‘DON’T CALL ME CLYDE!’

- Jazz Journey of a Sixties Stomper -

PETER KERR

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Best-selling Scottish author Peter Kerr is a former jazz musician, record producer and farmer. His award-winning *Snowball Oranges* series of humorous travel books was inspired by his family's adventures while running a small orange farm on the Spanish island of Mallorca during the 1980s. Peter's books are sold worldwide and have been translated into several languages.

In the early 1960s he was clarinettist/leader of Scotland's premier jazz band, the Clyde Valley Stompers. The reason for the band's unlikely demise, at the height of its fame, is revealed for the first time in this enthralling book.

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The author in 1960, age 19.

INTRODUCTION

THE CLYDE VALLEY STOMPERS were Scotland's premier jazz band and its first ever super group; Caledonian kings of the 'Trad Boom' that swept Britain during the late Fifties and early Sixties; creators of a phenomenon dubbed 'Stompermania' decades before most of the country's current pop and rock idols were even born. Yet in 1963, 'The Clydes', at the height of their commercial success, disappeared from the scene. Conspiracy theories were rife, but the true reason for this trailblazing band's untimely demise has never been revealed – until now.

Here is the story as told by clarinettist Peter 'Pete' Kerr who, in 1961 at just twenty years of age, inherited leadership of the Stompers after they'd moved their base from Glasgow to London. During what had become the most disruptive period in its already turbulent history, the band stormed the charts for the first time the following year with their recording of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, produced by George Martin, soon to sign the Beatles.

A frenzy of incessant touring followed, punctuated by frequent network TV appearances in the company of big-star names of the day, like Shirley Bassey, Danny Williams, Brenda Lee, Morecambe and Wise, Dusty Springfield and the Beatles themselves. The Clydes also played the title music for Norman Wisdom's 1962 movie *On the Beat*, and appeared soon after in *It's All Happening* with Tommy Steele. Then, to the dismay and bewilderment of the Stompers' legions of fans, the curtain came down – literally.

But this is more than just a chronicle of the highlights and hardships, the bonhomie and back-stabbing, the generosity and greed that marked the rise and fall of one of the most iconic British bands of its time. It's also an affectionate recollection

of family life in rural Scotland during the austerity-gripped years following the Second World War, and of how a young lad went all out to realise his dream of one day playing jazz for a living. It's an account of how friendships forged through a common love of music can develop into bonds sufficiently strong to survive fate's toughest trials. Well, provided you have a sense of humour to match (or temper!) an indefatigable faith in human nature, that is!

And a sense of humour is what carries Peter's childhood sweetheart Ellie through a seemingly ill-starred courtship into a marriage destined to withstand, not just the rigours of the unpredictable world of itinerant jazz musicians, but also the test of time. For this is a story that lays the foundations of a young couple's roller coaster ride through life which, in time, will introduce them to adventures and misadventures, to places, people and experiences that they could never have imagined. As such, *Don't Call Me Clyde!* is a precursor of Peter Kerr's bestselling *Snowball Oranges* series of humorous Mallorcan travelogues, and a companion to their set-in-Scotland prequel *Thistle Soup*.

So, whether or not you have an interest in or knowledge of jazz, this is a story that will entertain, surprise and amuse in equal measure – and will occasionally shock as well!

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"But pleasures are like poppies spread –
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river –
A moment white – then melts forever."

(From *Tam o' Shanter* – Robert Burns, 1759–96)

CHAPTER ONE

'DOWN THE STAIRWAY TO THE STARS'

'THE CAVERN' – two white-painted words curving above a doorway in a Liverpool back street that struck me as one of the most drab and easily forgettable places I had ever laid eyes on. Yet this was the setting of what was to become an icon as far-famed and instantly associated with Britain as the tower of Big Ben itself. Pasted over the graffiti on a brick wall beside the doorway, a poster announced:

Tonight
THE CLYDE VALLEY STOMPERS
Scotland's No 1 Jazz Band!
(with Support Group)
8pm – Admission 6/-

'Where d'ya think you're goin', skin?' the bruiser guarding the door grunted.

I was the only other living soul in the street, so I knew he had to be talking to me. I nodded at the poster. 'I'm with the band.'

'Oh yeah? Wot one?

'The Clyde Valley Stompers.'

He glowered at me with a look that left me in no doubt that he considered himself king of the alley. However humble his domain, he was ready – itching even – to defend it.

'Honest, I'm the clarinet player,' I said with as much self-assurance as I could muster. 'And, ehm, the leader … as well, actually.'

His frown deepened. 'Yeah, and I'm 'er Majesty the bleedin' Queen!'

'Fair enough,' I came back, trying not to appear too cowed, 'you can check with the rest of the boys. They're in there, setting up.'

'Where *you* been, then?'

I hooked my thumb over my shoulder. 'Parking the bandwagon.'

'You the roadie, then?'

'Nah, we don't have one. I do the driving.'

'Thotcha sez ya was the bandleader.'

This conversation was going nowhere, and neither, apparently, was I.

The gorilla's brows lowered still further as his eyes wandered down my right arm. 'Worra ya gorrin yer 'andbag?'

I was sorely tempted to voice disapproval at having my faux snakeskin instrument case so unjustly demeaned, but my teeth were a vital part of my stock-in-trade, so I kept them clenched. I opened the case to reveal the matching pair of Selmer Paris clarinets nestling in velvet-lined luxury within. They'd been hard-earned and were my pride and joy.

A sneer tugged at the corner of the bouncer's mouth. 'See yerself as some kinda Jock version of Acker bleedin' Bilk, do ya?'

I thought it prudent to reply with a non-committal shrug.

A few tense moments ticked by. 'Awright then,' the bruiser finally growled. He shuffled aside from the door. 'Gerrin! An' next time ya come out, gerra fookin' pass! Awright?'

*

If the attitude of the doorman had seemed a mite chilly, the same most certainly could not be said for the reception afforded us by the jiving mass crammed into the club that night. The Sixties were now getting properly under way and the young folk of Liverpool were set to make them swing with a vengeance. The Cavern, originally a jazz club when it opened in 1957, had yielded to skiffle during the height of the washboard-and-tea-chest craze, but was enthusiastically promoting jazz once again. Now, whenever one of the top bands was on tour in the north-west of England, Sunday night at The Cavern had become an automatic fixture.

Although this policy was soon to be swept away by the biggest sea change ever in popular music, no-one could have foreseen that the reason would be a global eruption in the popularity of a bunch of young Liverpudlians who'd cut their musical teeth playing interval spots for jazz bands.

Many of these 'beat groups', as fledgling rockers like the Beatles were referred to at the time, had started out playing skiffle themselves. This two- and three-chord derivation of primitive American folk, gospel and blues was first popularised in Britain by splinter groups set up within, ironically, trad jazz outfits. The prime mover had been Lonnie Donegan, banjoist in the Chris Barber Band, who, switching to acoustic guitar, would lead his fellow rhythm section members in an interlude of novelty vocal ditties to give the band's horn players a breather.

But the skiffle craze soon passed. Accordingly, 'beat' was regarded by many music business experts as just another fad

the fickle followers of pop would also discard before too long. Trad jazz was booming and jazz bands, with their customary line-up of trumpet, trombone, clarinet, bass, drums, banjo and (in some cases) piano, were, for the present at least, what young people flocked into clubs to dance to.

It has to be said, however, that a fair measure of creative licence would need to be applied to the word 'dance' by anyone attempting to describe what took place on the floor of The Cavern on a Sunday night.

This was a cellar of the low, vaulted variety, entered from street level by a narrow stairway which, as far as I could make out, would also serve as the only exit in the event of fire. It has been said, I think a tad unfairly, that when empty the Cavern had the appearance of a brick-lined sewer with alcoves off. My own first impressions were of a miniature underground station that had been blocked off at both ends, leaving enough room for maybe a hundred or so customers to strut their stuff in. But the reality was that well upwards of five times that number of determined clubbers would pack in there when a popular band was playing.

Dancing, therefore, was strictly of the stomp-on-the-spot kind; a technique more evocative of the grape-treading tub than the ballroom floor. Clearly, any hand movement above thigh level would risk inflicting injury on fellow dancers, so manual rhythmic expression was best limited to finger-popping – particularly in front of the bandstand. On a busy Sunday night, there was always the risk of a trombone player having his slide whipped away by the flailing arm of an over-enthusiastic jive monkey.

In such an enclosed and crowded venue, air conditioning would have been mandatory, had present-day regulations applied. Actually, ventilation of *any* kind would have been a godsend, but there was no evidence of even that back then. Not going by the Turkish-bath conditions prevailing on the tiny bandstand, at any rate. A one-night gig in The Cavern

would inevitably result in even the leanest of musicians losing several pounds of body weight. It was a veritable sweat box, and the condensation glistening on the walls when the joint was jumping bore ample testament to that.

Conditions were no better in what passed for a band room. This was nothing more than a small recess at the side of the stage: a depository for outdoor clothes and instrument cases which had to be shared with the support group. When stumbling in there drenched with perspiration at cross-over time, you could cut the fug with a knife. The aroma of Old Spice mingling with cigarette smoke and the hum of b.o. would linger long in the nostrils.

There was a certain snobbery about jazz musicians when it came to guys who played pop music. It wasn't an openly declared attitude, nor even one discussed at any length in private. It was just assumed that we all agreed pop musicians to be in some way inferior, because … well, because they didn't play jazz. That they may have been equal to or even better than ourselves as musicians didn't come into it. We saw them all as guitar-twanging posers, more interested in wearing tight-arsed jeans to titillate birds and looning about on stage to impress each other than actually … well, playing jazz. And how about all their ear-splitting amplification? Take that away from your average two- and three-chord beat group, and what would be left? That's right – skiffle.

