



ELEMENTARY
MURDER

A. J. WRIGHT

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

Copyright © 2017 by ALAN WRIGHT

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-1949-5

Typeset in 11.5/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*For my younger brothers Billy and Stephen, who shared a great
childhood with me in the ironically-named All Saints Grove.
I should also like to dedicate this novel to all the friends I made at
St Benedict's RC Primary School, Hindley, and Blessed John Rigby
Grammar School for Boys, Gathurst, Orrell.*

If only we had a time machine . . .



George Street Elementary School, Wigan
Extracts from school log book September 1894
[Completed by Mr R. D. Weston, Headmaster]

Monday 10th September

Billy Kelly, Standard 6, given three swipes of the cane for spitting at Albert Parkinson in class. Later given six swipes of the cane for swearing at Miss Ryan in the playground. Absented himself from the school buildings at 3:20 p.m.

Tuesday 11th September

Mrs Kelly demanded interview with me. Her son unable to carry out his duties at Cartwright's Rolling Mill on account of his hand. Mrs Kelly was informed firstly that the boy's inability to collect scraps of wrought iron from the floor of the foundry was a direct consequence of his inability to behave himself in class and in the playground. Secondly, that in any case it was against the law for her to send her son to work at Cartwright's or anywhere else. There ensued a most unseemly scene in front of girls' drawing class. Police informed.

Wednesday 12th September

Albert Parkinson absent – third Wednesday in a row.

Friday 14th September

Letter received from school inspector based in Blackburn. He will visit next week (the 21st) which is also the date of the interview for new assistant teacher to replace Miss Rodley. We must make a concerted effort to impress upon the inspector how far the school, and especially Standards 1 and 2, has come in terms of spelling and arithmetic. Last year's report spoke of 'lamentably weak performances' in those areas. We must also be sure to let the inspector know of our high hopes for sewing: it is hoped the successful candidate next week will build on the excellent work Miss Rodley has done with the Standard 6 girls in this area.

Monday 17th September

Arthur Clayton, Standard 2, and Edna Clayton, Standard 4, not in school all day. Attending the funeral of their father who was killed in the pit last week. I observed Miss Mason's spelling lesson with Standard 1; our pupil-teacher is making very good progress and will doubtless be an asset to the profession.

Wednesday 19th September

The four Macfarlane children sent home on account of infant sibling suffering from scarlatina.

Thursday 20th September

Lady Crawford paid a most unexpected visit this morning to see the work of the sewing classes. Her Ladyship was most complimentary and gave a short address to the staff, graciously

praising their work with 'such inferior material' and paying tribute to the efficient leadership enjoyed by the school.

Friday 21st September

A most curious day. The school inspector, Mr Henry Tollet, spent almost the whole day in school, during which time he attended several lessons. He was most impressed by Standard 4 boys' geography, and he commented favourably on Standard 5 girls' penmanship which, he observed with humour, flowed far more fluently than their speech! He expressed surprise and delight at the work of our pupil-teacher, Miss Mason. There were points of dissatisfaction, especially the behaviour of some of the children, and his subsequent report will enumerate in more detail his concerns. However, it is sufficient to say that on balance his observations weighed more heavily towards the favourable.

Unfortunately, the interview for a new teacher to replace Miss Rodley did not end satisfactorily. The applicant, a young lady named Miss Dorothea Gadsword, had spoken well enough when with myself and some members of my staff, and in spite of an initial lack of firmness and distance when observed with Standard 6, she eventually acquitted herself quite well. Later, in the staffroom, she was overcome by a fainting spell, a circumstance made all the more awkward as it coincided with the entrance of Mr Tollet on one of his peregrinations around the school, accompanied by our school manager Reverend Charles Pearl and myself. Rev. Pearl and I were both in melancholy agreement that such sensibilities would be unsuitable for the hurly-burly of teaching at George Street and at her interview informed the young lady accordingly. She was most distressed.

I have arranged for a short staff meeting Monday morning before school to discuss the inspector's preliminary (verbal) findings before the official report is issued.

