago. If the boy did not do what he was told in class, then we should 'give him a good hiding and be done with it'. I asked whether she or George's father ever punished the boy. She said she would if she could catch him, and that her husband did give the kids a thick ear when he was that way out. 'When he gets in before they're in bed,' she added.

She showed us into the living room, where there were three dogs. We picked our way through a minefield of toys, empty crisp packets and drinks cans to a window at the rear of the house. A rusting car engine lay in one corner of the murky, walled back yard, next to some rotting kitchen units and a cracked lavatory bowl. The five children were engaged in a highly organised game, with George very much in charge. He was using a pile of three tyres, in front of the outside toilet, as a platform from which to issue instructions for what appeared to be a dramatic production. He spoke loud and clear. His mother wrenched open the metal-framed window, which screeched in protest at being disturbed, and called him over. He hopped down from his precarious podium, came halfway towards

the house and stopped when he saw us. I tried to engage him in conversation, skilfully and sensitively, I thought. He did not respond in any way. No, that is not strictly accurate. He did respond, by looking down at his feet. Elective mutism it was, then. He just didn't want to talk to us. This was the second time that this 12-year-old boy had left me feeling totally inadequate. We said our goodbyes and thanked Mrs Campbell for the coffee.

'It's a big family. I wonder where they all sleep,' I remarked to my colleague.

'The three girls share the back bedroom and the two lads sleep in the attic.'

'What about the uncle?'

She shook her head and put on a pained expression:

'One of the little girls told her teacher that Uncle Cameron sometimes sleeps in the attic with the boys, sometimes on the settee and sometimes with Mummy and Daddy.'

'How the other half live', was all the wisdom I could sum up.

Our problems with George Campbell did not diminish. Rather they worsened. To his refusal to speak or write George added ever increasing truancy. In his second year at the school, being almost totally dysfunctional, he was relegated to the slow learners' set in every subject. I resisted pressure to remove him from French classes – his French teacher declared him impossible to teach and a drain on her energy:

'Not only does he never speak, he never writes a single word, not even to copy from the board, never looks at me even, and he never listens to a word I say. And he never does a jot of homework. How am I supposed to discipline the rest of the class when he just gets away with everything?'

Other teachers regularly sent him out of their classroom, presumably out of anger or frustration. When I or the Deputy Head discovered the boy ejected on the corridor and challenged the teacher for a reason, the stock answer was that the boy had disrupted the lesson by his dumb insolence.

The war-cry of the French teacher was taken up by other colleagues. After one case-study meeting about George, Frank Wilson, the Second Year Tutor, came to see me. There were calls from staff for the boy to be transferred to another school. His view was that too much of his own energy and that of colleagues was being expended on him, in vain, as he was making no progress

either educationally or socially. I refused to give up on George and have him transferred. I told Wilson I would not be browbeaten by teachers who wanted a quiet life. The following morning, I made an announcement in the staffroom: George was no longer to be ejected from classrooms, unless he was a threat to either the other pupils or the teacher. I knew this would lose me friends on the staff. It was my second year in the post. So far I had prided myself on managing to build good relationships with all my colleagues, but the honeymoon period was now definitively over. There were no more formal complaints about young Campbell, but the Deputy Head, Bill Rodgers, told me that there was an undercurrent of discontent; allegations of not giving staff my full backing, the cardinal sin in the eyes of teachers, were being levelled at me privately.

Some of the staff discontent was gradually dissipated because George was so often absent from school. Despite all the efforts of truancy officers, his attendance eventually diminished to one day per week, Wednesdays, and so the clamour to 'do something about him' diminished correspondingly.

There was one bright note: George liked drama lessons, and drama was on Wednesdays. Our drama teacher was a young woman in her probationary year, appointed the previous summer, my very first appointment at Harry Brearley Comprehensive. She went by the unfortunate name of Doris Day, her father being a fan of her Hollywood namesake, as she averred without any evident embarrassment. Despite her semi-permanent worried frown, I had liked the look of her, her energy, enthusiasm and effervescence, from the first moments of her interview. I admit that I was also swayed by her promise to revive interest in the school's moribund chess club, a hobby-horse of mine, and I had battled for her appointment against a panel determined to select a more experienced candidate. I had finally got my way.

'You're the boss,' conceded the chair of governors reluctantly.

'I suppose I am, aren't I?' I agreed. Young Miss Day was appointed.

