

EXTRACT 1

I imagine, looking back, that I was perhaps a teeny bit naughtier than most of the other boys at Worsley House – that swanky grove of academia in West Hampstead, the prospectus of which had so impressed dear Ma because of its claims to “enlightened methods” and lack of corporal punishment.

By the age of fifteen I should have been boarding at some public school of repute (some rather minor one, perhaps, in view of Dad’s straitened financial circumstances), but Ma could never bear the thought of sending either of us away to school. She herself had been dreadfully unhappy at Leatherhead Court during the war, and she believed that a child’s place was at his mother’s side. Dad had wanted us to follow him to Ardingly in Sussex, but Ma and “enlightened methods” won the day, and off as a day-boy to Worsley House I had gone – first into the preparatory department, and then, from the age of thirteen, into the Upper School. Mike was to soldier on there until 1974 when he too left and went to a big local comprehensive’s Sixth Form to do A Levels in Art, Drama and Business Studies – none of which Worsley House offered.

There are advantages to be gained from “enlightened” teaching, but I’m now the first to admit that a spot of severe thrashing might have prevented the ghastly collapse which confronted the family at the end of the school year of ’69/70.

My expulsion had been on the cards ever since I had been taught by Mr P. Burgess in Drake C. This beaky, nervy young man’s interpretation of the easy-going, psychology-based, child-centred training methods advocated by the Headmaster had gone so far as to insist that we brats call him by his first name (it was Perry – short for Peregrine, we believed) from Day One. This had proved a mistake. Sometimes he forgot to be loving and understanding and, after a particularly exuberant bout of ragging, would seize upon a victim and request that he stand upon a desk and roll up his right trouser-leg. Perry, with a peculiar mixture of vindictiveness and sorrow, would then beat the miscreant’s calf with a *six-inch* ruler, the while imploring us never to inform the Headmaster that such a thing had occurred. Partly because I was so often dragged out to receive this chastisement, and partly because I couldn’t respect a man who hadn’t the common-sense to select at least a *twelve-inch* ruler as his instrument of castigation, I joined the wildest spirits of Drake C, whose mission it was to bring Burgess’ hairs in sorrow to his grave.

Perry (known more often as Pee-Wee, a corruption of his initials, PB, I should think) taught (or tried to teach) French. At the time I believed that no true-blue English boy should be expected to master the lingo of so silly a race as the French, and I’m sure that millions of other British youths felt (and feel) the same. This may explain why French lessons have traditionally been the most disorderly of school subjects. Drake C’s classroom was on the third floor and, thanks to the jamming together of two buildings of different eras, was approached by a short flight of steps which continued down into the room itself. This room commanded a view of the London tube lines running over-ground towards Stanmore and crossing the Finchley Road through a tunnel. Beneath its windows was the concreted courtyard which was used as the junior boys’ playground, and which was reached by the staircase which ran down from our classroom, and by another, thinner flight of stairs round the L-shape of the building.

Pee-Wee would appear at the door of Drake C, a little out of breath from his climb up from the yard, pause, poke his head round the lintel as if to ascertain that all was safe, then scamper

in and dart behind the old-fashioned desk on its dais at the other end of the classroom. His passage through the desks would usually be greeted with joyous cries of ‘Wotcha, Pee-Wee!’ and flying bits of exercise book and inky blobs of blotter. Sometimes a copy of “*The Henriade*” would whizz past him; sometimes he would beat a flying grammar or a heavy Roubaud’s French/English dictionary by a short head to the comparative safety of his dais. Very often Roubaud or the grammar would beat him. Once behind his rampart he would bleat,

‘Quiet! Quiet, boys! Please be quiet! Quiet, I say! Now today we are really going to work! Quiet! Quiet! Now, turn to page forty-two.’

The rest of the lesson would be drowned out by chit-chat, snatches of “*Old Macdonald had a farm*” (“...and on that farm was a peregrine, ee-iy-ee-iy-oh! With a ‘Pee-Wee’ there and a ‘Quiet, boys’ there, etc.....”) and a periodic squeal from Perry louder than the background racket.