It may well be, of course, that similar derogatory thoughts about us jazzers were harboured by the beat boys. Given that each of our chosen brands of music stemmed from the same American roots, they could justifiably consider that we, although of the same generation as themselves, were stuck in a groove that hadn't changed all that much for decades, while they at least were attempting to take the music forward, albeit in an unashamedly brash form.

But musicians, no matter what their persuasion, are respectful towards their peers – in public at least. So, no

discourteous words, or even looks, were exchanged as the four lads in The Cavern's interval group squeezed past us. A nod and a grunted 'Aye, aye!' or 'How's it goin'?' was the only communication; not that there would have been either time or space for anything more sociable, even if we'd felt so inclined. We were as relieved to get off that sweat-box stage as the beat group appeared keen to get on. And it immediately became apparent why.

Unbilled on the poster outside these boys may have been, but the audience were well aware of who they were, and they made their delight at seeing them amply obvious the moment they emerged from the band room. If the roof had had rafters, the cheering would have brought them down. But that was nothing compared to the noise that accompanied the intro to the group's first song and continued unabated right through to the end of their set.

Screaming! Screaming so loud it drowned out whatever sounds were blasting from all that amplification gear. Row upon row of girls were working themselves into hysterics in front of the stage. A peppering of boys too. Not dancing, not finger-popping, just screaming and shouting themselves into a frenzy over a band they couldn't even hear.

To a purveyor of acoustic music like myself, this was a disquieting new phenomenon indeed. Could this be the way things were heading? I mentioned my misgivings to our piano player Bert Murray when we were climbing the stairs at the end of the gig.

'Local band,' said Bert with patent disinterest. 'You get these over-the-top reactions. Probably a set-up as well. All stage-managed by the club. Like happened way back with Sinatra. Know what I mean?'

Bert was quite a bit older than me, and had been on the road a lot longer, so I respected his opinion – usually. But he must have noticed a look of doubt in my expression this time.

'Nah, don't worry about it, man,' he muttered. 'Ten-a-penny round here, these beat combos. Electric skiffle groups, I call them. Seven-day wonders. Here today, gone tomorrow.'

Who was I to argue? And why should I bother about possible competition from unbilled interval bands in a scruffy little back-street dungeon like this? In a few days we'd be playing London's Royal Albert Hall, in a festival featuring the foremost jazz bands in Britain. On top of that, our latest single, which we'd recorded for an up-and-coming producer called George Martin in EMI's Abbey Road Studios, was heading for the charts, and a string of promotional appearances on network TV had already been lined up. With our date sheet full to overflowing for months ahead, the future for the Clyde Valley Stompers could hardly have looked more rosy.

Banishing all thoughts of screaming teenagers and electric skiffle groups from my mind, I stepped from the depths of The Cavern into the Liverpool night. It was raining. In the glow of a solitary street light, puddles reflected the buildings rising dark and forbidding on either side of the alley. The scene reminded me of some ancient black-and-white movie, set in Al Capone's Chicago. Suddenly, the optimistic thoughts I'd been doing my best to nurture were replaced by the echo of words that had been spoken almost two years earlier and had haunted me ever since…

* * * * *

CHAPTER TWO

'IF THE WOMEN DON'T GET YOU, THE LIQUOR MUST!'

'He'll end up dead in the gutter!' The prediction was delivered with a matter-of-fact raising of the shoulders. 'Prostitutes and rotgut booze. Way of life in that game. The pox and cirrhosis of the liver … always ends the same … seen it all too often .'

My mother summoned up a weak smile, trying, no doubt, to give the impression that she took the words to have been spoken in jest, though unable to disguise the fact that she knew otherwise. She said nothing.

My father forced out one of his let's-lighten-things-up-a-bit laughs, as was his way when such conversational chasms opened before him. 'Aye, very good, Fergus,' he chuckled. 'Prostitutes and rotgut booze, eh? You have a grand sense of humour, right enough.' He took our guest's glass. 'Here,' he grinned, almost convincingly, 'have another drink!'

'Dope as well,' Fergus declared, warming to his theme. 'Marijuana and heroin.'

'Sorry,' said Dad, still grinning gamely, 'we're right out of them, so you'll have to make do with this.' He poured our guest a beer.

My mother was now busying herself re-washing washed dishes in the sink. She still said nothing, but her body language spoke volumes. I felt a sudden surge of remorse, quickly followed by one of sympathy. Remorse for having given my mother such deep cause for concern, and sympathy for the disappointment she was clearly now feeling. Yet she had shown no evidence of either emotion until now.

'What do you think about our Peter setting out as a professional jazz musician?' she'd asked Fergus, in some hope, I now realised, of having her mind put at ease by the opinion of this self-vaunted man of the world.

His cynical reply had been the last thing she'd wanted to hear. And the smug way he'd said it added anger to the confusion of feelings now flooding through me. I wanted to come right out and ask Fergus what the hell he knew about jazz musicians anyway. But I kept my lip firmly buttoned. I was nineteen, Fergus was in his fifties, and I had been brought up to show respect for my elders, even those I didn't think particularly worthy of it.

What made the situation even more awkward was that I'd always suspected that neither of my parents thought much of Fergus either. He was some sort of distant relation of my Dad's, who appeared unannounced on mercifully rare occasions when he 'just happened to be in the area'. He'd served in the Royal Navy during World War II, and my guess was that his clichéd concept of clap-ridden, junky musicians may have been influenced more by the habits of some of his own shipmates than by any exponents of jazz he'd bumped into on his travels. What's more, he had the swaggering air of someone trying very hard to give the impression he'd commanded vessels significantly more eminent than the clutch of rowing boats he now hired out in a down-at-heel holiday

resort in the west of Scotland. Fergus was a braggart and a bore, and he had deliberately hurt my mother's feelings, as well as gratuitously predicting my descent into the gutter.

Nevertheless, here I was, obliged to be polite to him as we stood in the kitchen of our family home on the outskirts of Haddington, the hub of the agricultural county of East Lothian, seventeen miles east of Edinburgh, Scotland's capital city. It was 1960, and Britain was finally showing signs of making a real recovery from the long years of post-war austerity my parents' generation had had to weather. Yet I had just chosen to give up the securest of careers to embark upon one of the most precarious imaginable.

'Yeah,' Fergus smirked, without even a glance in my direction, 'dead in the gutter. That's where he'll end up.' He raised his glass and slapped Dad's shoulder. 'Happy days, mate!'

Now it was my father's turn to say nothing.

*

I could never have dreamt that learning to play the bagpipes as a ten-year-old would point me towards such an unexpected path through life, or would lead to such anguish for my parents. But that's the stamp that joining the Haddington Boys' Pipe Band had put on things.

It was barely six years after the end of the war, its lingering aftermath meaning that most families were obliged to live within fairly modest means. Food rationing was still in force, although there generally wasn't enough money about to buy anything but the bare essentials anyway. TV was years away from being within everyone's reach – both technically and financially – so home entertainment meant listening to the radio or gramophone, playing board games or cards, or, for those who could, making music.

My father, also called Peter, worked at the time as a clerk for a local road haulage company. He was a dapper little chap,

with a neatly-trimmed Douglas Fairbanks Jr moustache and an impish twinkle in his eye. As an incorrigible, though strictly amateur, ‘tickler of the ivories’, he’d always made sure there was a piano in the house. And even if, as in 1951, his current instrument had seen better days, he never grudged paying to have it tuned. This, in my mother’s opinion, was a shameful waste of money.

‘It wouldn’t be so bad if you could play the damned thing,’ she would grouse, ‘but your so-called honky-tonk is nothing but a hotchpotch of rubbish. My god, we had a cat back home that could play better – and he was only running up and down the keys trying to get at the mice inside!’

‘Back home’ for my mother was the northern Orkney island of Sanday, where her father, Tom Muir, farmed a 600-acre spread called Backaskaill. Her mother was the local school mistress. There had always been a piano in the Backaskaill front room, too, and my grandmother, herself an accomplished pianist, had taught my mother and two sisters to play ‘properly’; which meant learning to read music.

This was a skill my father had never mastered, nor felt any need to. Playing by ear was his thing. Consequently, no matter what my mother said to the contrary, honky-tonk was what he heard when his fingers thumped the ivories on his old upright. And as if to substantiate this conviction, he’d then make a point of declaring that no bloody mice lived inside *his* joanna!

‘They’d need to be tone-deaf if they did,’ was Mum’s standard reply.

To which Dad would blurt out, ‘OK, let’s see if you can do any better yourself, *Mrs* Fats Waller!’

But she never took the bait. While she hadn’t kept up her piano practice beyond her teens, she could still sit down, when the mood took her, and play from the sheet music of any popular song that was put in front of her – yet quick to admit that she did so a lot more hesitantly than when a girl. The fact of the matter was, though, that Mum was neither

as keen on playing the piano as my father, nor did she have his natural 'ear'. In truth, if he had been subjected to the same musical discipline as a child, there's no doubting his piano playing prowess would have developed far beyond the enthusiastic mangling of Fats Waller favourites and the like that had become his trademark.

He may have been, in my mother's words, a poor imitation of a ham-fisted pub piano player of the most lowbrow kind, but he was happy to be just that. And he never missed an opportunity to prove it to anyone who happened to be around when there was a piano handy. Captive audiences at wedding receptions and funeral wakes were his favourite victims, their (and his) generous intake of alcohol contributing considerably to the raucous merriment that his brand of musical mayhem invariably generated. Many were the newly-weds and corpses sent cheerily on their way to his jangle-box accompaniment of *Somebody Stole My Gal* or *After You've Gone*. And if a bar or two of the melody had been missed or added here and there, by that stage in proceedings few of those singing along would notice – or care, even if they did.