Monday 24th September

It is with the greatest regret that I must record the dreadful events of this morning. Upon unlocking the school buildings and prior to firing up the stoves, our caretaker, John Prendergast, made a terrible discovery. In Standard 5 classroom, he discovered the body of a young woman. I was shocked to discover that it was the body of Miss Dorothea Gadsword, whom we had last seen on Friday and whom we were compelled to dismiss as a candidate for Miss Rodley's position.

The police were sent for and I took the decision to close the classroom. Standard 5 were placed with Standard 4 for the day. To a very great extent the pupils behaved with commendable gravity, with only a few exceptions who were dealt with as befitted the solemnity of the occasion. I spoke at length with the police detective who was most impressed by the way the school had comported itself on this most unfortunate of days. The aforementioned detective conducted several interviews with members of staff at the end of the school day and he complimented the manner in which the school had risen to the challenge of a very trying day.

CHAPTER ONE

‘What the bloody ’ell’s up wi’ that lot?’

The concerned citizen had paused on her way to the shops when she heard what she thought was a full-scale riot emanating from the schoolyard of George Street Elementary School.

The old woman she was addressing lifted her shawl a little and glanced across the street, shaking her head.

‘Should be inside an’ learnin’ summat,’ she said. ‘Goin’ to the bloody dogs, that place. They let ’em run wild. I’m glad my young uns are out of it. Didn’t learn ’em owt anyroad.’

‘It’s makin’ the little buggers stay till they’re eleven,’ an older man added as he approached the two women. ‘When I was their age I were down t’bloody pit pushin’ tubs.’

As if to emphasise his disgust at the recent raising of the school leaving age, he spat forcibly into the road before shuffling his way into town.

The two women watched him go, then, with a sniff, returned their attention to the unholy racket from the schoolyard, where they could see several children violently shoving each other

in what seemed to be a desperate attempt to climb up to the windows of the school building facing the street.

The old woman chuckled.

‘At least when my lot went yonder they fought like buggery to leave the place. Them little sods look like they’re fightin’ to get back in!’

‘Eyup!’

The first woman elbowed her companion and nodded towards the upper end of George Street, where two police constables, standing either side of a man in plain clothes, were marching purposefully along the pavement. All three had grim expressions on their faces.

‘Some bugger’s for it!’ she said. ‘Probably *’im.*’

She raised a gnarled finger and pointed at the sign outside the building, its lettering faded and the paint flaking where the wood was rotting:

George Street Elementary School
Mr Richard D. Weston, Headmaster

She was slumped near the door, one arm stretched out as if she had been reaching for something, while her other arm lay loosely by her side. She was wearing a small hat that rested slightly askew on tight curls, and the small outdoor coat was still buttoned tightly at the front to highlight her trim waist. Nearby, there was a pool of congealed vomit, and stuck in the centre a single sheet of paper. Fighting back a wave of nausea, Detective Sergeant Michael Brennan stooped low and carefully plucked it from the rancid mess. Although the paper was damp, he could still make out the only thing written there: in spiderish letters the word FAILED.

He stood up and turned to the man standing in the doorway. The caretaker, John Prendergast, had found the body early that morning, as he opened the building. He was around forty, with thick greying hair and a scar down his left cheek. He stood there now, staring at the woman's body with a mixture of pity and revulsion on his face.

'You say the door was locked?' Brennan asked him.

The man nodded and wiped his mouth. 'Aye. It were. When I looked through the glass in the door an' saw her lyin' there I had to break the lock.'

'You didn't have a key?'

He shook his head vigorously. 'These classrooms are never locked. I keep the keys in the storeroom back yonder.' He pointed towards the end of the corridor and a small door that lay half open. 'I ran back there for the key but it weren't where it should be.'

'So you broke in?'

'Aye. I didn't know what else to do. She might've been alive still for all I knew. I thought she might be drunk.'

Brennan looked around the room. 'Was the door locked from the inside?'

'Aye.'

'How do you know? It could have been locked and just left like that, leaving the woman still inside.'

As if by some sleight of hand, John Prendergast pulled something from his pocket. When he held it out towards him, Brennan could see it was a key.

'That's the key to this room, is it?'

'It is.'

'I thought you said you couldn't find it?'

'I never said that. It was found after I broke in. It were on

t'floor over yonder. Reverend Pearl spotted it when he came in.' He pointed to a space behind the door.