It seemed that George liked her too. I discovered this whilst conducting her half-year appraisal in February. I knew that George was in one of her classes, as she taught all the second year pupils.

'How do you get on with George Campbell?'

'Oh, he's a little poppet! Absolutely no problem at all, sir.' She always called me 'sir'.

She told me George took a full part in all the lessons, although he never spoke. She had soon found out that it was pointless

assigning any speaking roles to him. I congratulated her and later that week spied on one of her lessons through the glass door of her classroom, making sure that George did not see me. He was clearly enjoying himself. I assumed that drama was the reason that he graced us with his presence on Wednesdays of all days. Doris corrected me:

'I don't think it's just the drama, sir. It's Chess Club that he really likes. After school, on Wednesdays. I don't allow him into Chess Club unless he has attended school that day.'

'You mean he has actually come into school just for Chess Club?'

'He's tried it on a couple of times.'

I mentioned that George was thirteen years old and I asked her if she thought that he might have a crush on her; she seemed surprised and blushed crimson:

'On me, sir? Oh, no!'

I looked at her. She wasn't pretty. Perhaps she had a point. I apologised for my insensitive suggestion and congratulated her on her success with the boy. She was the only teacher who had built any sort of relationship with him.

I had had no inkling that the boy was interested in chess. From our conversation I discovered that quite early in the autumn term he had taken to turning up at the chess club, and for the first three or four weeks had stood in the background watching proceedings. She had then seen him sneak a book on chess for beginners from her desk into his satchel. It did cross her mind that he might be stealing the book, but she had decided not to challenge him. The following week he had returned the book covertly to her bookshelf and played out a game of chess against himself in the corner of the room. She had watched him from a distance; he clearly knew all the rules. By the end of the autumn term he was silently taking on all the lower school members and trouncing them. At last week's club she had played against him herself and had been unable to beat him within the hour.

It still rankled with me that I had made no progress with this troublesome little boy and I resolved to try a new tactic. I should explain that during my degree studies I played number one board for my University for three years, attaining Candidate Master status, and so I am a more than respectable chess player. After University, I started out on my teaching career, met Marilyn while working at my first school, fell in love and married her. There was soon no time for chess. In any case, I had a nagging suspicion that I was not quite as good as other people thought I was. I was rather

like those sportsmen who are not quite good enough to play at the very top level and give up their sport because they are unwilling to accept anything but the best. For mental relaxation in those days, I turned to bridge, where I didn't have a reputation to maintain.

I buttonholed George one Wednesday lunch-time and took him to my office, as I explained, 'for another little chat'. Waiting on my coffee table was a chess board with the pieces laid out ready to play. The ensuing scene is etched in my memory, in every last detail.

We sit opposite each other, George with his customary blank expression, me all avuncular and smiling. The white pieces are on his side of the board. I invite him to play white and wait for him to begin. Nothing. I turn the board around and move white king's pawn forward two spaces to e4, the standard opening move. George reciprocates with his king's pawn, moving it to e5, the standard reply. I continue with bishop to c4 and he mirrors the move with his king's bishop. I thrust my queen forward to h5, and George responds by moving his king's knight to f6, presumably to chase off the white queen - a beginner's error that all of us have made at one time. I snaffle his bishop's pawn and declare checkmate. He stands up and makes for the door. I call him back. I explain to him that he lost the game by what is called 'Scholar's Mate'. There is no shame in it - it happens to every beginner, but he must learn not to fall into that trap again. I am pleased that I have been able to teach him a valuable lesson. I sit him down once more. This time he is white. He plays pawn to f3, and immediately I know what he is doing. He is trying to lose as quickly as possible, so that he can get out of here. I play the standard king's pawn to f5 and wait for the inevitable pawn to g4. This little boy is messing with me; he doesn't want to play and he's telling me so in no uncertain manner. I play the required queen to h4 and it's all over in two moves: Fool's Mate.

'Okay, George. You've made your point. Off you go.'

He stands and hurries out of the door without looking back. For a third time, this little boy has left me feeling totally impotent.

My next encounter with George Campbell was also across the sixty-four black and white squares of a chess board. One late Wednesday afternoon towards the end of the public examination period, Doris knocked at my door. After I had enquired about her well-being and, remembering it was Wednesday, how Chess Club was going, she explained that she wanted to further raise the profile of chess in the school, and had arranged a match, pupils versus teachers. Four

other teachers had volunteered to play on the staff team, which left just one place.