Nor did the traditional music of his homeland escape Dad's attentions. He never failed to tune in to the weekly *Scottish Dance Music* programme on the BBC's Home Service. The volume of the radio would be screwed fully up, all the better to hear what the featured band was playing while he mercilessly pounded the piano in unison – or as near unison as his limited grasp of key signatures would permit. Mother always shut herself in the kitchen on these occasions.

But my sister Minnie and I usually braved it out in the front room, although for very different reasons. Minnie, fifteen months my senior, had already started piano lessons, so she would stand beside Dad, scrutinising his keyboard-thumping and yelling at him whenever she noticed a clanger being dropped. Not that this made any difference, other than adding a vocal element to the prevailing instrumental bedlam.

Meanwhile, I would sit with a finger in one ear, the other ear glued to the radio.

I suppose I had traditional Scottish music in my genes. My father always told us that his father, the first of a trio of Peter Kerrs, had been weaned on it in the little East Lothian mining town of Prestonpans, and by adolescence had become proficient at 'sook-blawin'' a fair-sized repertoire on the mouth organ. Then, while still in his teens, he escaped the grim darkness of the local colliery for the fresh-air life of a professional footballer. During a long career, which saw him play for each of the three top-division teams Scotland's capital boasted at the time, he was introduced to a wider social circle than might have been likely had he remained 'doon the pit'. One enduring friendship he formed was with a pioneer of Scottish accordion music called Peter Leatham, universally regarded as one of the most gifted players of the instrument in the years between the two World Wars.

It was probably exposure to Peter Leatham's talent that inspired my father to strap on a squeeze-box whenever he could get his hands on one, then attempt to get his fingers round a toe-tapping composition of Peter's called *Shufflin' Sammy*. In it's day, this had been regarded as a test piece for aspiring accordionists, and although my father did his best to negotiate the tricky nuances of the tune, he never quite cracked it. Still, his attempts had sounded pretty impressive to the untutored ears of a toddler like me.

So, too, had my maternal grandfather's belting out of Scottish Country Dance standards on his melodeon. This diminutive, button-keyed accordion operated on the same suck-blow principle as my other grandfather's mouth organ – except that, in the melodeon's case, the technique involved either pulling or pushing the instrument's bellows to obtain two different notes from the same button. Not a music machine for anyone but the most dexterous to grapple with.

For all that, old Tom Muir, his fingers like bananas from a lifetime of working with heavy horses, could still dazzle with the lightness of his touch. He and my grandmother had moved from their native Orkney to a farm near Haddington shortly before the Second World War. Some of my earliest memories are of visiting them every Sunday afternoon, and I recall that it never took long for my father to ask old Tom to fetch out his little ten-button Hohner melodeon for a 'swaree' after tea in the front room, where the piano just happened to be located.

So, without really noticing, I gradually became familiar with many of the old-favourite jigs, hornpipes, marches, strathspeys and reels that, only a few years later, were coming at me full-belt through the radio in our own front room. The difference now, of course, was that the same tunes were being played by the slickest Scottish Country Dance musicians in the land, and no group of them was slicker than the band led by ace button-key accordionist Jimmy Shand. Jimmy was already a worldwide legend, whose path, although I couldn't have imagined it back then, would eventually cross my own and have a considerable influence on my life.

As would joining the Haddington Boys' Pipe Band…

* * * * *

CHAPTER THREE

'FROM JIGS TO JAZZ'

'They teach ye to play the bagpipes and ye get a kilt for nothin'!'

I hadn't had reason to consider either of these opportunities before, but they'd been presented with such enthusiasm by my pal Derek Dewar that my curiosity was kindled.

'But how much does it cost for the lessons?' I checked. Kids born during the war like us were popularly known as 'Utility Babies', conditioned to food rationing, make-do-and-mend clothing and having to watch every penny. This mindset was still pertinent in the summer of 1951, even for ten-year-olds.

'Nothin'!' said Derek. 'Honest, ye just have to buy yer practice chanter. It's about thirty shillins, but they'll maybe let ye pay it up, if ye're skint.'

I *was* skint. All kids were skint in 1951, or so it seemed to me. My own weekly pocket money amounted to threepence, which was enough to buy a pocketful of hard little pears from an orchard near the school on Fridays. I did a quick calculation. Thirty shillings equalled three hundred and sixty

pence. That's a lot of pears! It was immediately obvious that, even if I denied myself the pears, it would take an awfully long time to save up for a chanter. Too long. And I also knew that paying it up wouldn't be an option, as my parents would never entertain buying anything on the never-never.

'Where did *you* get the money to buy a chanter?' I asked Derek, curious as to how my equally skint chum had suddenly struck it rich.

'I haven't got the money,' he shrugged, '– yet. But they're lookin' for kids to pick berries on the wee fruit farms along the Pencaitland Road, so…'

*

So, we spent the rest of our summer holidays picking strawberries – and raspberries – and blackcurrants – and redcurrants – and gooseberries – and whatever else needed picking when the weather was right. By the time the pipe band was ready for its next intake of rookies in the autumn, Derek and I were there with enough money in our fruit-stained mitts to buy our chanters.

These little eight-hole instruments, a scaled-down version of the 'melody' pipe on a full set of bagpipes, look a bit like a cross between a snake-charmer's flute and a recorder. Made from African Blackwood with imitation ivory mountings, our MacPherson student models were regarded as being excellent value for money, and of proven quality too. Having a copy of *Logan's Bagpipe Tutor* included in the price made us even more pleased with our investment of all that berry-picking time as we joined a handful of other hopefuls for our first lesson.

One evening a week from then throughout the winter, we'd sit at little desks in a classroom of Haddington Primary School while Davie MacLeod, a veteran ex-army piper with the patience of Job, shepherded us through the rudiments of

fingering, then on to playing scales and reading the related notation as written on the stave. Unlike the blood-curdling skirl of the full-blown Highland bagpipes, the little practice chanter has an altogether more gentle voice – akin, it could be said, to the buzz of bees with sinus problems.

As the weeks passed, the faltering efforts of the assembled novices progressed from what sounded more like the fight than the flight of the bumble bees to a stage at which we were able to wing our way through basic exercises in passable concert. By Christmas, we were ready to start on the embellishments that are essential for providing 'punctuation' in pipe music. First we learned to play simple grace notes, then tackled the more complex fingering of doublings, grips, throws, birls, shakes and finally the *taorluath*, a tricky manoeuvre separating two notes with a group of four others played rapidly in sequence. Once those techniques were mastered, the long-awaited step to actually playing tunes could be made.

The end of winter found us tiptoeing our way along such well-trodden paths of the piping repertoire as *Highland Laddie*, *Loudon's Bonnie Woods and Braes* and *The High Road to Linton*. And stumbling though our efforts were, they had become sufficiently developed for us to be actually reading the dots on the printed page, a skill none of us had had a clue about a few months earlier. We were as cock-a-hoop as old Davie MacLeod must have been exhausted.

What Davie didn't know, however, was that, while I had been practising legitimate exercises on my chanter at home, my father had encouraged me to play along with some of his honky-tonk piano favourites as well. My mother didn't just retreat to the kitchen on these occasions; she took the dog for a walk. And the dog was always out of the house first. For there's no denying that what they were escaping would have been torture to the ears of all but the two protagonists, oblivious as we were to the imperfections of our creative

collaboration – or 'bloody racket', as Mother chose to put it. Even sister Minnie didn't hang around waiting for bum notes to pounce on.

The first musical hurdle we had to confront was that, unlike the piano, there are no half-notes on a chanter. However, I found that I could overcome this by blowing slightly harder whenever the melody demanded. The little double reed inside the chanter would respond by raising the note played by the required semitone, then returning to standard pitch as soon I reverted to normal blowing. It was crude, but it worked ... well, sort of.

'Close enough for jazz,' Dad would reassure me if I ever showed the slightest sign of doubt.

Of course, what we were cooking up wasn't jazz, or anything even remotely approaching it. But it did involve an element of improvisation just to be able to follow each other, so maybe I actually was having the seeds of jazz planted in my subconscious.

The second hurdle presenting itself was that the chanter was pitched in the key of B-flat. Not one of Dad's favourites. Hence the proliferation of bum notes from which Minnie had elected to absent herself. The tactic Dad employed when ambushed by a particularly awkward chord in this key was to retreat to a key he was comfortable in and hammer out a free-form introduction to nothing in particular. Sometimes he'd manage to retrace his steps to whatever we happened to have been butchering in B-flat, sometimes he wouldn't. In any event, my ears were learning to follow musical lines that were anything but obvious, and this was something else that was to prove of value in the fullness of time.

*

With the arrival of the longer evenings of spring, the pipe band's practice sessions moved out of the classroom and into

the school playground. While the older boys, who were already proficient in playing the bagpipes, rehearsed winter-learned tunes as they marched, wheeled and counter-marched with the drum corps in the main yard, we beginners were ushered away to a corner beside the boys’ toilets. Here awaited the boss, Pipe Major Willie ‘Pat’ Paterson, an ex-army contemporary of Davie MacLeod’s and an equally able teacher, though not entirely blessed with old Davie’s gift of patience.

Pat Paterson’s priority at this time of the year was to advance the progress of lads newly graduated from the novices’ class. He would introduce us to a full set of bagpipes, explain the workings of the various component parts, show us how to secure the bag under the left arm, place the long bass drone and two shorter tenor drones over the left shoulder, grasp the blowpipe between the teeth and hold the full-size chanter in the ‘strike-up’ position.

In the Pipe Major’s experienced hands, this demonstration looked like simplicity itself. In the hands of a young rookie, particularly one of modest stature, the exercise took on the appearance of a dwarf being mugged by a mutant octopus. And this was even before the beast had been given the kiss of life.