‘I never had this trouble from the boys at Preston!’ he would shriek. Usually a massy book would whizz across the room and thud on or near him. ‘Stevens!’ he would howl. ‘What are you doing? How dare you throw that book!’

‘Oh, Sir,’ Stevens would protest. ‘I didn’t mean to throw it. Dombey’s just farted, Sir, and I was waving the niff away with my book, and it flew out of my hand.’

And others would chip in with cries of,

‘It’s true, Sir! Dombey’s always farting. He goes to the doctor for it. He’s got farto-psychosis, Sir.’

And books would wave away an imaginary smell again, followed by shouts of,

‘Whoops! There goes my book now, Sir! Sorry, Sir. It slipped out of my hand like Stevens’ book, Sir.’

‘Quiet! Oh, please be quiet! The Headmaster will hear you!’ Pee-Wee would scream.

The six-inch ruler usually followed about ten minutes before the end of the lesson, after which pandemonium would become general. Twice the Headmaster did appear to quell the row, and twice Pee-Wee had burst into tears of rage and hysteria when he left.

In short, Drake C French lessons were among my regular treats of the week.

Pee-Wee fell regularly for every trick we handed out. He really was such a “mong”, as we used to say in those days. He even fell for the tarpaulin jape. You place a tarpaulin sheet under the blackboard, in whisks Pee-Wee, you shout: “Careful, Sir! The floorboards are up just there! The caretaker asked me to tell you.” Pee-Wee gazes at the tarpaulin, bleats, “Oh dear! I wanted to use the blackboard today,” and spends the whole lesson leaning at a dangerous angle across the tarpaulin, overbalancing, dropping his chalk, and trying to write “Page 42: *La visite a la gare*” and attendant work. The twit never thought to pluck up the edge of the tarp to look underneath.

Pee-Wee fell for the alarm-clock wheeze. You get friends to bring nine alarm-clocks in, you place them in the nine large lampshades dotted round the ceiling of your classroom: those proper, scalloped china bowls, so much cosier than fluorescent tubes in the dark afternoons of winter, and you time each clock to go off five minutes after the one before, the *toute ensemble* lasting nicely through a 45 minute French lesson. I recall that our most successful foray into this form of clockwork campanology was the third one. The previous two efforts had not worked quite as we had expected, for two reasons. On the first, Pee-Wee had simply bleated through the ringing, affecting to notice nothing and hoping to win through by bluff, true to his

motto of "Peace at any price". On the second, we, his pupils, were making more noise than the nine clocks. On the third and best time, we decided to give the alarms a chance and be silent for once. In dashed Pee-Wee, full of beans, but cautious. We had to give him marks for persistence. After each fiasco he seemed to look forward to the next with undiminished relish. Perhaps he thought that the very next day was going to be the one on which we grew up and showed an interest in his subject. He always put me in mind of a quip we had learned in English: "More frightening than his pessimism is Man's baseless optimism." Who said it, I can't remember – and searching for it on-line comes up with zilch. I often quoted it to Mike – the optimistic brother of us two.

Anyway, in rushed Pee-Wee, amid total and unaccustomed silence from the mob. He cried, 'Right! Page forty-two, boys! Today I want to cover a lot of ground!'

Almost immediately came, "Ting-a-ling-a-ling-ling!" from above his head. I must admit, it was pretty noticeable. The lampshade amplified an already lusty alarm-clock to the decibel level of a dustbin being chucked out of an express in a tunnel. Pee-Wee leapt into the air with wild, staring eyes. I suppose he couldn't believe that "Alarm Clock III" or "Alarm Clock, the sequel" was starting. What an arse the man was! Instead of instantly handing out a detention, to be made more extensive if one of us did not *immediately* remove all clocks, he lost his head, dragged out his high chair from behind his desk, leapt upon it, and tried to fish the clock out from the dust and dead flies. As soon as his fingers groped into the shade, the clock stopped, of course. As the words "I never had this trouble with the boys at Pres.....," were forming on his lips, the second clock went off equally deafeningly. And what did Pee-Wee do? He grabbed up his chair and went to try and field that one too. As the second clock had been halted in mid-ring, there was time for him to descend and begin a squealing tirade before the third started off. This went on for some time, with Pee-Wee trying vainly to anticipate from which of the lampshades the bells would peal, and sobbing with humiliation and exasperation, while Drake C rolled exaggeratedly among the desks in hysterics. The lesson ended, as Pee-Wee's so often did, with his rushing tearfully from the classroom. Wonderful fun!