'I know you're very keen on chess, sir, and I wondered if you would like to play. It would make a big difference if you would turn out. It would make it a really big event.'

I looked at the pile of work on my desk. Preparations for the next school year were not going well. Bill Rodgers was having problems creating the timetable and had called on me to resolve several issues. We were hoping to make four new appointments before the end of the summer term and there were almost a hundred letters of application to be waded through. For the past three weeks I had not left my office before eight o'clock in the evening. I couldn't afford the time.

'It's a great idea, Doris, but I'm afraid I just don't have time at the moment.'

'I thought, you know,' she stammered, 'seeing as you played in goal in the football team against the first XI, you might want to turn out in the chess as well.' Her voice tailed away; she was clearly disappointed with me.

'I'm sorry, Doris. Any other time, but . . .'

'That's a shame, sir. Never mind.' The semi-permanent worried frown had returned to her face.

'Keep up the good work, anyway. I'm very impressed with what you've done.'

I mentioned the invitation to play on the staff chess team to Marilyn that evening in bed and quickly wished I had not, as this seemed to put her in a particularly obstreperous frame of mind. She also seemed disappointed in me. I was always bleating on about heads' needing to have the human touch, to be seen around the school, to interact with pupils as well as teachers. Surely it was no skin off my nose to turn out for ten minutes and polish off some spotty youth before going back to my paperwork. After all, didn't I used to be some kind of Grand Master or something? I argued that, apart from my heavy workload, it would be unfair for me to play for the staff team, as I would be far too good for any of my young opponents. She accused me of being yellow, and although I didn't believe she was entirely serious, this still rankled. Having rebuked me soundly, Marilyn turned over and was instantly dead to the world. As for me, exhausted though I was, I found it oddly difficult to sleep.

The next morning I left home at 7.15, as usual. Marilyn walked to the front door with me to wave me off. I turned to her and kissed her.

'I've changed my mind about the chess. You're right. I should play in the team.'

'If they'll still have you.'

My wife was not a morning person.

I had a message sent to Doris asking her to see me immediately after assembly. She ambushed me as I was leaving the stage after giving my homily on 'beauty is skin deep'. It would have to be quick, as she had a class waiting. I said I wouldn't keep her and explained about my change of mind. She beamed. It was worth changing my mind just for that smile.

'Fantastic, sir! I'm so glad. George Campbell's playing, you know. Isn't that wonderful? I was going to tell you this morning. I thought it might change your mind.'

'Is he up to it? I mean, he wouldn't say boo to a goose, would he?'

'Oh, yes. He's a really good player. He'll be number one board. Playing against you, sir.'

A second-year boy on number one board! I was amazed to hear such confidence in the boy's chess prowess, but concerned that it was I who had to perform the delicate balancing act of beating him without humiliating him. I protested that she should be number one board, as I hadn't played for years. She insisted that I should not be so modest. She knew all about my chequered history. I said I hoped that was a pun, and she laughed and went off to her class.

I was preoccupied during our management team meeting that morning, and Bill Rodgers asked me afterwards if I was all right. Was there anything he should know? I reassured him, fobbed him off with a concern of mine about the standard of teaching in the sixth form, an issue of which he was already aware. In fact, I had been wondering about young George Campbell. Would playing chess for the school team be a bridge too far for him? On the face of it, this was a long stride forward in his development, but it could be a dangerous one. I thought back to my other chess encounter with the boy. Would he behave in the same way? Why were we failing so miserably with him? I could not recall coming across another such case in my teaching career. I did remember a boy a year older than I at school, to whom something similar had happened, but only temporarily. Paul Rutter, Chatsworth House Captain and all-round good guy, whom I had admired for years, suffered the trauma of his

parents' separating and was struck dumb for the last six weeks of his school career. We lost touch, but I met him the following year on a train from Newcastle to London. He was a national serviceman returning on leave from Catterick Camp. He was back to normal. Perhaps George would be cured too. Eventually. Perhaps this was step one of a return to normality.

Two weeks later, I was in earnest discussion with Bill Rodgers at the end of the school day, when there was a light knock at my door and my secretary came in:

'They're waiting for you in the Hall, Mr York.'

'Oh yes, your chance to show off your genius,' grinned Bill.

It was the chess match.

'I shan't be long, Bill. You can make that call to Leopold Street.'

'Oh no, I'm coming with you. I wouldn't miss this for the world!'

