

5. SECONDARY SCHOOL

A Teenage schoolboy

By now I was living permanently with my father and step mother, and so when I left Kilimani to start my secondary education at The Prince of Wales School, I used my father's name, Finne, although I was still legally Peter Helliwell. Although the "Princo" was a government school it was a member of the UK "Headmasters Conference" and run along the lines of an English public school for boarders. It was overseen by a headmaster, "Flick" Fletcher, who lived and fought for his boys. When there was a suggestion, well supported in the local press and by a rival school called The Duke of York, that it should be compulsory for schoolboys to wear caps, his ire arose. "My pupils are young men. At home they go around bare headed and even the trilby hats on the school clothing list are optional. They will be forced to wear caps over my dead body!"

I can still recall Flick at assembly one morning, telling us that rules were written as guidelines. If we, with our schoolboy ingenuity, could bend or break them, but without doing harm to others, well and good. However, there was one rule that was never written, and which was never to be broken. That was the rule which stated that if we were caught breaking the rules we took whatever was coming to us without evasion and without complaint. That great man was truly preparing us to face life and the Prince of Wales school turned out infinitely more civic leaders and successful business men than the Duke of York.

I was nominally a member of Clive house, but spent my first two years in Junior and then intermediate house dormitory. Even in my second year there I was still one of the shortest boys in the school and also one of the skinniest. I was also ever more "experimental" and in "Inter" attempted my first explosive device. Watched by curious friends, I poured hydrochloric acid into an empty ink bottle, added an open container of sodium bicarbonate, screwed down the lid and threw it, so that the bicarb and acid mixed. We waited, crouching behind cover, but despite my theories it didn't explode. After a while we threw stones at it and the weakened bottle finally semi-exploded, but it was disappointingly weak. *(Some years later, after leaving school, I eventually perfected electrically detonated home made devices that did indeed make entertainingly big explosions.)*

A problem of sleeping in a dormitory along with up to forty other boys, was somebody snoring. Usually, a shake or well aimed pillow was enough to stop it, but some boys were insufferable, repeat offenders - that is until we found a harsh but effective "cure". Perhaps modern researchers could benefit from studying our discovery. When a serious offender failed to respond to the usual cures we would open his locker and locate his toothpaste, then squeeze some

into his mouth, if open, and up his nostrils. The snoring would stop and he would later wake up with a stinging sensation in his throat and nose. A couple of these harsh treatments were usually enough to ensure peace and quiet for the rest of the term, or even longer.

Certain sports I loved, particularly hockey and rugby; hockey because, unlike most sports, one's size and weight didn't matter and rugby because in certain circumstances it did! Whenever the ground was soft and sodden, I would make kamikaze style flying tackles on opponents, locking my arms around their hips before sliding the lock down to their legs. The bigger they were the harder they fell, and burly members of the opposition soon learned to pass the ball in a hurry rather than risk being tackled. However, in neither sport did I excel, although I did eventually play in the house first eleven for hockey.

I also enjoyed cross country running, not least because it allowed us out of school bounds. This gave us the chance to head for a copse of bushes where we could have a crafty smoke, then take a short cut across the valley and run back into school. In serious cross country events I usually did quite well, finishing in the top classification, but I could never stand out because the school champion, by a long chalk, was also in Clive house - and, in fact, became head of house.

Inevitably, mischief flourished. Boys will be boys and we were wild colonial boys. The Prince of Wales was a boys' school, and a "posh" one at that, so we didn't study domestic science, but some of us did secretly cook. With a couple of mates we would break into the house kitchen, through a small ventilation window, and nick some sugar and butter. We would then hide in a remote part of the school grounds, one boy keeping watch, light a fire, and use an old pan to heat the sugar and butter mixture, stirring it constantly until it started to turn brown. Once it had cooled enough to solidify we would break the brittle toffee we had made into largish shards and then destroy all evidence of the "crime". I was still a junior "rabble", and any seniors who discovered our toffee would comander large chunks of it, until I hit upon a solution - green food colouring. It didn't alter the taste and my mates and I, who knew the secret, still enjoyed our toffee, but the seniors shied away, filching their "tribute" from other junior chefs.

A master bought a Goggomobil. These tiny, German-built, micro cars had a rear mounted 250cc engine and when we first saw it amusement was rife. Soon, however, schemes were hatched. I don't know who the genius was who first thought of it, but I was a willing participant as we carried it up the main stairs and into the school library, placing it on top of the reading table. When its owner eventually tracked it down we were splitting our sides with laughter as we helped him carry it back down, all loudly proclaiming our innocence of the original foul deed.

