

The Second Charade

“My God, not again!” muttered Mostyn Tuckwell, the history teacher. Two old ladies had just tottered into his class. Mostyn Tuckwell had told the head-teacher, Mr Forgan, if he had told him a hundred times: “Lewis,” he had said, “Lewis, sir, this Open Door policy for pupils’ families just won’t work!” And of course he had been right. Who would ever forget the traumatic maths class when Mrs Powers had been knocked out by an optimistic uncle slightly the worse for drink, insisting that there was no such thing as a negative number? Or the time when Miss Ram, the computer studies teacher, had burst into tears after a gang of OAPs wanting access to the Internet had locked her out of her classroom?

But our Mostyn put on a brave face. “Welcome, ladies. If you would like to take a seat quietly at the back, I will continue. Make some room there, Catriona McGillivray. Now, as I was saying, the Crusaders of the Second Crusade were determined to re-capture Jerusalem, and in 1099, under Godfrey of Bouillon, they finally did so. Now, class -”

Just at that moment, Mostyn’s worst nightmare came true. One of the two old ladies pounded the desk with her fist:

“What arrant nonsense, young man! How dare you stand up there and fill these young minds with such rubbish? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Here,” she said, addressing the children on either side of her, “Help me out of this silly desk...”

Obligingly, two of the pupils heaved and puffed, and with the aid of their friends and a window-pole, levered the old lady out of her seat. As if driven by her anger, she rushed up to the front of the class, knocked Mostyn Tuckwell to one side and tapped on the map of Europe and the Near East with her sharp finger.

“I say, madam, you can’t do this!” Mr Tuckwell did his best to regain control of his class. “I’m the teacher here, and Mr Forgan gave specific instructions that --”

He got no further. “How old are you, young man?” demanded the old lady tugging at the collar of his jacket, until the stitching began to rip.

Mostyn avoided her gaze and muttered something. “What? Speak up? Forty-five, did you say? Well, I’m seventy-three. Twenty-eight years older than you. Twenty-eight years nearer the Charades than you, so I think I know what I’m talking about. Hmph!”

Mostyn Tuckwell stood at the front of the class, muttering and clucking. But there was nothing he could say.

“Now, you children all listen to old Mrs Hubbard,” shouted the other old lady from her safe position at the back of the class. “You just listen to our Mary!”

The children listened dutifully.

“So the Charaders, Mr Tuckwell, the Charaders turn up at the city gates of Jerusalem. And how do you think they took the city? Well, if you’re a Charader, then you do it by charades, of course! Look, that girl at the front there, what’s your name?”

“Rona Bott, Mrs Hubbard”

“What a ridiculous name, child! Can’t you come up with something better than that? Your parents must be absolutely potty. Nevermind:, are you any good at charades?”

“Yes, Mrs Hubbard”

“So watch me, I won’t say a word.” Mrs Hubbard clamped her mouth shut and began to act out a charade in the most overblown way. First she held up one finger.

“*One word,*” said Rona.

Then she held up two fingers.

“Two parts”

One finger.

“First part...” said Rona.

Here Mrs Hubbard grabbed Mr Tuckwell, forced him to his knees and made a great show of tapping an invisible sword on either shoulder.

“Beheading?” asked James, “Decapitation?”

“Knighting?” asked Rona

Mrs Hubbard nodded vigorously and waved her hands about.

“Sir?” asked someone else.

Mrs Hubbard beamed, then held up two fingers and tugged her right ear.

“Second part sounds like...” said Rona.

The old lady gave Mr Tuckwell a five pound note - takings from the Bingo session she had just attended. The teacher, astounded, put it in his pocket, smiling sheepishly. Mrs Hubbard smacked his hand and clicked her fingers, asking for it to be returned. Then she did it all over again.

The class was mystified. Mr Tuckwell nursed his hand.

“Give?” asked one pupil.

“Steal?” murmured a second. “Backhander? Slush fund?”

“Corruptible teacher?” surmised a third. “Thief? Mugger?”