The Hall was unexpectedly full. The general hubbub dropped to a murmur, as Bill and I walked down the steps into what could only be described as an arena. Six tables, each with a chess board and clock, were set out in the centre, at intervals of three to four metres. Around the perimeter were at least fifty pupils. I have seen smaller attendances at Scottish Football League matches. Doris Day's publicity machine had been effective. Six pupils, all bar one from the Fifth and Sixth Forms, sat waiting for their teacher opponents, waiting for me. Little George Campbell sat impassive. I wondered how he was feeling. Was he nervous? It was impossible to tell. I sat down opposite him and offered a handshake. He did not meet my gaze, looking directly at the chess pieces, ignoring my greeting. What would he do? Would he commit hara-kiri again, deliberately succumb to Scholar's Mate or something of the kind?

Doris stood and cleared her throat:

'Those of you who are Chess Club members will know how to behave, but for those of you who are not, here are one or two guidelines. You may stand close, but not too close, to the competitors' tables, so as to follow individual matches, but you may not talk within their earshot.'

I wondered if 'in earshot' was within the vocabulary range of some of our children. Doris continued:

'Chess is a game which requires the utmost concentration. If you wish to talk, you should go to the far corners of the Hall and whisper. Each player will have a maximum of forty minutes' thinking and playing time, as measured on the chess clocks. This means that games could take up to a maximum of one hour twenty

minutes. Individual matches still unfinished will be sent for adjudication. Teachers will play white on Boards 1, 3 and 5, pupils will play white on Boards 2, 4 and 6. If the players are ready, we shall begin.'

I marvelled at her self-possession. She was quite a girl. Some of the spectators gradually shuffled towards the tables, choosing the match they wanted to follow. I was conscious of quite a number gathered behind me, fidgeting. I started my clock, played pawn to e4 and pressed the buttons to switch over to my young opponent's clock. The first moves followed the pattern of my first game with George. This time I was resolved not to let him have the easy way out, if he chased my queen and opened himself to Scholar's Mate. He did not. Instead he played a solid defensive opening and had soon established a sound basis for a tight match, where either a mistake or a piece of inspired attacking play would determine the outcome. As white, by the mid-game I had the usual small advantage conferred by playing first. As in the simple game of noughts and crosses, the first to play, white, should in theory never lose.

Young Campbell was taking an unusually long time to respond to my twelfth move, which had put me in a strong position, from where I would be able to line up my queen and rook against pieces standing in front of the black king, unless he took the correct precautions. I looked across at Doris, diagonally opposite me at the next table. She was surrounded by admirers, most of whom I recognised as Chess Club members, who evidently adored her. Her concentration was total, her eyes shone and her face glowed. She had drifted into a haven of relaxation. Gone were the worry-lines of the overworked young teacher. She actually looked quite attractive, damn it! I scolded myself inwardly for my un-headmagisterial thoughts and turned my attention back to the board. My opponent had made his move and my clock was ticking again. Oh dear, Georgie boy, you've made a bit of a blunder there, haven't you? He had ignored the potential threat from my queen and played an irrelevant move, offering me the cheap capture of a knight into the bargain. Let's get it over, was my response. I ignored the knight sacrifice, lined my queen up against the black king and leaned back in my chair. I looked at my watch: twenty to five – still time to phone the Education Office. The crowd around our table had grown. They must have sensed the end was nigh. Bill Rodgers came over and glanced at the board. I signalled five minutes to him with my hand.

I looked further down the hall. The matches on Boards 5 and 6 had already ended, and the looks on the faces of the staff and pupils indicated that the teachers were two boards up. A pity, as the humiliation of a whitewash would do nothing for pupil morale. From a quick glance at her board, Doris looked certain to beat Philip Hargreaves, the Head Boy, but perhaps one of the two sixth-form girls on Boards 3 and 4 might at least force a draw. I hoped so.

I doodled on my pad, where I had made a note of all the moves of the game, a habit ingrained in me through years of competition. George Campbell's pad was untouched. A little boy behind me spoke very low: 'It's your move, sir.'