'Are you saying the door was locked from inside?'

'Aye. Key must've dropped out when I broke t'lock.'

Brennan gave a long sigh. 'What did you do after you found she was dead?'

'I went for Mr Weston. He came along, with all the others followin'. . . '

'Others?'

'Aye. All the staff. And the vicar. They'd got in early for a meetin', after the inspector's visit last Friday. Seein' what he'd had to say in his report, probably. Anyroad, when Mr Weston saw for himself, he asked the reverend to escort 'em all back and said I were to make the room secure. Though how I was supposed to do that wi' yon lock hangin' off . . . I just shoved a bench in front of the door. That's when he must've sent for you lot.'

Brennan thanked him. 'I'll need to speak with you later, Mr Prendergast. But that'll be all for now.'

When he'd gone, Constable Jaggery, who had been standing outside the classroom with the other constable to ward off any prying eyes, came in and gazed down at the body.

'Why do they do it, Sergeant?'

'Do what?'

'Suicide. She seems pretty enough.'

'Let's see if we can get some answers, then, shall we?' With that, he told Jaggery to stand outside the main entrance, while Constable Hardy waited for the wagon to arrive for its melancholy cargo.

In the normal run of things, Richard Weston regarded his study as his inner sanctum, a sacred place where he dispensed

the necessary punishments, oversaw the work of both scholars and teachers, and drew up his weekly list of materials to be introduced to the children for their Object Lessons as advocated by Mr Currie and his worthy tome *The Principles and Practice of Common-School Education*. In such a venerated place, he ruled.

Today, however, he sat in his study feeling rather unvenerated, and tried hard to keep his hands still. His face was pale, a consequence of standing over a body and, with his caretaker watching on, ascertaining that indeed the woman was dead and declaring this was a matter for the police.

‘Suicide is the most heinous of crimes, in my opinion. A selfish, wicked act.’

‘And you are convinced it was suicide?’ asked Brennan, sitting opposite him.

‘Well,’ he began with the same patient tone he would use with a backward child, ‘there’s the small matter of the note she left.’

‘Of course,’ said Brennan, placing a hand against his inside pocket, where the slip of paper lay folded inside his handkerchief.

‘Added to the fact that she locked herself in the room so she wouldn’t be disturbed.’

‘I see.’ Brennan thought for a few seconds then said, ‘Perhaps you could tell me who the woman is and how she came to be found in a classroom?’

Mr Weston leant forward and picked up a pen, turning it around and examining the dry nib.

‘As to your second question, I have no answer, Sergeant. Mr Prendergast, our caretaker, assures me he locked the school on Friday night – only two doors, front and rear. How the woman got into the school is beyond me.’

Beyond the closed door of the headmaster’s study, they

could hear the shuffle of feet along the corridor where the woman's body was being carried in the cheap wooden coffin to the wagon waiting outside. They must have opened the large double doors that formed the entrance to the main school buildings, for immediately from inside the headmaster's study, they could hear the loud screams of nervous and excited children who would be gathering round the coffin eager to steal a glance and terrified of the consequences.

'Get back you snivellin' little sods!'

Brennan smiled thinly. He could rely on Constable Jaggery, whom he had left on duty in the schoolyard, to maintain the safety, if not the dignity, of the melancholy transportation. He looked at the headmaster's bowed head and gave an audibly provocative sigh.

Finally the headmaster began to elaborate.

'Her name is Miss Dorothea Gadsworth. She was here in school on Friday.'

'Why?'

Mr Weston took a deep breath, as if he were about to dive in a freezing stretch of river, and said, 'She had been invited for interview. We are soon to have a vacancy, you see, as Miss Rodley is leaving us. She is engaged to Reverend Pearl, our school manager, and as such it would have been inadvisable for Miss Rodley to continue in her post.'

'Now, tell me what happened on Friday.'

With a frown, he looked up at Brennan and said, 'From an inauspicious start, everything was going quite well, Sergeant. Until the poor woman fainted.'