I think the most complicated trick we played on him – the penultimate one, in fact, before he was taken to hospital and I was expelled – took advantage of our third-floor position. I like to entitle this joke "The Phantom Corpse Wheeze". It provided our classic Pee-Wee story. Whenever two or three Worsley House old boys from the late 'sixties are gathered, and the topic turns to Perry Burgess baiting, there are cries of: "Yes, yes! That was a good one! But surely you remember the Phantom Corpse?"

French, on that star-crossed day, began in utter silence.

Pee-Wee appeared, haltingly, as usual, at the doorway.

'Morning, boys!' he bleated. He was greeted with a dead quiet and then one or two loud sobs. Each of us had powdered a little chalk and smeared it on our faces so that, in the dusky classroom, we looked pale and distraught. The sobbing of one or two boys increased and Pat Stevens buried his face in his hands and rocked to and fro like those women you see on news reports about earthquakes in the Middle East. In short, he was overdoing it, but Pee-Wee didn't notice. He whisked over to his desk.

'Good gracious, boys! What's the matter?'

One of us, looking up with drawn and ghastly visage, sobbed,

'I don't know how it happened, Sir! But he....he....he just fell out!'

An arm was thrown dramatically in the direction of a wide-open window. The windows were large sash types with low sills.

Pee-Wee gasped. Two more boys began crying loudly.

‘He was just sitting on the window-sill, Sir, and....and we were talking, and then he just overbalanced and toppled out! And we didn’t know what to do!’

‘Oh, my God!’ shrieked Pee-Wee, rushing across to the window, with saliva streaming back in the wind. He looked out. There, three storeys beneath, spread-eagled in a hideous attitude of death, lay Johnnie Butt, legs twisted, head back, tongue lolling out and curling on his cheek, like a limp party squeaker.

‘You were late for class, Sir!’ said someone.

‘That’s why we were *unsupervised*.’ I added.

‘Oh, my GOD!’ screeched Pee-Wee again, and he tore from the room like a banshee, presumably to fetch the Headmaster, an ambulance, the police and so forth.

When he’d gone, we jumped up, wiped the chalk from our faces with our sleeves, leant out and gave Butt a whistle. He cheated the death pose, got to his feet, darted into the building and nipped across to the back staircase. In a few moments he was sitting in his accustomed place. We lounged back, chairs tilted, hands in pockets, as if awaiting French. Butt had been just in time. There was a firm – a very firm – step in the corridor. The Headmaster had arrived. Behind him hung Pee-Wee, wringing his hands in anguish, and gasping,

‘A terrible sight, Headmaster! The poor boy is obviously dead! Look! Look!’

With stately tread the Headmaster descended the steps into our room, crossed it and approached the open window. We stood and, fascinated, watched him. In truth, we hadn’t expected him to feature in this jape. John Butt looked rather nervous. A grey scholarly head was poked out. The expression on the Head’s face was extraordinary when he turned back to Pee-Wee.

‘There is nothing there, Mr Burgess.’

‘W-what?’ stammered poor Pee-Wee. ‘But, Headmaster, Headmaster, when I was here a few moments ago, I...’

It was our cue to barge in.

‘Excuse me, Sir,’ said Francis Healy to the Head, ‘Mr Burgess hasn’t been in yet. We have been wondering where he was.’

Pee-Wee gulped, like someone swallowing a chestnut that’s too hot.

‘But....but....,’ he gurgled, ‘but, boys, I was here a minute ago!’

‘No, you weren’t, Sir,’ I said.