The Highland bagpipe’s pigskin bag is about the same size as the body of a juvenile member of the donor species, and it takes a bit of inflating. Even for a burly adult with the knack, this undertaking presents quite a challenge for the lungs, cheek muscles and, though easily overlooked by the unwary, the sphincter. We soon appreciated the logic behind a location close to the boys’ toilets being chosen for our first attempts at aerating an octopus.

‘Castrating a pack of wildcats’ would have been the term more likely used by immediate neighbours to describe the sound of our struggles to gain the upper hand over our new charges. Just as soon as Pat Paterson was satisfied we had grasped the rudiments, each of us had been presented with our own full set of pipes, and it was up to us to make whatever

progress we were capable of in as little time as possible – but in our own time, not his. His priority had now moved on to furthering the piping skills of the older, more experienced boys. He'd give us our chance to join them in the band when we had earned it, and if that meant driving our neighbours insane in the meantime – tough. Haddington Boys' Pipe Band may not have been the regular army, but it was as near to it as our diehard Pipe Major was ever likely to return to.

*

It's surprising how much a young mind and body can cope with, if the opportunity and will are there. Although playing the pipes had become a passion for all the kids in my group, we had also just moved up to secondary school, with a daunting array of new subjects to learn from scratch. On top of that, we were now committed to playing rugby for our school team on Saturday mornings, which necessitated travelling to away games every other week. This all ate into valuable bagpipe-practising time. Or should have. But it didn't.

And it isn't as if those activities were all we were involved in. There was football to play in the cow field along the road after homework of an evening. We'd help our folks digging, planting and weeding the garden (big vegetable plots were the norm and cultivating them a necessity of life in rural areas back then). We went wandering along the riverside watching poachers 'guddle' trout from under the banks with their hands; the boys who knew the trick sometimes getting down on their bellies to do a bit of guddling themselves. We did evening and weekend drills with the school's contingent of the army cadets: map-reading in the hills, stripping and re-assembling Bren Guns and firing old Point-303 Lee-Enfields in the rifle range. But we still found time to read about the weekly adventures of *Dan Dare*, *Pilot of the Future* in *The Eagle* magazine, to follow the five-nights-a-week exploits of

Dick Barton, *Special Agent* on the radio, and to marvel (or laugh) at the serialised episodes of Sam Katzman’s *Superman* during the local flea pit’s Saturday matinees.

And then there was cycle speedway, a passion for some of us that matched even our zest for playing the pipes.

Motorcycle speedway racing had become a spectator sport to rival the popularity of football in Britain after the Second World War. Most cities had a team, and Edinburgh was no exception. Every Saturday evening during the summer months, thousands of fans would pack the terracing of Old Meadowbank Stadium to cheer on the Edinburgh Monarchs as they raced against such arch rivals as Glasgow Tigers, Newcastle Diamonds, Stoke Potters, Cradley Heathens, Fleetwood Flyers and Liverpool Chads on a shale oval surrounding the soccer pitch.

My father, a speedway enthusiast since his youth, had formed a Monarchs Supporters Club in Haddington, with a bus laid on to transport the members to every Meadowbank meeting. It didn’t take long for a group of us kids to become totally addicted to the thrills. On arrival at the stadium, we’d press our way as close to the track’s safety fence as we could, oblivious to the stinging showers of shale flung at us by the bikes as they were hurled broadside round the bends. The roar of the engines, the smell of burnt methanol fuel, the colours of the riders’ racing jackets, the glint of their chrome-plated steeds under the floodlights, the bellowing of the crowds, and the latest hit records blaring out of the Tannoy system between heats created an atmosphere that was positively intoxicating. As impressionable boys, we couldn’t wait to be speedway riders ourselves.

We were ten-, eleven- and twelve-year-olds, the bounds of whose imagination bore no relationship to reality. Nevertheless, the will was there, so we reckoned all we had to do was create a way. And we did – albeit with an inescapable measure of compromise. Even if we’d had the physique to handle a bucking, stripped-down 500cc motorbike with

no brakes and the acceleration of a rocket, we didn't have anything like enough money to indulge the fantasy. The solution, then, was to adapt the motorised version of the sport to suit our pushbikes.

As so often happens, however, the solution to one problem was thwarted by the emergence of another. Our bikes may not have been brand-new, top-of-the-range models (in most cases just patched-up hand-me-downs), but they got us to school and back, and carried us on jaunts into the countryside with reasonable reliability. Under no circumstances would our parents allow us to remove the brakes and mudguards and whatever else we deemed surplus to requirements just to emulate the lean, mean look of our heroes' racing machines. Prudence, not to mention our own safety, was paramount.

Enter the mother of invention, in this instance dressed in her make-do-and-mend clothes…

The municipal rubbish dump was located on the farm of Barney Mains, a mile or so east of Haddington. We were tipped off by one of the boys whose father worked for the council that, from among the miscellaneous examples of household dross heaped there, recyclable bicycle parts could occasionally be gleaned. All it required was a keen eye and a blocked nose. So, any wheels, frames, pedals, forks or handlebars that peeped from beneath their blanket of smouldering ash and putrefying vegetable matter were keenly scavenged by us and stashed away until enough had been gathered for our needs.

What we didn't know about the assembly and maintenance of a cycle speedway bike was quickly learned. After an evening's racing round our makeshift track at Peffercraig Quarry on the outskirts of town, there would inevitably be damage to make good. The re-spoking and realigning of buckled wheels became second nature, as did fixing snapped chains, replacing bent pedal cranks and mending punctures. Broken bones we left to the experts.

Miraculously, though, those of us who also aspired to be pipers always managed to emerge from the quarry with our fingers intact. Just as well, too, because national service was still compulsory, so the pipe band was continually having to replace older lads when their time came to go off and do their two-year stint in the armed forces.

Cometh the hour, cometh the kilt for nothing?

*

As was inevitable, Derek and I did finally come to realise that, just as there is no such thing as a free lunch, neither was there a truly free kilt – not within a non-profit-making community institution like Haddington Boys' Pipe Band, at any rate.

By the summer of 1954 we had already spent a couple of years in the ranks of the band proper, our commitment to music having replaced our dreams of becoming speedway riders. Resplendent in our military-style tunics and Balmoral bonnets, our adolescent backsides would brazenly swing the pleats of those long-coveted kilts as we marched up and down the streets of Haddington every Saturday evening. How we enjoyed our moments in the limelight, proud to wear the tartan, chuffed to see the admiring faces of so many onlookers lining the pavements, and delighted to be playing with reasonable skill the band's modest but judiciously chosen repertoire of popular pipe tunes. Pipe Major Paterson was as acutely aware of the technical limitations of his young charges as he was conscious of the value of giving the listening public what they wanted to hear.

Still, all those expensive bagpipes, drums, tunics, bonnets *and* kilts had to be paid for, and if not by the pipers and drummers themselves, then through their 'entertaining' the local community. Public performances, therefore, doubled as experience for the boys and as fund-raising events for the band itself. Obviously, pubs were the most lucrative source of

contributions on a Saturday evening. We'd stop outside a few of the most popular in turn, forming a circle and churning out our best selections for ten or fifteen minutes while the hat was passed round inside.

It was hard work, and could be uncomfortable, too, when the Scottish summer took a sudden wintry turn. Even so, I relished being part of a well-drilled band that seemed to give as much pleasure to those listening as we derived satisfaction from playing. Although blissfully unaware of it at the time, I had been bitten by a bug whose infection would prove to be incurable.

*

'Remember that Teresa Brewer record?' Derek asked me when we met for one of the pipe band's engagements during the summer of 1954. 'Ye know, the one they used to play all the time at Meadowbank Speedway a few years back?'

'*Put Another Nickel In*?'

'Aye, that's the one, but it was really called *Music*, *Music*, *Music*.'

'Fine, but it'll never make a good pipe tune, no matter what you call it.'

'Naw, I'm not talkin' about the pipes,' Derek bristled. 'I'm not even talkin' about *Music*, *Music*, *Music*. I'm talkin' about the B-side.'

'*Copenhagen*? Now you're talking! I even remember what the band was called. The Dixieland All-Stars, wasn't it?'

'That's right!' Derek's enthusiasm was showing again. 'And if ye liked that, ye've got to hear some of the music in the new flick that's on at the flea pit this week!'

'*The Glenn Miller Story*?' I shook my head. 'I'm not too keen on all that sugary *Moonlight Serenade* stuff.'

'Who's talkin' about *Moonlight Serenade*? I'm talkin' about jazz music, like the stuff on the B-side of that Teresa Brewer thing – but even better. I'm talking about Louis Armstrong's

All-Stars – the best! They’ve got a spot in the movie, and ye’ve *got* to see it!’

I sat spellbound in Haddington’s County Cinema that very night, as the jazz club scene featuring Louis ‘Satchmo’ Armstrong and his seven-piece band brought the typically schmaltz-laden Hollywood film to life. *Basin Street Blues* was the tune they played; slow and easy at first, with a growled vocal from Satch, then a wild drum break from Gene Krupa that doubled up the tempo and set the band alight. Even the Haddington flea pit was swinging. I’d never heard or seen anything like it. From the moment Barney Bigard wailed out his clarinet solo, I was hooked – not just on this kind of music, but on that particular instrument too.

Up to now, the nearest thing to real jazz I’d heard (apart from the band on the B-side of Teresa Brewer’s *Music*, *Music*, *Music*) came from my Dad’s small collection of 78s featuring the let’s-have-a-party toe-tappers of the Firehouse Five Plus Two and the musical mayhem of Spike Jones and his City Slickers. I now realised that, even if those guys had grafted what they played onto the same roots as Louis Armstrong, the branch they eventually swung on was on the other side of the tree.