Dorothea Gadsworth stood at the front of the class – Standard 6 – and cleared her throat before speaking. Thirty-seven pupils – girls and

boys – stood before her behind desks that had seen better days. Their faces were, for the most part, quite clean, although Dorothea could make out smears of dirt just below the hairline on many of the boys. Occasionally there was a chorus of sniffing, and she noticed several of them using their sleeves to wipe their noses. She had been told beforehand of the nature of this particular group – ‘prone to silliness’ had been the view expressed by Miss Jane Rodley, the teacher whose position she hoped to take – and so she adopted the stern expression they had been encouraged to develop at training college.

‘Good morning, Standard 6.’

There was a ragged chorus of ‘Good morning, miss’ mainly from the girls. The boys stole furtive glances at each other and some covered their mouths to hide their sniggering, unaware that such an action served only to highlight, not conceal, such rudeness.

‘Now you may sit. In SILENCE!’

Although she had a slight, demure figure, her voice was loud and forceful. It had the desired effect, for now the whole class were sitting quietly behind their desks.

‘My name is Miss Gadsworth, and I am here to teach you arithmetic this morning.’

There were the beginnings of a communal groan that were immediately stifled when the schoolroom door opened and the headmaster, Mr Weston, entered, followed by the school inspector, Mr Tollet. The children all rose and stared directly ahead, their faces now expressionless, a contrast with the rather apprehensive frown that had suddenly appeared on Miss Gadsworth’s forehead.

‘Sit!’

Mr Weston’s voice was hard and splintery, rather like the long cane he carried under his arm.

It took Miss Gadsworth a few seconds to re-compose herself, but she lifted her head in a superior manner (again following the

guidelines set by her training) and leant forward on the teacher's desk in what she imagined was an attitude of authority.

'As you are no doubt aware, I am new to the school and would like to spend a minute getting to know you. I am told you are a very bright set of children.'

There was a sharp cough from Mr Weston, who had by now moved to the back of the room, Mr Tollet beside him.

Miss Gadsworth moved away from the front of the classroom and began to walk between the rows of desks. She raised a hand and pointed to a small girl seated halfway along.

'Name?'

'Elizabeth Paxford, miss,' the girl replied in a faint voice.

'Elizabeth. I want you to tell me what you want to be when you grow up.'

The girl looked at her curiously.

'Do you understand me, girl?'

'Miss?'

'Well? What do you want to be?'

It was clear that the girl was under great pressure, for her cheeks reddened and she looked down at her desk.

Undaunted, Miss Gadsworth pointed to a young boy seated at the back of the class, a few feet away from Mr Tollet.

'You. What is your name?'

'Albert Parkinson.'

'Miss,' she added as a reminder of his manners.

'Miss Albert Parkinson,' came the instant reply to an accompaniment of sniggers.

The hopeful applicant took a deep breath, glanced to the rear of the classroom where the headmaster and school inspector sat with expressionless faces.

'And what do you want to be when you grow up, Albert?'

The boy looked at a red-haired boy near him and said loudly, 'A carrot, miss. Just like Billy.'

There was general laughter, which threatened to reach a riotous crescendo until Mr Weston stepped forward and gave the joker a resounding slap around the head.

The headmaster gave a paternalistic sigh.

'She made two basic mistakes, Sergeant. After the lesson – which went off quite well after that wicked boy's attempts to derail it – I told Miss Gadsforth that she must always remain at the front of the classroom, either seated at her table or standing behind it. That provides a commanding focus of attention, and she can see at a glance any child who fidgets or otherwise misbehaves. A lighthouse, I told her, never moves but shines its light in all directions. A warning and a guide. That is what she must be. Secondly, a teacher must never try to *make conversation* with the children. They aren't her friends, they are her charges. A lighthouse may benefit all within its compass, shall we say, but it never encourages vessels to sail close. I mean, asking them what they wish to be? It encourages dissatisfaction. Besides which, the question was superfluous.'

'Why?' Brennan asked.

'For the simple reason that there is very little doubt about these children's futures. Mapped out, Sergeant. The girls will work in the mills and get married and have children of their own, or they'll work on the pit brow screening coal and wearing those ridiculous trousers. The boys will go down the mines or work at the iron works. One or two might even run away to join the army. Why encourage flights of unreachable fancy?'

Brennan had a fleeting image of his own six-year-old son Barry and the dreams he had spoken of.