‘Yes, yes, YES! I...I...’ Pee-Wee gobbled like a turkey, his voice beginning to rise several octaves. ‘I....they’re lying! I....I....was....was....Why – oh! That’s...that’s....’ He had at last spotted Butt, sitting demurely at his desk with a perfectly judged expression of bewilderment on his face. ‘But....you....how did you....?’

The Headmaster gazed at us, then at him. He took off his spectacles and closed them up with that unpleasant snap which indicates that the wearer is damned annoyed.

‘Mr Burgess,’ said he at last, in a sub-arctic voice, ‘will you have the kindness to come to my office after school?’

Perhaps he thought Pee-Wee was plastered. At any rate, he wisely decided not to penetrate the mystery, scenting the likelihood of defeat at our hands. For the rest of the lesson, Pee-Wee sat in tears at his desk while we enjoyed the joke – bastards that we were.

The long-term Torturing of Pee-Wee culminated in the sad affair which resulted in his needing seven stitches, and my needing to find a new school.

We had never meant the jape to go so wrong, but, as usual, Pee-Wee's ineptitude made things much worse than they might have been.

For some time we had been experimenting with that new and delightful toy: transparent nylon fishing wire. Pretty well every classroom in the British Isles has – or had – hot water pipes going round the edge of the room at floor level. If you tie fishing-wire to your ankle, run it along the floor and under those pipes, and then bring the other end to, say, a statue of St Anthony, or to an oleograph of a coastal scene hanging on the wall, you can, with a single jerk, cause the *objet d'art* (as we say in French) to hurtle to the ground in mid-lesson with gratifying results.

Pee-Wee could actually be standing over you, saying, "The boys at Preston never gave me this sort of trouble...." And you could be replying, 'Yes, Sir, Mr Burgess, Sir,' while pulling with your foot, and a wall-clock or map would crash down startlingly at the far end of the room.

We had kept this sort of thing up for a few weeks, but the interest was fading, and we needed to try our hands at something larger than mere wall décor.

Pee-Wee's desk, as I have mentioned, was on a dais under the blackboard, and the dais was only just big enough for it and its chair. Before French, on one enjoyable day, this heavy piece of furniture was pushed right to the forward edge of the platform, teetering, you might say, on the brink of the abyss, just in balance. The boys down the centre row – eight in all, sitting side-by-side at the inky double desks of the period – tied fishing-wire to their ankles and linked it, person-to-person, up to the stubby feet on the master's desk. It was known, of course, that Pee-Wee would, as usual, rush for the cover of this rampart, and crouch defensively behind its bulk.

The door opened.

'Morning, boys! Open your books to page forty-two! We are really going to work today!'

Pee-Wee bustled in. A paper aircraft caught him on the neck as he came halfway down the room, and a piece of blotting-paper soaked in black ink followed it just as he reached his desk. There was a lot of general noise, designed to get him quickly behind his defences. He did the last yard or two at an Olympic rush, darted behind his fortress, began squealing something or other about Preston, and leant forward brandishing his French grammar, which he held like a warrior's shield.

As he reposed his weight upon the sloping desk-top, we hissed,

'Now!'

The eight down the centre aisle jerked back their ankles, unseen by Pee-Wee, and the great desk poised for a second on the very edge of the dais. Pee-Wee, feeling it go, reached over to clutch at it. Of course it over-balanced catastrophically, carrying Pee-Wee with it. The boys in the front row immediately ceased operations with fishing-wire from that time onwards. They were painfully buried, crushed by the impact of Pee-Wee, desk, books, board rubbers and all landing on top of them. We roared, while Pee-Wee disentangled himself, gazed wildly around, and ran hysterically from the room, not to appear again that lesson.

I believe that it was after this event that I gave birth to The Grand (but Disastrous) Idea.

I have written already of the short flight of four steps which led down into the Drake C classroom. These were supported by small wooden columns. Pee-Wee, having plucked up courage at the doorway itself, would normally race down these steps, making a beeline for the shelter of his desk. I borrowed a hack-saw, or perhaps it was a fret-saw, from the hobbies room where Loudon was making a model of a seaplane, and I sawed through each of the little columns. I then put the sawn out sections back into place and nylon fishing-wire was tied to them, led round the pipes, and knotted round my ankles. I had this brilliant idea one break, I recall, after a particularly stimulating bout of Pee-Wee baiting the day before, but only put it into practice after being egged on by Stevens, Healy, Butt and Co.