A year or so after *The Glenn Miller Story*, Hollywood released *The Benny Goodman Story*. This chronicled the life and music of another star of the 1930s big band era, the ‘King of Swing’ himself, clarinettist Benny Goodman. If Barney Bigard’s playing with Satchmo had hooked me on the instrument, Benny Goodman’s stunning clarinet artistry had me hauled in, netted and – to borrow from the jargon of contemporary jazz musicians – gassed, sent and solid gone.

I’d *have* to get myself a clarinet!

* * * * *

CHAPTER FOUR

'A NAME WITHOUT A BAND'

It went without saying that no amount of raking about on the municipal rubbish tip would provide me with a potentially serviceable clarinet. These were delicate woodwind instruments, intricate pieces of craftsmanship that would only be thrown away if they had become damaged beyond repair. There was nothing else for it, then; I'd have to earn enough money to buy one. This was how it was in the days before obtaining credit became as easy as catching a cold. Youngsters from families bound to frugality either figured out a way of saving up for any extras they wanted, or did without.

I had no problem with that. It was how I'd bought my practice chanter. The difference now was that I'd have to earn a lot more to buy even a cheap, second-hand clarinet. As berry-picking was purely seasonal, I reckoned it would take forever to come by enough money that way. And I was in a hurry. The answer? Find work during other school holidays, and at weekends, too, if possible.

Farming was still a labour-intensive business, and, luckily for me, Lennoxlove Acredales Farm, just along the road from our house, could be relied upon as a source of casual employment for a fit young lad prepared to roll his sleeves up and muck in with the men. I became that lad, stooking and stacking sheaves during harvest, 'feeding' the mill at threshing time, lifting and clamping potatoes in the autumn, cutting hedges in the winter, mucking out cattle yards in the spring. And on occasions when there was no work on the farm, there were usually jobs to be had shifting timber about at the nearby sawmill, or thinning trees and planting saplings in the surrounding woods.

Busy times, and happy days. But it's a true saying that time flies when you're enjoying yourself. Before I knew it, I was preparing to sit my 'Highers', the Higher Leaving Certificate exams that finally determine your fitness for university entrance in Scotland. Although I had worked every bit as hard at my studies as I'd had fun engaging in all the spare-time activities that presented themselves along the way, I couldn't help feeling apprehensive about these tests. I would do my best and hope for the best, too, but without abandoning the sense of purpose induced by seeing *The Benny Goodman Story*. Obtaining a clarinet had become an obsession, and at last I'd saved up what I hoped would be enough money to buy one.

*

After trailing round most of the junk shops in Edinburgh's Old Town, where the few clarinets on offer looked like ex-military band instruments that had been discharged on health grounds during the First World War, I finally found what I was looking for … well, almost what I was looking for. In a shopping arcade near the top of Cockburn Street, there was a 'bargain emporium', and nestled among the bric-a-brac in the window was a clarinet, which, although second-hand, had the appearance of having been well looked-after. The shop's

elderly proprietor keenly affirmed this as he handed it over the counter for me to 'try out.' I didn't even know how to hold it properly, far less try it out. However, I had spent enough time reading about and looking at pictures of clarinets to be sure of a few important essentials.

'Springs all workin' fine too,' said the shopkeeper, tapping a couple of keys with his forefinger. 'Pads in good nick as well. Oh aye, best clarinet we've had in for a while. Good tone an' everything. A right bargain, son – complete wi' case.'

While unable to dispute any of that, and although the asking price just about matched my budget, I did have a couple of doubts.

The shopkeeper must have sensed this. 'Clean as a whistle too,' he gushed. 'Been disinfected wi' TCP an' everything.'

'No, it's not that,' I assured him. 'It's just that it doesn't have the right system.'

The shopkeeper raised a puzzled eyebrow, then lowered it, frowning. 'System? It's a bloody clarinet, son, no the *Rook-a-Bookie Handbook* or somethin'!'

I explained that I was talking about a clarinet's arrangement of keys. This one had the old Albert or so-called 'Simple' System, whereas the more technically advanced Boehm System was generally accepted as best nowadays.

The shopkeeper pulled a take-it-or-leave it shrug, thought for a bit, then said, 'OK, I'll knock a quid off for ye. How about that?'

Tempting. That pound would have amounted to more than a day's wages for my father. By the same token, it would have constituted a fair slice of my mother's weekly housekeeping allowance for the whole family. And I hadn't forgotten how many basketfuls of strawberries I'd had to pick or how many cartloads of cattle dung I'd had to fork before I could pocket the same twenty shillings. Like the cattle dung, a pound wasn't to be sniffed at. Yet I still wasn't sure about this clarinet.

'Covered holes,' I said to the shopkeeper. 'It's got covered holes, and that's not normal.'

He looked at me blankly.

I pointed out that, instead of having spring-loaded metal rings round each of the main finger holes, this particular clarinet had little covering discs. Which, I explained, would prevent the pads of the musician's fingers from 'being in touch' with the music he was playing, and would limit, therefore, the amount of expression he could put into it.

The shopkeeper's own expression degenerated into one of undisguised exasperation. 'Look, son,' he sighed, 'the only hole covers I've heard about are to do wi' drains, and this is a clarinet, no a bloody sewer.'

'Maybe it was adapted to suit a saxophone player,' I calmly suggested, hoping that I could convert the old chap's frustration into his knocking a bit more off the asking price. 'Saxes have covered holes, but clarinets don't … normally. So, I reckon this one would be best suited to a sax player doubling on clarinet, except that even sax players are going for Boehm System clarinets these days … without covered holes.'

'Listen,' the old boy snapped, 'I've got more to bother about than systems and holes!' He returned the instrument to its case. 'Do ye want the damned thing or not?'

I took another look at the clarinet, pondering, then raised my eyes to meet the shopkeeper's. 'Another quid off?'

He slammed the case shut. 'Go on, then! Take it away afore ye talk me into givin' ye it for nothin'!'

And so I became the grateful, if somewhat less than fulfilled, owner of my first clarinet, with enough money left over to buy myself a how-to-play manual and half-a-dozen spare reeds. I had to admit, though, that any elation I felt really was tempered by the fact that the instrument was both technically old-fashioned and bizarrely equipped with those covered holes. But then I recalled that I'd read even Benny Goodman had started out on an Albert System clarinet before switching to a Boehm. What's more, the older system had been and still was the one favoured by most of the legendary

musicians from New Orleans, the city universally regarded as the cradle of jazz. This even went for Barney Bigard, the Louis Armstrong sideman whose appearance in *The Glenn Miller Story* first got me interested in taking up the 'liquorice stick'. And Monty Sunshine, star clarinettist with Chris Barber's Band, the English outfit currently scoring in the pop charts with their brand of commercial trad jazz, also championed the Albert System. So, I told myself, if it was good enough for those guys, it would be good enough for me – until, that is, I could save up enough money for a piece of proper Boehm kit.

*

As chance would have it, Kimber Buglass, my sister's new boyfriend, had also developed an interest in jazz and had recently bought himself a trumpet. I'd known Kimber, by sight at least, since my earliest days with the Haddington Boys' Pipe Band. He was some five years my senior and had been an established piper in the band long before I graduated from the novices' group. Somewhere along the line, our mutual interest in jazz helped bridge the age gap and we became firm friends. Now that he was visiting our house on a regular basis to see my sister, we were soon making our first tentative attempts at playing, if not jazz, then at least some simple jazzy tunes together.

As there were no teachers of clarinet or trumpet in the area, both of us had been obliged to teach ourselves from the pages of our respective tutor books. Get-togethers in the house were therefore useful progress-comparing sessions, as well as opportunities to 'have a blow'. While these intense tête-à-têtes between her boyfriend and me must have got right up my sister's nose, my father saw them as a wonderful chance to get in on an act that was right up his street. So, whenever Kimber and I indicated that we were ready, Dad would sit himself down at the piano and pound out an intro to *When You and*

I Were Young, Maggie, followed by *Little Brown Jug*, before segueing into the inevitable *When The Saints Go Marching In*. It was all fairly basic and, no doubt, corny-sounding stuff, but it was nonetheless a step in the right direction, and all the bum notes, squeaks and fluffs produced en route bothered us not a whit.

For the sake of our neighbours' comfort, Kimber always played with a mute stuffed up the bell of his instrument, a restriction not conducive to the cultivation of the full-blooded tone considered essential by bona fide jazz trumpeters. It followed that it was just a matter of time until our family's traditional Sunday visit to my grandparents' farm was hijacked for what I saw as a logical progression from the Scottish Dance Music 'swarees' of times past; except that the front room was no longer the location, nor were the featured instruments Grandfather's melodeon and my little practice chanter.

The cattle shed became the venue and its bemused occupants the audience for the un-muted blasts of Kimber's trumpet and ear-piercing wails of my clarinet as we gave no quarter to whatever jazz standard we'd decided to attack. It says much for the average bullock's indifference to musical quality that our efforts didn't trigger a stampede. Indeed, apart from a lethargic bellow or two from the line of cud-chewing beasts staring at us, the only reaction to our performance was the faint 'clap, clap, clap' of cowpats being produced when it ended. Apt applause, perhaps, but to us it was a standing ovation at the Newport Jazz Festival. We savoured every dung-dripping decibel.

'You know what this means?' I eventually said to Kimber, a hint of apprehension in my voice.

He stood expressionless for a moment or two, thinking. Then, as a knowing smile spread across his face, he canted his head and ventured, 'You mean a –?'

'That's right,' I cut in. 'A band. We'll *have* to form a band!'

Kimber thought a bit more. 'Hmm,' he nodded, 'and we could maybe call it something to do with the Hidden Town. That's Hidden Town, as in the old name for Haddington, if you see what I mean.'

I did see what he meant, and I liked the idea.

'Maybe something along the lines of the Hidden Town Jazzmen?' he suggested.

Not bad, I thought. But something was tugging at the strings of my memory. The name of the band on *Copenhagen*, the B-side of that old Teresa Brewer hit they used to play at Edinburgh Speedway. What were they called again? The Dixieland All-Stars, that was it!