‘She should have made them recite their times tables,’ the headmaster went on. ‘Much more productive. And harmonious.’

Brennan shifted in his chair. He wasn’t here for a lesson on lessons.

‘You said Miss Gadsworth fainted?’

‘Yes, indeed. After her lesson I left her in the staffroom and asked Miss Rodley – whose class she would have been taking over – to speak with her and give her some words of encouragement. Miss Mason and Mr Edgar were already there – they are in charge of Standards 1 and 5 respectively – and they made a very pleasant table fortified by tea and coffee. By this time it was playtime and all the children were outdoors. The boys in their playground and the girls in theirs, of course. Miss Gadsworth seemed to be getting along with everyone. So I left to have a word with our school manager Reverend Pearl, who had arrived a few minutes earlier and whom I had left looking after Mr Tollet.’

‘And who’s Mr Tollet in charge of?’

Mr Weston gave a wry smile.

‘I suppose in a way the answer is all of us.’

Brennan frowned, so Mr Weston explained.

‘Mr Tollet is our school inspector. Occasionally we’re graced with an inspection. It was just unfortunate that poor Miss Gadsworth chose the moment we entered the staffroom to faint. Mr Tollet was most gracious – indeed, most concerned for her welfare. He ordered her to be laid flat on the floor of the staffroom and the windows opened. She recovered enough to ask if she might be excused for half an hour to *take some air*.’ He gave a half-smile. ‘She hadn’t spent much time in this town, obviously.’

Ignoring the condescending attitude to his town, Brennan asked, ‘She left the school?’

‘And returned within the half hour, looking a little more

composed. Mr Tollet later assured me that the incident would form no part of his report. Out of respect for his position I asked if he wished to sit in on the interview later in the day. I would have welcomed his views on the girl. But he pleaded a prior engagement. Of course by that time . . .’

The headmaster spread his hands open and left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

‘By that time, what?’

‘Well, considering she was an applicant for a position here, it would have been unseemly to confirm her appointment.’

‘Why?’

Weston seemed to take umbrage at the question. ‘Apart from her initial lack of firmness in the classroom, and although she acquitted herself quite ably for the remainder of the lesson, it would have been folly itself to appoint someone who fainted in front of a school inspector. What would that say about our judgement of character, Sergeant? The Lord Himself knows what she would have done if he *had* agreed to stay for the interview. Perhaps a more histrionic attack of the vapours?’

Brennan, who found himself now feeling a certain sympathy for the deceased, shook his head. Mr Weston took that as an affirmation.

‘I would be grateful if you could give me a list of all those staff who came into contact with Miss Gadsforth.’

‘Might I ask why, Sergeant?’

‘Because I wish to speak with them.’

The headmaster flushed. ‘What I meant was, why do you wish to speak with them?’

‘Because I have a desire to,’ Brennan replied with a smile.

The expression on Mr Weston’s face contained elements of shock, outrage and protest. Clearly, he was unaccustomed to

such prevarication in his own office. When he spoke, his lips barely moved.

‘I shall furnish you with a list, Sergeant. Of course. Though as to why you should wish to prolong this unfortunate incident . . . However, may I ask that you speak with my staff when school finishes for the day at five o’clock? The school is already facing disruption.’

Brennan considered the request and gave a nod. ‘And the address of the school inspector, Mr Tollet.’

Mr Weston stood up. ‘Is that really necessary?’

‘Part of the investigation. No stone unturned.’

‘But an investigation into what, for goodness’ sake? The poor woman was obviously distraught at failing her interview and came back here to take her own life. There is absolutely no need to bring Mr Tollet into this. No need whatsoever.’

Brennan, too, stood up. ‘We’ll see. And now I’ll set about my business while you set about yours. I can hear the children getting restless.’

As he opened the door he paused and turned. ‘Just one more thing, Mr Weston. Out of interest.’

‘Oh?’

‘Once your caretaker found the woman’s body and reported his gruesome discovery to you, why didn’t you close the entire school? It would have made our job all the easier.’

The headmaster smiled at last. ‘My responsibility is to look after the pupils in my charge, Sergeant, not clear the way for what appears to be unnecessary officiousness. Besides, letting them loose at nine in the morning would create far more work for you and your constables than you could ever imagine. Think of a pack of monkeys swinging around the market hall, not to mention the howl of anger from parents who’d got rid

of them till midday. I took the decision with the full support of Reverend Pearl who was here this morning.'