I looked at the dial of my clock. It had moved on by three minutes. George must have played his move 13 immediately. The boy had read my mind! He knew I would ignore the free knight so as to gain the easy winning position. What I had not seen, in my patronising dismissal of his move as foolhardy or incompetent, was that his next move of the knight would not only plunge my bishop and rook into jeopardy with an attacking fork, but also reveal a pin by his bishop on my queen. He had risked everything on a mind-game. If I had taken the knight he had offered, he would have been lost. From there on, he took the upper hand and savaged my pieces with a series of pins, forks, skewers and discovered attacks. At move 23, my time rapidly running out, I conceded. The other matches were over and the players and remaining spectators, all gathered around our table, burst into a spontaneous round of applause, as I toppled my king. My opponent stood, wriggled through the throng and ran out of the hall without a word, avoiding as best he could the congratulatory slaps on the back.

Doris was standing by my side now.

'Where's he off to in such a rush?' I asked.

A little girl answered for her: 'I think he has to look after his brother and sisters a lot.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Doris, with that winning smile again. 'That was very magnanimous.'

'Magnanimous? What was?'

'What you did there, letting him win. It will mean so much to him, I think.'

To my eternal shame I did not contradict her. The best I could manage was: 'Well, he's a very good player.'

'Yes, he regularly plays all the best players in the club, and he's never lost yet. I daren't play him anymore!'

I wondered why she had not told me that before, and felt a tinge of resentment. The teachers had won by four boards to two, but it would be all around the school that the Head had lost. I retreated to my office with Bill. It was too late for any phone-calls to Leopold Street and I was no longer in the mood in any case. I told him we'd call it a day and drove home through the rush-hour traffic.

If I thought that George Campbell's participation and success in the chess match would be the first step out of the silent world he inhabited, and I did, then I was totally wrong. I suppose I dreamed that the generous sacrifice of my dignity in losing the chess game might be the first helping hand on his road back to normality, and that one day he would come to me and say:

'Do you know, Mr York, that the day you allowed me to be beat you at chess changed my life? It gave me the confidence in myself that I had been lacking. I shall be forever grateful to you.'

It did not change his life. Nothing changed, except perhaps for the worse. At the beginning of the next school year, George's third year at the school, his attendance improved initially, but then he began to have squabbles with other boys in class. Some teachers reported that other boys were bullying him, whilst some suggested that he was encouraging and inviting bullying by other boys through his refusal to interact. He was involved in several fights after school, on and off school premises. Soon his attendance was back to the bare minimum of one day per week. He had still not uttered a single word in any class, had never yet completed a piece of homework and refused to report for detentions unless physically taken to the detention room.

Matters came to a head when George was accused of pushing his science teacher during a lesson in the chemistry laboratory. The teacher refused to have him back in class, and a governors' disciplinary panel, chaired by me, was convened to deal with the matter. The evidence against the boy was flimsy, and I suspected that the teacher in question, well-known for his proclivity to tease and victimise individuals, had provoked him. However, I agreed that we suspend him from school for three days, Friday until Tuesday. As the boy was in the habit of only attending school on Wednesdays, this seemed an acceptable compromise, although I left the meeting with a sickening feeling that the system was failing him, that the school was failing him and that I in particular was failing him. It was not for the want of trying. We had repeatedly called for the aid of the psychological service, with no positive

outcome. I personally had conducted several interviews with George, interviews which had consisted of frustrating monologues, during which I at times came very close to losing my temper in the face of the boy's stubborn silence and total lack of response. The only positive note was his continued attendance at Chess Club, where he was now quite a star performer, would play simultaneous boards against three or four other members and was never known to lose.

In July of this his third year in the school, George was accused of attacking a female RE teacher, swinging an arm at her and hitting her on the shoulder and neck. I asked Bill Rodgers to investigate, which he did in his typically thorough manner. From interviewing the teacher and pupils in the classroom, Bill established that there had been a scuffle between George and two other boys which had developed into an angry exchange of blows between them. The teacher had intervened and George, continuing to hit out, had made contact with her, perhaps on purpose, but more likely accidentally. Pupils not involved in the scuffle maintained, possibly out of solidarity, that George had not been in any way aggressive, but was merely defending himself from the other boys. Bill talked to George's mother and discovered that the boy had ceased to communicate even with his siblings. He had been totally silent at home for several weeks, a period coinciding with the return of his father after a month's absence. There was clearly a deeply rooted problem behind the boy's mutism, on the face of it probably concerning his father. I enquired from the first year tutor, Angela Davis about George's sister, Nancy, of whom I had heard nothing.

'So far, there's no sign of any problem. Academically, she is way below average, but her behaviour is impeccable. She's as quiet as a mouse.'

'Not as quiet as George, I hope.'

'Oh no! She does speak when spoken to.'

'Are there any more Campbells on the way?'