'How about the Hidden Town Dixielanders?' I said.

An exchange of winks, grins and back-slaps clinched it.

'Done!'

The fact that we couldn't even play our instruments properly was only one of the realities we had to face up to when the euphoria of our cattle shed debut finally wore off. To put a jazz band together we'd need other jazz musicians: a trombone player, drummer, bass player and banjoist at least. And there were none of those readily available in a little country town like Haddington. On top of that, Kimber, his time as an apprentice joiner now served, was about to embark on a two-year stretch of national service. At a stroke, our proposed six-piece combo was reduced to a one-man band: me, a greenhorn clarinet player, still fumbling his way around a few simple licks in just one key.

But the will was there, so, yet again, it would be merely a matter of finding a way.

* * * * *

CHAPTER FIVE

'CRIME AND PUNISHMENT'

Also *in* the way for me, however, were those Higher Leaving Certificate exams. My maternal grandmother, once a teacher herself, had instilled in me the old Scottish ethic of 'sticking in and doing well at school'. The respect and affection I had for her had compelled me to do just that, particularly when it came to subjects I didn't have any particular aptitude for. Perhaps this is what prompted the teaching staff of Knox Academy, Haddington's venerated state secondary school, to appoint me head boys' prefect for my final year. It was a choice that surprised me. I certainly didn't have any claim to be the best scholar in my class; others easily outshone me in that respect. But I did always try to give everything my best shot, which was my way of accentuating the positive and thereby making the most of my lot.

Rebel Without a Cause, a film starring James Dean as a mixed-up young American, had recently attained cult status, spawning a whole generation of James Dean clones.

It had become the 'in' thing to be a brooding teenage martyr to nothing in particular – or maybe even to everything. Whatever, I couldn't see the point in deliberately making life difficult for yourself when there were other, more constructive, ways of coping with the 'injustices' of youth. And, with any luck, while having a bit of fun into the bargain.

'You have a commendably pragmatic disposition,' old Frank 'Spoof' Rayner, the head English teacher, told me at the time.

I took this as a compliment, although I wasn't all that sure what having a pragmatic disposition actually meant. One thing I was sure about, however, was that the sacrifices my parents had made to allow me to stay on at school wouldn't be taken for granted. I had been given an opportunity, and I wasn't about to waste it.

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While enforcement of discipline may not have been about to vanish totally from the list of prefects' duties when I began my stint as lead enforcer, it could be said that an erosion of certain standards did begin to set in. This was certainly the view of Headmaster A.B. Anderson, an ex-Latin teacher of the old Victorian school and, ergo, a strict disciplinarian. He summoned me to his office to discuss the matter.

My mumbled reading of scripture lessons during school assembly in the mornings was, he said, unacceptable. It gave the impression that I neither understood nor was particularly interested in the message being conveyed. This sort of thing spread apathy, manifested by a general lowering of the attention threshold throughout the hall, but most notably expressed by a marked increase in chattering and sniggering among the older girls towards the rear. A tape recording would be made to demonstrate how drastically my diction and delivery needed to be improved.

There was also, A.B. judged, too much 'chumminess' developing between prefects and the more recalcitrant members of the school roll. He was referring particularly, he added, to known recidivists within the lower grades.

'Recidivists, sir?'

The beak observed me owlishly for a moment. 'A recidivist, Kerr, is a person, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, who constantly commits crimes and is not discouraged by being punished.'

'*Crimes*, sir? Here in the Knox Academy?'

'For example, it has been brought to my notice – for your actions *are* being observed by members my staff, you know – that a certain boy who is habitually late for school is not being dealt with severely enough when you are on door duty in the mornings.'

'A *certain* boy, sir?'

A.B. rummaged through some papers on his desk. 'McLatchie. Yes, uhm, McLatchie, I believe his name is.'

'There are several McLatchies in the school, sir. McLatchie's a fairly common name in Haddington. A big family – a clan, almost.'

The rector continued to rummage. 'Yes, I'm well aware of that,' he muttered, his glasses slipping down his nose. 'Scant regard for authority, most of them.'

'So, which particular McLatchie is the recidivist on this occasion, sir?'

'Ah, here we are!' A.B. pointed to a scribbled note. 'Patrick. Yes, Patrick McLatchie.' He adjusted his specs and glanced up at me. 'Class 3D, I believe?'

I thought for a bit, then shook my head. 'A Patrick McLatchie in 3D? Hmm, no, I don't think so, sir.'

The headmaster drew a slow, long-suffering breath. He indicated the scribbled note with a backwards flick of his hand. 'I checked this against the relevant page of the school register, and I can assure you, Kerr, that 3D is confirmed as the

form class of McLatchie, whose given name is Patrick.' A.B. stared at me, waiting for a positive response. When none was forthcoming, he consulted the note again. 'A stocky, tousle-haired lad, the reporting teacher states here. Unkempt. Looks as though he's been hauled through a hedge backwards.' He shot me a chastening look. 'Hardly how we expect pupils of the Knox to turn up for studies, is it?'

At last, the penny dropped. 'Ah yes, sir, yes. Now I know who you're talking about. Never heard anybody call him Patrick before, though. No, *Patchy* McLatchie is what he's always called.' I couldn't help smiling. 'Yeah, Patchy – a real character. And right enough, he does usually look like he's been hauled through a hedge backwards. Although he's more likely to have *crawled* through – forwards!' The thought made me chuckle.

'I'm surprised you think it funny!' the beak snapped. 'You've been entrusted with a position of authority within the school, and in that capacity you are responsible, among other things, for ensuring that your subordinates abide by the rule of punctuality – as well as maintaining an acceptable degree of personal tidiness.'

Except for a hint of incredulity betrayed by an occasional narrowing of his eyes, the headmaster's expression remained inscrutable throughout my ensuing attempt to explain the enigma that was Patchy McLatchie. Even my optimistic suggestion that Patchy should be prized as the school's very own version of Huckleberry Finn failed to elicit the slightest sign of empathy.

Undaunted, I went on to speculate that aspects of Patchy's appearance might indicate that traces of Romany blood flowed through his veins. After all, it was well known that certain families in the old Nungate quarter of Haddington (on the other side of the river from the town's more 'affluent' parts) were descended directly from gypsies who had settled there many centuries earlier. Even the vocabulary they still

used in everyday conversation contained words that had their roots in Sanskrit, the ancient language of northern India, from where the gypsies first set out on their wanderings a thousand years ago.

'For instance, *joogal*,' I said, 'is their word for a dog, and –'

A.B. stopped me there. 'All very interesting, Kerr, but totally irrelevant. School rules apply to all pupils, no matter what their background.' He thumped his desk to emphasise the point. 'The boy McLatchie *must* be made to toe the line.'

I was painfully aware that I could be putting my own neck in a noose by attempting to save Patchy's. But if I didn't, the relatively minor issue of his timekeeping was liable to develop into a situation of confrontational strife for the school. Any such turn of events would inevitably implicate me, and I didn't relish the prospect of being bushwhacked by a bunch of vengeful McLatchies.

'The thing is, sir, Patchy – the boy McLatchie – is a free spirit.'

The beak eyballed me over the top of his specs, sceptically this time. 'Free spirit?'

'Yes, sir. I mean…' I swallowed hard, bracing myself for the tongue-lashing I'd be in for if old A.B. didn't buy the premise I was about to put to him. 'I mean, you could actually call him a real nature boy.'

The rector arched his brows, then knotted them. '*Nature* boy?'

'That's right – it's in his blood, sir – that gypsy blood I mentioned.'

A.B. had clearly heard enough. He made to cut me off again, but I got in first:

'You see, to Patchy's way of thinking, it's the rest of us, the so-called *normal* pupils, who are the recidivists – turning up on time every day to sit cooped up in classrooms, when we could be out in the open air catching rabbits, or guddling trout.'

The headmaster continued to frown, but I detected the merest twitch of a smile. He motioned me to go on.

I did, and with no small sense of relief. 'What I'm saying, sir, is that poaching is a way of life for Patchy. It's in his genes. I mean, left to his own devices, he probably wouldn't come to school at all.' I had the bit between my teeth now, so I pressed on. 'In fact, it probably isn't an exaggeration to say that he doesn't actually see a classroom as a place of learning – just somewhere to have a quiet kip after being up all night checking his snares and stuff.'

The beak pulled at his nose, a little cough stifling what I suspected was the makings of a chortle.

I grabbed the chance to deliver what I hoped would be my coup de grâce. Telling Patchy to write out 'I must not be late for school' a hundred times, I explained, had been found to be a pointless exercise. While Patchy duly produced the scrawled lines on arrival at school next morning, his arrival was invariably late. The next step, logically, would be to march Patchy along to his form teacher's room for six of the best. But the damage inflicted upon his snare-making fingers by a licking from the twin tongues of a leather belt would only provoke Patchy into skipping school entirely. This in turn would necessitate calling upon the services of the truant officer, resulting in additonal cost to the school and the likelihood of the officer involving himself in a potentially suicidal difference of opinion with Patchy's kinfolk over in the Nungate. I summed up by submitting that, under the circumstances, sticking with the status quo would seem the more attractive option.

Clearing his throat, the beak resumed his air of authority. 'Pragmatism is commendable, Kerr, and does indeed have its place – at times. The enforcement of discipline is, however, mandatory – always. You'll do well to remember that.' He then dismissed me with a doorward jerk of his head. 'See to it that the boy McLatchie toes the line!'

Now that I knew better what old ‘Spoof’ had meant when he said I had a pragmatic disposition, I decided this would be as good a time as any to put it to the test.