'So I gather. He took the staff back to the staffroom.'

'Yes. The sight of that poor girl was most distressing.'

'The reverend didn't stay?'

'Why should he? Once we'd secured the room, there was no reason for him to stay. He had only come to discuss the inspector's visit, and we could hardly do that with a dead body down the corridor. Besides, he had parish duties to perform.'

Brennan grunted and stroked his moustache. 'This afternoon will do, Mr Weston.'

'For what?'

'The list of people who met Miss Gadsworth. If you could ask your staff to remain behind when school ends.'

'Yes.'

'Oh, and that will be a good time to pick up Mr Toller's address.'

Brennan could see the man's hands were now shaking as he leant on his desk for support, and he was almost through the door when the headmaster called out, 'You never answered my question. An investigation into what?'

'The circumstances of Miss Gadsworth's death.'

'But I thought she had taken her own life. Surely the evidence . . .'

'A possibility, of course. And from the blue colouring of her skin and lips I'd say it *was* poison of some kind.'

'There you are then.'

'But I have some questions first, Mr Weston. Before I can accuse the poor woman of suicide.'

'Questions? What sort of questions?'

'The sort that need answering. And if you'll . . .'

The detective's sentence was left unfinished. There was a sudden commotion from outside. And in the midst of a tremendous cheering and screaming from what sounded like the hordes from hell, he could hear Constable Jaggery's ferocious roar, threatening to *rattle the arse* of anyone who threw another thing.

Albert Parkinson was ten years old. Along with the rest of the school, he'd watched as the policemen carried out a long wooden box with grim expressions on their faces. It was obvious what the box contained. Some of the girls had begun to whimper, prompting the lads to sneer at them and warn them that the body in the box would rise up any second and eat them.

The girls had screamed and hugged each other for protection. Soft sods.

Every Wednesday, instead of going to school, he helped his uncle deliver coal, heaving hundredweight bags from the back of the cart and dragging them along the back alleyways to make his delivery. It was grimy work, coal dust often billowing from the badly-tied bags, and gave him a cough which he never seemed able to get rid of. The work, though, gave him a sturdy physique, which, along with his usual surliness, meant the other pupils at George Street kept a wary distance from him, unless he saw fit to include them in his occasional bouts of mischief. In which case many of them became his temporary if reluctant allies, unwilling to endure his wrath if they refused him. He took particular delight in ridiculing Billy Kelly, who was the only one in the class with red hair, and who was also the only one to stand up to him. Not that it did him much good: such defiance usually ended with Albert triumphant and Billy in tears. But Billy had always been told by his dad to fight

back if anyone picked on him, and he knew that any reports of cowardice would get back to him – Billy was much more afraid of his dad’s temper than Albert Parkinson’s thuggery. Sometimes he even gave a good account of himself. Trouble was, Albert’s strength far outweighed Billy’s courage.

But Billy hadn’t shown up at school this morning, a fact that required some elaboration as they waited for permission to enter the school building.

‘Cos I snotted him Friday night. Ran off like a mouse, skrikin’. That’s why ’e daren’t show ’is face, the gingerknob bastard. That right, Joe?’

In such scathing tones Albert dismissed his arch-rival’s absence: there was room for only one cock of the school.

The other boys looked at Albert’s right-hand pal, Joe Marshall, a small ferret-faced child with a permanently glistening nose and a fierce temper. None of the others had witnessed the altercation, and it fell upon young Joe to offer confirmation.

‘Aye. Like a mouse. Albert snotted ’im all right.’

There was a communal groan. It was a great pity they’d missed all the fun.

With this most recent testimonial to his ruthlessness, Albert urged several of the boys to leave the school entrance, where the large policeman stood guard scowling at them like a gargoyle, and follow him to the rear of the building, to the trapdoor that led down into the cellar where the coal was stored for the classroom stoves. The lock on the door was faulty. Everyone knew that. The plan was simple: each boy was to fill his fists with lumps of coal and return to the front of the building where they would hurl their missiles at the uniformed bully stopping them from entering.