Mr Tuckwell looked pained. Mrs Hubbard looked fierce.

“Lend?” asked Christine.

At this, Mrs Hubbard burst to life again, drawing her hands apart.

“Lender?”

Then grabbed her ear-lobe.

“Sender? Bender? Sir Lender... oh! - Surrender!”

There was a great burst of applause.

“So you see, children,” beamed Mrs Hubbard “The Charaders could not lose. If the defenders of Jerusalem had not guessed the word, they would have lost the game and forfeited the city; and if they did guess the word, they shouted out “Surrender!” and the Charaders simply marched in. Brilliant, eh?”

Mr Tuckwell groaned and clutched his forehead. Mrs Hubbard tapped him smartly to make him behave.

“Now has this young man told you about how the Pie Kings discovered Newfoundland in 1000 AD, sailing across the North Atlantic in a pie-dish and fortified only by steak-and-kidney and Fisherman’s Pies? What about the Tutor Kings who ruled England from 1485 to 1603? What a great Royal House that was - every day they taught their subjects something new and helped them revise for exams. 1745 - what has he told you about that, eh?”

The class was silent for a bit, trying to remember. The year sounded familiar. It took young Mhairi Robertson to remember - “The Jacobite Rebellion, under Bonnie Prince Charlie!”

Mrs Hubbard looked grimly at the history teacher. She was silent for a good thirty seconds, during which Mostyn visible wilted, wishing he had in fact listened to his Careers Teacher at school and gone to work as a banana-designer.

“Jacobites, eh? What do you think of that, Lizzie?” she asked her friend sitting at the back.

“Off with his head, Mary! No more cabbage and cocoa for *him*, that’s what I think!”

At the back Lizzie folded her arms and nodded fiercely to the children around her, gesticulating wildly with her eyebrows.

“Certainly not, Lizzie. Jacobites, indeed! Jack-Rabbits, you ignorant young man, Jack-Rabbits!” At each syllable of this sentence, Mrs Hubbard made sure Mostyn was still paying attention by poking him with a pencil. “The Jack-Rabbits in 1745 were led by the Bunny Prince Charlie, also known as the Young Contender. Now repeat that after me, Mr Tuckwell, sir!”

“Jack-Rabbits led by Bunny Prince Charlie in 1745,” muttered Mostyn miserably.

“Also known as the Young Suspender! Louder!”

“Also known as the Young Suspender,” he finished, almost whispering.

Mrs Hubbard gasped. “Young Contender, you cheeky wretch! Suspender, indeed! What insolence! Oh, you make me blush with shame!” The old lady, who did not in truth really seem to be blushing, smacked him twice on the back of the head so that he would pay more attention. “You’ve had it too soft in here, Mr Tuckwell. You’re like all the rest of them - not real teachers at all, all impostors, the lot of you!”

The children found this an interesting theory: could it be that not one of their teachers was a real one, that they were all in disguise - clowns and rat-catchers and stockbrokers and astronauts, all dressed up as teachers? And the head-teacher himself - was he in on it? Certainly, if you looked around, it all began to make some sense...

“Now, let’s get back to our Charaders, children. In 1187, the Charaders lost Jerusalem again. They were never very good at keeping things - losing handkerchiefs, shopping-lists, the keys to the dungeons, then whole fortresses and finally the entire city. They had to have a Third and a Fourth and even a Fifth Charade to find all the things they had lost...”

“That’s right, Mary” shouted Lizzie encouragingly from the back, where she was looking in the children’s lunch-boxes and sampling sweeties. She confided in her young neighbours: “An ancestor of mine on the Third Crusade found a betting-slip for the Grand National which he had dropped in 1174, but that was about the best of it.”

Mrs Hubbard smiled indulgently.

“Now I think that’s quite enough history for today, children. Tuckwell, go and get me a cup of tea. You make it strong now, none of that single tea-bag in a pot stuff. While we’re waiting, let’s look at something far more interesting. Lizzie, get your Lottery Tickets out - now, who’s good at maths...?”