Next morning, when Patchy turned up, late as usual, I recounted the gist of my conversation with the headmaster, and suggested that he should make an extra effort to be punctual. This, I reasoned, would save us both the bother of dishing out and writing lines, but, more crucially, would nullify any risk of the truant officer becoming involved. Patchy grunted one of his customary grunts, but didn’t say a word. Nor did a scowl or smile give any clue to his thoughts. Indeed, when it came to being inscrutable, Patchy was in a higher league than even old poker-faced A.B. Anderson himself.

Predictably, Patchy continued to check in late when it suited him. Nothing changed, except that I jettisoned the futile gesture of giving him a hundred lines to scribble for his sins. Patchy McLatchie had his own set of values, and if upholding them in defiance of petty rules and regulations made him a recidivist, then so be it. He neither knew what the word meant nor was he interested in finding out. Likewise, not even the possibility of never learning how to spell ‘snare’ or ‘guddle’ would make him a bad poacher. Which is where Patchy’s interest in the whole matter of school discipline began and ended.

I admired his determination to be free from the shackles of convention – even envied it, in a way. That old Scots ethic of sticking in and doing well at school was anathema to Patchy, and he seemed so content with the simple life he’d been born to that I admit having considered, both then and on many occasions since, that he might actually be right.

The headmaster never broached the ‘problem’ of Patchy McLatchie again, causing me to presume that he’d given the whistle-blowing members of his staff instructions to turn a blind eye to my turning a blind eye. This got me thinking that being able to accept things that can’t be changed takes courage, while doing so in a way that isn’t detrimental to your

own position takes skill, with perhaps a generous measure of duplicity chucked in. Whatever, A.B. Anderson had clearly mastered the art. He was, in essence, an ace practitioner of pragmatism, whose handling of the Patchy McLatchie affair had taught me a lesson in how to deal astutely with fellow members of the human race – and even with some professional jazz musicians, too, as I'd find out in the fullness of time.

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CHAPTER SIX

'SCHOOL'S OUT'

'Heh, you! The laddie wi' the eyes like a fuckin' googie-wog! Ye're marchin' like ye've got two hairs in yer arse tied thegither!'

So screamed the Royal Scots sergeant (we'll call him Jimmy) who came out from Edinburgh's Redford Army Barracks to drill the school's Combined Cadet Force contingent every Friday afternoon. Sergeant Jimmy always screamed those same words of abuse – sometimes at the laddie wi' the googie-wog eyes (whatever they were), sometimes at the laddie wi' the tumshie heid (turnip head), sometimes at the laddie wi' a face like a skelped erse (spanked backside), yet without ever identifying his current target by name. He knew, of course, that such outbursts were guaranteed to elicit a ripple of giggles from the ranks, thereby giving him an excuse to let rip with another blanket bollocking, which would duly add to his feeling of superiority over the 'horrible little men' in his charge.

Small and stocky, with a nose that looked as though it had routinely led his face the wrong way through a revolving door, Sergeant Jimmy could never claim to have been blessed with

a commanding presence. He was in the poison-dwarf mould of Scottish soldiers, built like a brick shithouse (his own description), hard as nails and with an accompanying aura of alcohol fumes, stale cigarette smoke, b.o. and cheap aftershave – a distinctive redolence which would be brought back to me years later on entering the band room of Liverpool's Cavern Club for the first time.

Another particularly noticeable characteristic of the sergeant's was his guttural way of pronouncing the letter 'R'. This mannerism has a somewhat exotic quality when spoken softly by the French, but takes on an altogether less alluring resonance when rasped out in Scottish parade-ground observations such as, 'Ye're marchin' like ye've got two hairs in yer arse tied thegither'.

Sergeant Jimmy knew that finesse was never going to be his strongest suit. Crudeness was his speciality, and he flaunted it whenever the opportunity arose. Which it frequently did during his lessons on the dismantling and re-assembling of the Bren Gun. These demos were usually conducted in a corner of the playing field adjacent to the girls' hockey pitch. If a game happened to be in progress at the same time, our redoubtable Royal Scots veteran would make a particular point of stressing the importance of properly inserting the gun's body-locking pin, or, as he would refer to it while ogling the nearest hockey player, 'the ladies' delight'.

Even if a few prepubescent boys in the younger squads didn't quite get the relevance of arse hairs and body-locking pins, they never failed to be impressed by Sergeant Jimmy's spiel. And this went for everyone. His chosen method of exercising control over those in his command may have been less subtle than that of our esteemed headmaster, but it was no less effective for all that.

Initially, I hadn't any real interest in most of the soldierly baggage attached to the cadets. But being a member was

compulsory, so, as was my wont, I got stuck in and made the most of the experience. And it paid off. By the time I reached my sixth and final year, I had become Company Sergeant Major, head honcho of the school's contingent. Although it wasn't really in my nature to be the one who yelled the commands during square-bashing exercises in the school quad, I had long since twigged that doing the yelling was preferable to being yelled at. By now, I had also recognised the logic behind such ostensibly trivial exercises as making a column of foot-sloggers count the required number of paces between being ordered to halt and actually halting, essentially in perfect unison. Here was the instillation of discipline in its most fundamental form, cunningly conceived to make an idiot of any individual who got out of step with the herd. As this was a ploy exploited by the military since time immemorial, it was fascinating to ponder that Sergeant Jimmy's arse-hair gibe may once have been screamed at rookie legionaries – in Latin.

Back in the 1950s, few of us thought twice about respecting our teachers and following a reasonable code of discipline. We just did it. It was how most of us had been brought up. We, like generations before us, had been taught to accept that, if we did something wrong at school, we'd feel the sting of a leather strap, the dreaded 'tawse', on our hands. And I doubt if it ever entered our parents' minds that some teachers might get a sadistic kick out of dispensing corporal punishment to the kids in their charge. Mind you, thinking back, I suspect that one or two probably did – though, to be fair, they may well have been driven to it! Whatever, the point is that the system worked. Respect and discipline prevailed – by and large, at any rate.

I grew to enjoy those Friday afternoons in the cadets, when we could escape the day-to-day routine of the classroom to be groomed – even if blissfully unaware of it – into reliable team players and, in some cases, leaders. Finding yourself in the latter category, while remaining keen to be 'one of the

boys', placed a weight on young shoulders that could be as tricky to balance as walking any authoritarian tightrope of the Patchy McLatchie variety. But if you got it right, the resulting relationship with your so-called subordinates was likely to be a whole lot more productive than by adopting the domineering approach I'd seen employed by a few of my predecessors.

I had a hunch that playing the bagpipes could also be a useful means towards the same end.

There were only two other pipers attending Knox Academy at that time, but they were just as enthusiastic as I was about forming a school pipe band. And they cared no more than I did that it would doubtless be the smallest in all of the Combined Cadet Force contingents in the country. Rehearsing would give us an excuse to skip some of the more mundane Friday-afternoon exercises, while playing at the head of the entire school company on parade days would give us a real buzz, as well as helping inject an essential element of swagger into those marching behind. After all, our parent regiment was the Royal Scots, and no 'Jock squaddies' – even Friday-afternoon pretend ones – were worthy of the name without having a bit of wiggle-waggle in their gait.

Yes, a school pipe band would be just the ticket. And old A.B. Anderson agreed when I put the idea to him in his office:

'Excellent, Kerr! Precisely what we need – added kudos for our cadet corps.'

I allowed myself a smug little smile.

'And as Pipe Major,' the rector continued, 'you will represent Knox Academy in the massed pipes and drums of Scotland's schools at Edinburgh Castle this summer. I'll make the necessary arrangements.' The audience over, A.B. nodded doorwards. 'Carry on!'

Massed pipes and drums? Edinburgh Castle? Pipe Major? *Me*? That's when it struck home that announcing my idea to the beak had been a tad premature. I'd already been pushing

it to call a trio of pipers a band. But what about drummers? None who’d played in Haddington Boys’ Pipe Band were still at school, so I found myself leaving the headmaster’s office decidedly less cocky than when I’d entered. What the hell had I talked myself into?

I was still worrying about it next morning, when I saw a bus from one of the outlying areas pulling up as I rode my bike through the school gates.

‘Heh, wait a minute, daddy-o!’ someone shouted. ‘Ah need to talk to ye!’

Jim Douglas hailed from Gifford, a sleepy little village nestling in the lower folds of the Lammermuir Hills, about five miles south of Haddington. He was a couple of years younger than me, and I didn’t know much about him, other than that he played guitar in a local skiffle group called The Tynesiders. Hence the hip ‘daddy-o!’ salutation.

Skinny and gangly, like a younger version of *The Goon Show*’s Spike Milligan, he loped towards me with a look of controlled exasperation on his face. It was the sort of look a doctor might give a patient who hadn’t the common sense to take aspirin for a headache. He flashed me a quick smile. ‘They tell me ye’re lookin’ for drummers.’

‘Bad news travels fast,’ I muttered.

‘Aye, right enough. Anyway, Ah can solve yer problem for ye.’

I automatically thought of Jim’s skiffle links. ‘Well, thanks all the same, but it’s drummers we need, not washboard players.’

He gave a short, staccato laugh. ‘Nah, we’ve no even got *one* washboard player. Naw, it’s me Ah’m talkin’ about, man.’

‘You – a drummer? But I thought you played guitar.’

Jim rolled his shoulders. ‘Yeah, well, that’ll be ma main instrument, right enough. Once Ah’ve mastered the rest o’ the Bert Weedon *Play In A Day* book, like. But, nah, drummin’s ma natural bag.’

‘You’ve played in a pipe band, then?’

'Me? Naw, but ma old man did – in the army. Top man on the skins. Oh aye, taught me the lot. Marches, strathspeys and reels? Two-four, three-four, four-four, six-eight?' Jim hunched his shoulders. 'Nae bother. Ah've got paradiddles and flams in ma genes.'