Another time we carefully lifted the back and placed two specially chosen bricks under the axle, so that the rear wheels still appeared to be on the ground. The car's suspension still reacted normally to the master's weight as he got in, but it went nowhere and it took him some time to figure out our ruse. Masters had to have a sense of humour to keep their senses!

The new French master bought a motorised bicycle, which he kept chained to a tree when not in use. It was the school fire pumps during a practice drill that triggered the germ of an idea. These pumps were designed to be stood in a bucket of water and as one operator pumped the other would play the stream of water on to the fire. Our scientifically trained minds went into physics overdrive contemplating the *gyroscope effect* we had learned about. We let the air out of the French master's front wheel, then took a hand pump for motorcycle tyres that we had "found", stood it in a bucket of water, and reinflated the tyre. Next time "Froggie" went for a ride all went well until he tried to turn the handlebars. The wheel resisted as the *gyroscope effect* came into play and he wobbled. Every time he went to ride his motorcycle a crowd of schoolboys would innocently gather to watch, giggling in anticipation. It was nearly a week before the cause was unearthed.

Academically, I survived on minimum effort. We used to say that the A stream was for swots who worked, the B stream was for idle swots and hard working normal students, and so on down to the hopeless, helpless E stream, who would leave school as soon as it was legally permissible.

One term my English teacher wrote on my report: "I cannot comment on Finne's homework for the entire year, as he has not handed any in." My Latin teacher wrote such gems as "I have to translate Finne's work twice; once from hieroglyphic into Latin, then from Latin to English." Another time he wrote "I must praise Finne this term. He has managed to spill a bottle of ink over his book only twice, instead of his usual three." I think the masters vied with each other to produce the best comment each term. However, my exam results were always high, often higher than all but the best of the A stream, and this was enough to keep me from demotion to the C stream. One of the reasons why I seldom handed in any homework was that during "prep", when we were supposed to studying in silence and doing our homework, I was usually busy helping others to understand theirs. In some ways it was better than homework, because in trying to explain something to someone else it helps your own mind to really understand it.

I did however find an excellent, if unauthorised, way to do my French homework. Living not far from the school was a Seychellois family who naturally spoke French creole. They also had four cheerful daughters who liked to bake cakes and, together with a school friend who was well taken by one of the girls, we would break out of bounds to visit them around tea - and cake - time. Because my "O" level exams were approaching I would insist we

speaking only creole, to their great enjoyment. The upshot was that when I took my French oral exam I entered the examiner's room and in reasonably grammatical and polite schoolboy French answered my name and the first few questions. I then started answering in rapid, guttural Creole. The examiner cut short the test and I was out of his room in about a minute - awarded a distinction in oral French!

When I eventually became a sixth former I achieved a new height of ignominy: It was almost unheard of for a sixth former not to be made a prefect. It didn't bother me. I had by now found my place in the school as the mentor of Senior Study, a special wooden building on the lawn near the school tuck shop. It was reserved for older boys in Clive house who were not yet prefects. Those who were later promoted to prefect still sought my advice and approval. I had discovered the power of being the power behind the throne, so why should I care?

Inspired by tales about German POW camps, we carefully cut a trapdoor through the floor of Senior Study, disguised to make it almost invisible. Underneath, we slowly excavated until we had created a large, half-height room. Here we were "invisible" and here we could smoke and store incriminating evidence. I remember at one old school re-union, many years later, a man asking "Weren't you the guy who had a brewery under the senior study?" Well yes, but it wasn't just me. I was merely the chief chemist, ensuring the correct fermentation of the juice we commandeered from the junior tables in the house dining hall, every time there was stewed fruit for dessert. I made sure it was labelled with the date and type of fruit and tested it to ensure there was no methyl alcohol in it, using reagents swiped from the chemistry lab. Once a month we would have a beverage appreciation meeting in our den under the study, to which honoured guests might be invited, like an ex-senior study member who became head of house.

