

Corkers

There were about thirty or more masters at Repton and most of them were amazingly dull and totally colourless and completely uninterested in boys. But Corkers, an eccentric old bachelor, was neither dull nor colourless. Corkers was a charmer, a vast ungainly man with drooping bloodhound cheeks and filthy clothes. He wore creaseless flannel trousers and a brown tweed jacket with patches all over it and bits of dried food on the lapels. He was meant to teach us mathematics, but in truth he taught us nothing at all and that was the way he meant it to be. His lessons consisted of an endless series of distractions all invented by him so that the subject of mathematics would never have to be discussed. He would come lumbering into the classroom and sit down at his desk and glare at the class. We would wait expectantly, wondering what was coming next.

‘Let’s have a look at the crossword puzzle in today’s Times,’ he would say, fishing a crumpled newspaper out of his jacket pocket. ‘That’ll be a lot more fun than fiddling around with figures. I hate figures. Figures are probably the dreariest things on this earth.’

‘Then why do you teach mathematics, sir?’ somebody asked him.

‘I don’t,’ he said, smiling slyly. ‘I only pretend to teach it.’ Corkers would proceed to draw the framework of the crossword on the blackboard and we would all spend the rest of the lesson trying to solve it while he read out the clues. We enjoyed that.

The only time I can remember him vaguely touching upon mathematics was when he whisked a square of tissue-paper out of his pocket and waved it around. ‘Look at this,’ he said. ‘This tissue-paper is one-hundredth of an inch thick. I fold it once, making it double. I fold it again, making it four thicknesses. Now then, I will give a large bar of Cadbury’s Fruit and Nut Milk Chocolate to any boy who can tell me, to the nearest twelve inches, how thick it will be if I fold it fifty times.’

We all stuck up our hands and started guessing. ‘Twenty-four inches, sir’... ‘Three feet, sir’... ‘Five yards, sir’... ‘Three inches, sir.’

‘You’re not very clever, are you,’ Corkers said. ‘The answer is the distance from the earth to the sun. That’s how thick it would be.’ We were enthralled by this piece of intelligence and asked him to prove it on the blackboard, which he did.

Another time, he brought a two-foot-long grass-snake into class and insisted that every boy should handle it in order to cure us for ever, as he said, of a fear of snakes. This caused quite a commotion.

I cannot remember all the other thousands of splendid things that old Corkers cooked up to keep his class happy, but there was one that I shall never forget which was repeated at intervals of about three weeks throughout each term. He would be talking to us about this or that when suddenly he would stop in mid-sentence and a look of intense pain would cloud his ancient countenance. Then his head would come up and his great nose would begin to sniff the air and he would cry aloud, ‘By God! This is too much! This is going too far! This is intolerable!’

We knew exactly what was coming next, but we always played along with him. ‘What’s the matter, sir? What’s happened? Are you all right, sir? Are you feeling ill?’

Up went the great nose once again, and the head would move slowly from side to side and the nose would sniff the air delicately as though searching for a leak of gas or the smell of something burning. 'This is not to be tolerated!' he would cry. 'This is unbearable!'

'But what's the matter, sir?'

'I'll tell you what's the matter,' Corkers would shout. 'Somebody's farted!'

'Oh no, sir!' ... 'Not me, sir!' ... 'Nor me, sir!' ... 'It's none of us, sir!'

At this point, he would rise majestically to his feet and call out at the top of his voice, 'Use door as fan! Open all windows!'

This was the signal for frantic activity and everyone in the class would leap to his feet. It was a well-rehearsed operation and each of us knew exactly what he had to do. Four boys would man the door and begin swinging it back and forth at great speed. The rest would start clambering about on the gigantic windows which occupied one whole wall of the room, flinging the lower ones open, using a long pole with a hook on the end to open the top ones, and leaning out to gulp the fresh air in mock distress. While this was going on, Corkers himself would march serenely out of the room, muttering, 'It's the cabbage that does it! All they give you is disgusting cabbage and Brussels sprouts and you go off like fire-crackers!' And that was the last we saw of Corkers for the day.