'There's one coming up next year, as a matter of fact. Ryan Campbell.'

'Any reports on him from the primary school?'

'He seems okay. They say he can be a bit cheeky, but we can handle that. Par for the course these days.'

'I think we should be looking out for signs of bullying at home.'

'Oh?'

'By the father.'

'I'll keep my eye open.'

But during the rest of my seven years as headteacher at Harry Brearley, I received no report of any concern about members the Campbell family. It seemed my fears were unfounded.

Bill reported his findings to me and to the union representatives. He concluded that an apology from the boy and a promise from all three not to repeat the behaviour, along with a detention for fighting in class and a letter home to parents, would suffice. However, the teachers' unions were adamant that a heavier sanction must be applied. The three main unions had resolved, in a joint meeting, that no teacher would allow the boy back into class. It was a matter of principle. The boy must be removed, permanently suspended, transferred to another school. The old-fashioned word 'expelled' would have been more appropriate.

I met the three union representatives, in an attempt to persuade them to adopt a more reasonable stance, but they were not to be budged.

'Is that your final word, gentlemen?' I asked.

There were shrugs and nods of assent from the three wise monkeys opposite me.

'Then our discussion is over.'

I was boiling with anger that these so-called professionals seemed not to possess an ounce of charity between them. I would have thrown them out of my office like a night-club bouncer, if I had been capable.

The following afternoon, Bill slipped quietly into my office without knocking, which was not his style at all.

'We have a visitor from Leopoldstrasse, David. Ralph Keane. I cut him off on his way to reception – told him you are with a parent. He's in my office with a pot of Lapsang Souchong and a chocolate digestive.'

Keane was the Deputy Chief Education Officer. He and I did not get on, and I suspected that my appointment had been against his advice. We had already clashed earlier in the year over what I considered an unfairly low allocation of funds to the school.

'My cup runneth over. What does he want, I wonder?'

'Take a wild guess,' said Bill, with an exaggerated grimace.

'Wheel him in. And I want you present.'

Keane marched into the room, followed by Bill carrying the tray of tea and biscuits. I stood to greet him, resisting as best I could his attempt to crush four of my fingers in his bony grip. He wore his usual country gentleman style, three-piece tweed suit, with the

chain of a fob watch dangling from a waistcoat pocket. His short, dark hair was immaculately brilliantined, with a centre parting, and he carried with him a faint aroma of floral perfume that reminded me of Parma Violets. Like many small men I have known, he was aggressively self-important. He walked across the room to sit with his back to the window. Bill sat to his right, and I formed the third point of the triangle, squinting against the sunlight streaming through the window. I was about to stand, to close the venetian blind, when Keane began.

‘No need for you to stay, Bill.’

‘If you don't mind, Ralph, I like Bill to sit in on any meetings with Leopold Street.’

‘Well, if he has nothing better to do, and the school is running like clockwork . . . Is that the case, Bill?’

‘Like a Rolls-Royce, as a matter of fact.’

‘Then I'll get straight to the point. There's a rumour going around the office that there's trouble at t' mill,’ enunciated Keane slowly, with an unsuccessful attempt at a northern accent. ‘T' natives are restless. The Chief has asked me to have a word, to smooth things out with the tribal elders, so to speak.’

He paused, for effect, waiting for some response from me, some signal that I was quaking in my boots before this ambassador from headquarters.

To be perfectly honest, I was. I gripped my hands together in my lap, so as not to show them shaking.

Bill spoke:

‘I presume you mean this business about the unions refusing to accept one of our pupils in class?’

I found my voice: ‘It's a storm in a teacup. It will all blow over. We can handle it.’

I saw Bill pull a face and look down at his feet.

‘I'm afraid the Chief doesn't agree. You see, we have a contact at NUT headquarters, and with a new pay round coming up, they are willing to back their members to the hilt, make a martyr out of the poor lady teacher who has been so brutally assaulted whilst carrying out her professional duties, blah blah blah. There is nothing they would like better than a national scandal, a few headlines in *The Sun*, the *News of the World* and co.’

He was enjoying himself. He bit into another chocolate biscuit, sipped on his tea, and smacked his lips.

‘Excellent tea, Bill.’

‘So, what you're saying is that you would like me to sacrifice this one little boy?’

He swallowed the mouthful of biscuit, put down his teacup and gave me a condescending smile, as though I were a backward pupil in his maths class, who needed only a little encouragement to realise that the calculation was very simple.