So there I sat, like one of the Fates, the thread of destiny spinning out from my feet of clay to the small sawn-off pillars. There was a sound of squealing from the passage. Pee-Wee had arrived.

He poked his head round the door-jamb, as usual, in order to see if it were safe to proceed.

He began the well-known bleat.

‘Morning, b.....’

He dashed on to the steps. I had whisked back my ankle. For a moment the entire cosmos stood still, the stars arrested in their courses.

The short flight of four steps collapsed like one of those minarets made of playing cards, and Pee-Wee, remaining in the air for what seemed like two hours, began his swift descent towards the centre of the earth in illustration of Newton’s great law of gravity. He didn’t get as far as that, of course, for the classroom floor stopped him. He tripped over the little pile of collapsed steps and shot along between the rows of desks, ploughing up the wooden flooring with his nose.

Drake C sat, horrified and fascinated. That line: “their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke” which we had had in English, went round and round in my mind like a mad refrain as Pee-Wee’s boko, Pee-Wee’s pointy, economy or family-size schnozzle tore through the sturdy oak like an Antarctic ice-breaker. I had not intended this to happen. After the collapse of the steps, a bemused Pee-Wee was supposed to be left marooned two feet up outside the classroom.

In due course of time, after what seemed nearly a week since I had first pulled back my fateful ankle, Pee-Wee came to rest against my desk. He sat up, gushing gore. Between his fingers, pressed to a lacerated nose, his eyes played like a ray gun around my lower leg and the nylon fishing-wire attached thereunto.

The rest you can guess – indeed know. The rushing to hospital. The painful stitches. The even more painful interview with the Headmaster. The end of my plans for the rest of the O Level year, then Sixth Form at Worsley House. The immediate expulsion of the perpetrator. The long diatribes at home, more in sorrow than in anger. A mother’s tears. The need to find me a new school.

It is interesting to record how difficult it was then to procure a place for an expelled boy who had a reputation for “insubordination and hooliganism” and who had assaulted a teacher. Nowadays, in the 21st century, in the era of “ECM” (“Every Child Matters”), schools would be falling over themselves to add such a specimen to the roll, but back then, in an era of NCM (“No Child Matters”) they didn’t want to know. The only place was a secondary modern in Maida Vale, and firm refusals to consider it were issued by Ma on the grounds that I would be bullied, by Grandpa on the grounds that it wouldn’t be suitable for “the son of a gentleman”,

and by Dad on the grounds that the exam cadre was non-existent and that as I was on the verge of O Levels I must see them through.

So began a twilight time of private coaching, crash lessons (especially in French) at a crammer's in Kensington, and severe moral pressure on me to spend 99.99% of my time in study.

In June 1970, I sat ten O Levels and got nine; (Top grades in English, History, Biology and Religious Studies – if you've got brains, you've got them).

'The boy will go into Bradley and Knights, of course,' said Grandpa. 'It is time he settled into his career. The boy will be sixteen in a few weeks. I have spoken to Geoff Bradley and he will interview the boy gently. The Stock Exchange,' proclaimed Grandpa, sitting upright in his huge wing chair in the new flat at Prince's Gate, 'is the best career for the boy. He is not all bad, by any means.'

The "boy" sat on the tapestry stool and said nothing.

I had as many misgivings about the Stock Exchange at the time as I do now. I had a vague idea that the handling of huge sums of money needed at least some rudimentary mathematical ability. I notice, looking back a few lines, that I have bragged somewhat of my astonishing successes at English, History, Biology and Religious Studies – but honesty compels me to point out that I failed Maths by a margin so vast that it can't have been worth marking the paper at all.