He lifted the trapdoor and ushered them down. Once their

clogs were crunching the coal beneath them, he gave his rallying call to his troops. 'It's our bloody school. He can't stop us gooin' in. Fat bastard.'

Some of them nodded, more in agreement with his depiction of Constable Jaggery than their leader's uncharacteristic desire to enter the building. Outside was much more fun.

'Besides,' Albert added, standing atop the mound of coal and now appealing to their sense of family loyalty. 'Them bastards battered me dad in the lockout last year. Be bloody good if we clod some o' these at 'em!'

He held up the lumps of coal in his fists. They all nodded at the retributive fitness of such missiles, each one of them mindful of the darkest period in their lives the previous year when the five-month miners' strike almost brought the town to its knees, and hunger ran rampant. Several of their fathers had been involved in various scuffles with the police, and they had long, vengeful memories. But it was the hunger they remembered the most.

He watched the others clamber up the coal pile and into the bright morning air and followed them more slowly.

He gripped the two lumps of coal and felt the black grit bite into the palms of his hands. As he strolled purposefully now towards the front of the school, a smile slowly spread across his face.

The three men moved with exaggerated slowness, weighed down by the cumbersome protective clothing they were forced to wear. Each of them was clad in thick iron boots, barely visible beneath the wide leather aprons and the shin guards that restricted their movements as they approached the strangely-shaped puddling furnace. The heat in the large workshop at the Cartwright's Rolling Mill was intense.

Tommy Kelly, the principal shingler of the three, felt the ferocity of the furnace's heat more than the others, not least because of how he was seething inside. He cut a large, almost superhuman figure beneath the clothing, an impression enhanced by the square mask of iron with its narrow slits for his eyes that made his head appear to sprout impossibly from his broad shoulders and bypass altogether the bull neck that lay beneath.

It was Tommy's job, now that the pig iron inside the furnace had finally become molten, to damp down the fire that had burnt with such ferociousness before stirring the iron with a puddling bar in order to allow as much air to reach it as possible, while at the same time ensuring it kept well clear of the carbon from the flames.

He forced the bar into the well of the furnace with more than usual vigour and scuttled it around to disperse the molten iron, feeling the sweat pour down his forehead and into his eyes. He cursed out loud at his inability to wipe away the salty sting that blurred his vision.

The two other men, standing a few yards behind him with their heads free of the stifling iron headgear, gave each other knowing glances. They knew better than to speak to Tommy when he was in such a mood, although they knew full well what was causing it. It had nothing to do with the heat, or the strained effort it needed to puddle the iron sufficiently. No, they'd been told at the beginning of their shift that morning what had put the big fella in such a 'heat'.

'Shithouses!' he had said to them as they booked in at seven that morning.

'Who, Tommy?' one of them had asked in a voice that carried a slight tremble of uncertainty.

'They'll not speak to my missis like that again in a fuckin'

hurry! Sendin' the bloody police round cos she made a stink.'

The others had looked at each other with smiles of relief, happy in the knowledge that it would be the pig iron, and not they, who would suffer the big man's wrath.

Later, as the three of them sat in the small yard outside the workhouse and ate their snap, he seemed to have brought his temper under control.

'Can be a little swine, our Billy, I know that. But yon bloody headmaster's gettin' too big for his boots. Needs choppin' down.'

'They're all t'same,' said Gilbert Barlow. 'Put 'em in a suit an' they reckon they're a cut above the likes of us.'

'Aye,' Fred Dunn added. 'He wipes his arse like the rest of us.'

'I'll wipe his arse wi' me puddlin' bar if he talks to my Edith like that again.'

Then all three of them laughed at the vision big Tommy's words had conjured up. After a few minutes' silence, the big man spoke again, this time with a surprisingly low voice, as if he were afraid of being overheard.

'T'wife reckons that's why he's done it, all this trouble at school.'

'Done what, Tommy?'

'Our Billy. T'wife reckons 'e's 'ad enough.'

'Aye, but what's 'e done?'

Tommy Kelly swirled a mouthful of cold tea around his mouth to clear the remains of his egg butty, spat it out and watched as it soaked into the ground.

'Our Billy buggered off Friday night. Not seen the little sod since.'