I reckoned that, if his drumming was even half as sharp as his flair for self-promotion, he'd be able to do a reasonable enough job for us. Anyway, what was there to lose? 'OK,' I shrugged, 'bring your snare drum along to the practice on Friday afternoon, and we'll take it from there.'

'Yeah, far out,' Jim replied, in a way that suggested he'd taken what I'd just said as read, even before I'd said it. Clearly, he already had something else on his mind, which he proceeded to express with an air of reciprocal benevolence: 'But listen, man, talkin' about washboard players – we're needin' one for the group. So, ye know, if ye fancy havin' a go –'

A don't-even-think-about-it scowl stopped him right there. Having finally saved up enough to part-exchange my old Albert System clarinet for a Boehm, I felt that adapting to the change was asking enough of my fingers, without having their flesh torn to ribbons thrashing a washboard. Besides – and I'm sure it wasn't lost on Jim – I was a would-be jazz musician, in whose veins the seeds of anti-pop-music prejudice had already started to germinate. Stuff playing in a bloody skiffle group!

Meanwhile, any concerns I'd had about Jim's drumming were swiftly dispelled. His technique may have been a mite unorthodox, but he knew how to kick a piper up the kilt, rhythmically speaking, which is the hallmark of any good pipe-band drummer. Also, like the best of that rare breed of Scottish percussionists, he showed that he could really 'swing' – in the jazziest sense of the word.

This got me thinking ahead. 'Listen, Jim,' I said, adopting a confidential air as I drew him out of earshot of the two pipers, 'there's, ehm – there's maybe gonna be a jazz band starting up here in Haddington.'

'Oh, aye?' Jim's mien was distinctly guarded. 'And ye're lookin' for a drummer, are ye?'

'No – well, yes – but I was thinking more about you being a guitar player, and…'

Jim's expression grew more wary. 'And?'

'And I wondered if you'd be interested in switching to banjo?'

The scowl that darkened Jim's face mirrored the one I'd given in response to his washboard proposal a few days earlier. Banjo-playing, evidently, did not have a place in his natural bag, so I swiftly dropped the subject – for the present at least.

Returning to more immediate considerations, it proved fortunate that Jim had plenty of confidence in his own abilities, for he was destined to be the one and only member of our drum corps. There would be no 'second tippers' echoing his snare drum lead, no syncopated 'fills' from stick-twirling tenor drummers, no bass drummer thumping out the beat. Just Jim.

Yet, despite its dearth of personnel, our mini pipe band proved amply able to do what was required of it. We played the squads out of the quad after marching drill every Friday, led them deliberately through the billet lines of larger, more eminent educational establishments at cadet camp (manoeuvres that provoked the occasional inter-school confrontation after lights-out), and finally headed the entire company in its parade past the Scottish Division Brigadier who took the salute at the end of our school year.

In keeping with custom, A.B. Anderson stood on the dais beside the army brass, and though his expression remained as inscrutable as ever, an almost imperceptible tapping of a toecap beneath the hem of his headmaster's gown gave the game away. He was delighting in the increased kudos he'd predicted the addition of a pipe band would bring to his school. He had long taken pride in Knox Academy being the only non-fee-paying school in Scotland to boast a cadet corps, but unlike those of its more prestigious associates, the Knox

contingent had never before had its very own pipe band to march to.

While referring to the four of us as a band stretched the meaning of the term to breaking point, this bothered the beak no more, apparently, than it did us. And if our goading some sniffy boarding-school boys into a scuffle or two at camp had met with his disapproval, he never let on. As I had already noted in his handling of the Patchy McLatchy affair, our headmaster was an ace practitioner of pragmatism – when it suited.

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School taught me a few more lessons that were outside the set curriculum. Not least of those was the value of fully committing to whatever you undertake, whether by choice or of necessity. Then, if things don't work out as well as hoped, at least you could say it wasn't for want of trying. Little did I know at the end of that final school term, however, that I'd be putting this principle to the proof a lot sooner and much more crucially than I could ever have foreseen.

But prize-giving day was intended more for reflecting on what had already been achieved than anticipating what the future might hold. And, on the face of it, I had a fair bit more to celebrate than I'd have predicted just a year earlier. One way or another, I had scraped together more than enough qualifications to allow me to apply for a university place. The snag was, though, that the group of subjects on my Higher Leaving Certificate was, as the careers master put it, 'a wee bit quirky' – or, to my way of thinking, totally bloody useless.

Only now did I fully realise the importance of one thing that school had *not* taught me, which was to have the courage of your own convictions. Looking back three years from the ripe old age of seventeen, I could see how wrong I had been to ignore my natural inclinations in favour of following ill-

suited advice, for all that it had been given with the best of intentions. But how many fourteen-year-olds possess the self-assurance, or confidence in their own foresight, to reject the guidance of their mentors?

In those days, the policy was for pupils starting fourth year at high school to specify which subjects they wanted to specialise in for their final three years. And, for reasons that presumably made sense to decision-making educationalists of the day, certain ‘main’ subjects could not be paired. For example, if you wanted to specialise in geography, you weren’t permitted to study history as well. The same applied to science and art. My opting for science had earned me my first invitation to the rector’s office.

Flanked at his desk by head art teacher Kathleen ‘Granny’ Weir, old A.B. Anderson wasted no time in telling me that choosing science as my primary subject was a glaring mistake: one that I’d regret for the rest of my life. I had a certain flair for art, a talent even, whereas my marks in exams over the previous three years had shown him that I wasn’t endowed with the same gift for matters scientific. In short, I could lay the foundations of a career in art with relative ease, while following a science course would require an arduous regime of study, with no guarantee of success at the end of it.

Crestfallen, I explained that, for as long as I could remember, what I’d wanted more than anything was to be a farmer like my grandfather. But as I was one generation removed from being given the opportunity on his farm, the alternative was to gain a formal qualification in agriculture and find my own way in the industry from there. My attempt to assure the beak that I wouldn’t mind working as hard as was necessary to achieve this goal was doused by an exasperated shake of his head and an ‘it’s all yours’ gesture to the principal of his art department.

‘Granny’ Weir’s nickname was a misnomer, in that she was, in appearance at any rate, the archetypal maiden aunt, and an

extremely genial one, normally. Even on the greyest of days, she would cut a sunny figure sweeping jauntily along the corridors, exuding so much bonhomie and joie de vivre that it was easy to imagine bluebirds sitting on her shoulder and butterflies flitting round her head. Also, as befitted a woman whose life was framed in art, her face, akin to the Mona Lisa's, seemed to be lit by a permanent smile. But she wasn't smiling today…

How could I be so blinkered? How could I be so ungrateful? How could I even *think* of spurning the ability I had been blessed with? Couldn't I see the wonderful opportunities that lay before me, once the basic skills I possessed had been honed and polished at art college? Why, to contemplate doing anything else with my life would be nothing short of a crime!

What defence does an adolescent, with the complexities of an adult world crowding his head, have against such a put-down from a matronly madonna with butterflies circling hers? In my case, none.

Fast-forward, then, to prize-giving day, those three years later…

'You've decided *WHAT*?' Miss Weir wasn't smiling again. So much so that any bluebirds and butterflies lingering about her person would have been wise to wing it.

'I'm not going to art college,' I replied, feeling more regret for disappointing her than fear of the dressing-down I sensed would be coming my way.

She uttered a plaintive squeak, squinting. 'B-but you've been awarded this year's special prize for art, for heaven's sake!'

I was tempted to say that I'd also won the cadet medal and a special prize for English, but this didn't mean I was obliged to join the Foreign Legion or become a poet. But I held my tongue. Bad enough to have turned against the advice of a teacher who genuinely believed in me, without adding backchat to brush-off.

A smile returned to ‘Granny’ Weir’s lips while she gathered her thoughts. It was a smile of the kind you’d expect to see on a dog-owner’s face as she laid her late pooch to rest.

‘Just think of the careers you could have chosen,’ she murmured at length.

I could have told her I’d been trying *not* to do precisely that for the past three years, but judged it more appropriate to say nothing.

‘After art college, you could have come into the teaching profession.’

Another wasted three years, I thought, just to qualify for a life of frustration trying to make silk purses out of sows’ ears? I don’t think so.

‘Or, like one of my former pupils, you could have gone into industry. He’s a designer in a leading ceramics factory in England now, you know.’

If the slightest doubt about the wisdom of turning my back on a career in art had been lurking in my mind, it had finally been given the boot. The idea of sitting at a drawing board in a Black Country plate factory painting flowers every day filled me with even more dread than the prospect of being an art teacher. I’d rather muck out cattle sheds for a living.

Miss Weir seemed to have read my thoughts. ‘Are you still set on going into farming?’ She was smiling again, but in a puzzled way. Clearly, design was more attractive to her than dung, and I could appreciate that. Still, no point in debating the matter.

‘Yes,’ I said, as firmly as I could, ‘farming *is* really what I want to do.’

She sighed a resigned sigh and gave a little shake of her head. ‘But, you know, the subjects you’ve got exam passes in – Highers in English, Latin, Geography and Art, Lowers in Maths and French – well, they won’t give you access to a BSc course in agriculture at university.’

Which, I felt like reminding her, was precisely what I'd tried to get across to her and the beak three years earlier. But there was nothing to be gained by bringing that up again.

'So,' she continued, 'how *are* you going to get into farming?'

'I've no idea at present,' I shrugged, before adding somewhat lamely, 'but where there's a will, there's a way.'

Gentle soul that she was, instead of giving me the dressing-down I'd been expecting, 'Granny' patted my hand and smiled again. This time, however, the smile suggested she'd come to the conclusion that I was a misguided half-wit – a nice enough lad, but seriously, if not dangerously, deluded.

'Perhaps you're right about wills and ways,' she nodded. 'Though a more fitting proverb may be the one about leading a horse to water.'

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