My method of coping with mathematical problems had been structuralist and kinetic, rather than conceptually sound. Given one of those silly sums (popular in the old O Level days) which goes:

A train leaves point A at 30 mph, while a cyclist leaves point B 50 miles away at 10 mph in the opposite direction. How many miles from point B will the train and cyclist meet? (You must show your workings) my immediate reaction had been to reflect a] that trains nearly always run faster than 30 mph, b] cyclists seldom set out on fifty mile spins, and c] was the cyclist on the railway line? My next reaction was to take a pencil sharpener (representing train) and a rubber (representing cyclist), hold them as far apart as my arms would permit – the distance to represent fifty miles – and then move sharpener and rubber towards each other, the sharpener going three times faster than the rubber. I could never show any workings.

Problems about tanks filling through valve A at 3000 gallons per hour, but emptying from tap C at three litres per minute, and how much would be left after two hours, I could not manage at all with sharpener and rubber, I would simply write: "Sorry no time – estimated answer: 4.5 gallons". It was always depressing after tests to hear that everyone else had found it easy and agreed that the answer was 1200 gallons.

This did not prove a recipe for success at O Level Maths.

'Geoff Bradley is delighted at the prospect of taking into the old firm one of my grandsons,' declared Grandpa. 'I may remind you, Bill, that I have built up a not inconsiderable fortune on the Stock Exchange. Anthony may do the same, given an early enough start in the right hands.'

'Sixteen is too young,' said Dad very definitely.

'We both want him to attempt A Levels. His mother hopes he may consider university in due course.'

'What! University! Humph! Har! Flower Power and homosexuals!' snorted Grandpa.

The last thing on earth Dad wanted me to do, I realised, was to tie my ship of destiny to Grandpa's dockside – backside, he might have put it, having had nearly twenty years of Grandpa's money, Grandpa's influence, Grandpa's punctuality, and Grandpa's ideas shoved down his throat. I understand now how humiliating it was for him to have been poor – even though you would never have guessed it by his manner and deportment. He was very tall and very heavily built, and moved with a deliberate, slow majesty and a downward tilt of leonine hair, winged eyebrows and blue eyes. He gazed down on lesser men, deftly moving his bronzed, manicured hands in the way that rich, leisured people do. Dad was almost the only person I had come across whose sleeve buttons at the wrists of blazers and coats actually undid, enabling him to fold the cuffs back when engaged in the least manual of tasks, such as writing letters. The boys at Worsley House had been impressed by his immaculately polished giant duo-tone 1950s Cadillac 60 sedan. Dad's fingers were so wide and strong that when a newly-lit cigarette was held between them, you could see only the glowing tip on one side and the filter on the other. To watch him handling the great Cadillac through London traffic, gently rotating the huge cream steering-wheel between fine, outwardly-curved thumbs, was to understand what driving really meant. To see him draw up outside Harrods, and the flunkey leap forward to open the door, was to have that sense which only Royals can know of being a special person – a being set apart. Say what you like, but small men never look rich in the fullest sense of the word. Seeing Grandpa and Dad together, you would not guess that the irritable, clipped-moustached smaller one had made "a not inconsiderable fortune" and that the larger one lived in a mad, topsy-turvy flat in Maida Vale, struggling with free-lance journalism in the cramped, shared office of a minor publishing outfit of hobby books and conscious of having to depend for school fees, summer holidays and large bills on his father-in-law's crusty munificence.

Perhaps, then, it was no surprise that Ma's wish for me to delve more deeply into the ample pages of knowledge was given powerful support by Dad's anxiety lest I become a scion of Grandpa's in Grandpa's old firm. The two of them proved unbeatable, and the promised – and, by me, dreaded – interview with Sir Geoffrey Bradley never came off.

Three cheers! No need to work yet. No need to depend on getting enormous sums right for my living. No need to start on the lowest rung of Bradley and Knight's long ladder. I had no clear idea of what being engaged in "a proper job" entailed, but I was certain it would be disagreeable, and would leave no room for the oceans of whimsy, silliness, self-indulgence and Bohemianism which, at sixteen, I felt sloshing round inside me, waiting to pour out.

With nine O Levels (Top grades in English, History, Biology and Religious Studies) to recommend me to a Sixth Form – provided they could overlook my status as an expelled pupil – it was Hey ho! Hey ho! Off to school we go!

But where?