‘It is one boy. One boy, who, if I understand it properly, rarely graces the school with his presence, anyway.’

He formed his hands into two sides of a weighing scale. His left hand floated, light as a feather, chest high, his right hand down below his thigh, as though bearing a heavy weight.

‘On the other hand, if union action is taken, the school's work will be interrupted and the education of nine hundred others disrupted. I say nothing of the damage locally to the school's reputation, and the standing of its leadership.’

He waited for me to respond. I said nothing.

‘It's your decision, David. The Chief is confident you'll get it right. On reflection, I think there's no need for me to speak to your union people. Whatever you decide, we shall of course back you. Thank you for your time.’

Keane stood, managed to crush only three of my fingers this time, and left, without turning his head.

Bill and I watched him disappear from the car park in his brand-new, red TR7 convertible, scattering a flock of avian visitors from the neighbouring council refuse dump.

‘Take a seat, Bill,’ I said, feeling and no doubt looking very glum. ‘What's your advice? What would you do, if you were Head?’

He shook his head.

‘Which question do you want me to answer?’

What did he mean? The question was clear enough.

‘I am in the last stages of my rather undistinguished career, David. I've spent most of my life as a secondary modern maths teacher, cajoling reluctant kids, boys mainly, to gain a few basic skills in arithmetic, making sure they behaved themselves, while we tried to turn them into decent human beings with the right values, into self-respecting, worthwhile members of society. All in all, I've done okay. What I would do, if it were up to me, and what I'd advise you to do, at this stage of your career, are two different things altogether. But you're the boss. This is what they pay you that big salary for.’

I understood him all too well.

‘How are we going to tell the lad?’

There was a long silence, before Bill spoke.

'I'll do it, if you like.'

The upshot was that the boy did not come into school for the rest of term and was transferred to a school at the other side of the city as from September.

Should I have resisted the threats of the unions and the admonishments of my superiors and risked certain strike action? Could I have fought harder for that fourteen-year-old boy? Would it have made any difference to his future? We shall never know. All I do know is that I had a sense of failure more acute than at any time during my career. Integrity, once sacrificed for expediency, is impossible to re-establish. From that point onwards, I had lost the respect of the staff at Harry Brearley; in their eyes, I was weak. When the opportunity to leave eventually offered itself, several years later, I took it without a second thought.

I did discover later that there had been one dissenting voice at the staff union meetings, that of Doris Day. As she no longer taught the boy, the views of this junior teacher had carried no weight whatsoever.

A headteacher in his first post has many concerns to occupy his mind, but for months the thought of that little boy alone in his silence returned to unsettle me. It was such a grievous waste of a young life, a waste of a childhood – a waste of an outstanding talent too, if his ability at chess were any indication. Gradually, however, he receded from my thoughts until, during the week before February half-term of 1981, Doris Day came to see me, ostensibly to talk to me about her plans for the next dramatic production. As she left my office, she turned, rubbing her hand across her mouth:

'Sir, what are your feelings about ex-pupils coming back to visit staff at the school? Is it okay?'

'I look on it very positively. It reflects well on us if our students want to come back to see us.'

'It's just that a boy has been coming back regularly, to join in Chess Club. Every Wednesday, in fact.'

I knew straight away who it was: 'That's good. A feather in your cap, Doris.'

'Don't you want to know who it is, sir?'

I smiled my most benign headmagisterial smile and pretended to be absorbed in my paperwork: 'I don't think I need to know every detail, Doris. Keep up the good work, though.'

When she had gone, I phoned my headteacher colleague at George's new school to check on the boy's progress, the very least I could do, I thought. It was not good news: George rarely attended school, seemed to have made no friends and was silent and uncooperative in the few lessons he attended. They had discovered that he often spent whole nights away from home and feared he was becoming almost feral and beyond the reach of social services. They were in the process of transferring the boy to the city's special unit for excluded pupils. It was likely too that George would soon be taken into local authority care. A few weeks later, I dropped in on Chess Club. George was there, apparently playing three boards simultaneously. I pretended not to notice him.

Doris left the school in the summer of that year to take up a post at another school, in the East Midlands, and with her departure presumably ended George's visits to the school. I heard nothing more of him until one late autumn morning in 1998, when, in my office at the British School in Berlin, I opened a letter marked personal. It was from an old Harry Brearley colleague.

It contained a newspaper clipping denouncing George Campbell as a patricide.