One of senior study's finest japes took place close to Guy Fawkes night. About a mile from the school was the Loretto Convent girls school and we planned the raid meticulously. At supper the raiding party wore dark clothing under their uniforms, and when the bell rang to signify the end of supper no time was wasted. Grabbing their supplies they broke out of bounds in the dark clothing, running across the fields to the convent. They carried non-filter cigarettes and I think it was eight of the largest fire-crackers available in the shops. These were about the same size as a "B" torch battery and made a terrific noise. Cigarettes were lighted, one from another to avoid the flare of a match, and then the blue touch paper of a fire-cracker was inserted into the unlit end of the fag, before placing each device where the glow of the cigarette would not be seen. The devices were widely scattered around the school grounds, then everyone sprinted back to senior study in time for the school's "prep" bell, which was always rung about 15 minutes after the end of supper.

Dressed again in school uniform everyone tried to breathe normally as they answered the roll call, thus verifying their presence at that precise time. Shortly afterwards somebody innocently asked the prefect if he had heard a bang. He listened, and sure enough there was another and another, carried by the night air. Meanwhile, at the girls' school all hell was breaking loose as nuns and priests scurried to catch the culprits; There were loads of them running about everywhere and letting off dozens of fireworks! I know because one of the girls told me all about it some months later. I'm certain our house master knew who the culprits were, but everyone had a cast iron alibi. Where was the proof? I'm sure "Flick" Fletcher had a quiet smile and I still swear my innocence of any involvement!

The school bell didn't only ring for supper and prep; it dictated our life at the school. The rising bell would sound at 6.30, then be rung again around 7, to tell those on dining room duty to report. Ten minutes later it signalled breakfast, and so it went, signalling each stage of the day until lights out in the evening. The school grounds were vast, with many playing fields, and the six houses (eight if one counted Junior and Inter) were well separated. Clive and Scott houses were in the centrally placed main block, while Rhodes and Nicholson shared premises near one border and Grigg and Hawke shared premises near another, each about three quarters of a mile away. The bell and its mechanism occupied a tall clock tower in the main building. Over the years, many an agile schoolboy had scaled the tower and muffled the bell hammer, thus disrupting the school routine. Breakfast would be late, and masters would have to resort to emergency hand bells and watches to signal the end of each lesson. Remember, however, that this was in an era when a watch that lost two minutes a day was regarded as top quality, so nobody's time pieces, and therefore hand bell signals, truly synchronised. Because there had been no rising bell, breakfast and morning assembly would be up to half an hour late and Fletcher would be doing his best to sound stern as he berated the unknown culprits. Later in the day a fire engine would arrive, a ladder would be sent up and the bell's hammer finally unmuffled.

Twice, in the dead of night, I was part of a small group that made its way across the tiled rooftops of Clive then Rhodes house, before negotiating the roof of the biology lab and finally reaching the clock tower. Next came the ascent of the tower itself, no mean feat in the dark especially when silence was essential. My first trip was when I was a fourth former, my second was as a responsible sixth former. This second visit was no straightforward muffling. Our first assignment was to visit another house, a mile away, and break into the house dormitory whilst everyone slept. We crawled our way to the special, partly separated alcove where the newly promoted head of school was sleeping and opened his bedside locker, seeking long socks and handkerchiefs that carried his name tag. Later, as we climbed across the roof of the main building,

we had to freeze for ages when two masters met and conversed in the quadrangle below, and then again we had to freeze half way up the clock tower when another master hurried across the quad. Eventually, the bell hammer was muffled and we sneaked back to our beds on the senior verandah. Next day, after the bell had been unmuffled, Fletcher returned the socks and hankies to a very puzzled head of school prefect. He adamantly protested his complete innocence to us, his classmates, saying that he had never ever done such a mischievous deed, and never would. I sympathised.

Once a year there was a house dance for the seniors, to which seniors from a girls' school would be invited. (*I think we had to be 16 or over to qualify.*) Before each event there was a series of optional dancing lessons, paid for by our parents, which I duly attended. That is why I know how to dance properly; it's the partner on the floor with me who doesn't!

After the school dance there would be many a love-lorn fellow, who had swapped addresses with a girl, but didn't know what to write. They would ask to for my advice, as I had a reputation for being "good with words" and, more importantly, for being able to keep a secret. Girl would receive a flowery letter, dictated by me, and I was party to many a confidential romance. I was also party to many a deception, as sometimes letters from star-struck teens were to the same boy or girl, and it was difficult to "steer" a bloke into his next move, or dissuade his pursuit of a two-timing girl, without breaking confidences.

When I finally left school, one master's report stated that he feared I would never amount to much in life. I took comfort from the fact that similar sentiments had been expressed for men whose achievements I wish I could have emulated by merely one millionth; men like Winston Churchill to name but one.