

My School Tie

(as related by Alan Harrap)

Jill was browsing through my wardrobe and my collection of ties caught her attention. I have ties for every occasion, some tasteful and sober, others brightly coloured and even vulgar. "You'll never wear these, (not in my company!)" she said, having selected a few. "And just look at this one !" she continued, waving a particularly unattractive diagonally striped specimen, frayed and slightly grubby. "That's for the bin!".

"Put it back" I said, rather sharply. "That's a treasured possession, a reminder of a lucky escape!".

And I told her the story.

When I was 16, Civics and Geography were my favourite subjects at school. The Civics teacher was Mr Proctor, always known as "Lenin", though not in his hearing. He'd been talking about ants and how they cooperated for the good of the community. Geography was taught by Miss Shepherd. She was "Miss Jones" to us because she seemed so like the frustrated spinster in "Rising Damp" on television. But she was an inspiring teacher. The subject that term was "Africa", and Miss Shepherd made it fascinating; she had spent a year teaching there. One day Miss Shepherd called me to her desk and said "Harrap, would you like to see the souvenirs I have at home. I'll give you an extra lesson; so wear your school uniform". And of course I agreed!

When I arrived at her flat she took me into her sitting room, and then left me. She had wonderful native carvings and framed photographs of natives and African scenes. Many included bare-bosomed native women. I didn't hear Miss Shepherd return while I was gazing goggle-eyed. She collected several native carvings and reminded me of the classwork on folk culture, gods and goddesses and spirits. "These carvings are of Shetani, malevolent spirits in East Africa. And this creature is a Popobawa from Zanzibar, said to have been a jinn who took to demonic ways".

"Sometimes African people attribute their sins to possession by evil spirits. Now Harrap, you are a sinner, aren't you?" Her voice had suddenly become shrill and accusing.

"N-n-no Miss Jo---- Shepherd", I stuttered.

"I saw you in the Park on Saturday. You went through a gap in the hedge with a girl and came back 15 minutes later."

"W-w-we were watching ants, Miss. Mr Proctor said we should" I stammered.

"**Mister Proctor!**" she fulminated. "The beards and sandals brigade shouldn't be allowed in schools; they condone immorality"

And she continued "Girls don't watch ants. And young men don't look so pleased with themselves after watching ants. And I also saw the way you looked at those pictures over there. Your sinful behaviour has to stop! "

Her whole demeanour was threatening and I was scared – too scared to respond. I trembled as I saw Miss Shepherd go to her open desk and pick up a huge pair of scissors! (John Wayne Bobbitt had recently been in the news.)

But at that moment the phone rang; Miss Shepherd put down the scissors and left the room. I recovered my composure, Miss Shepherd was talking on the phone in another room and I went over to her desk. There were the scissors (not that large in fact) and an album which I opened at a page inscribed "**Gluttony**". Below that were the words "*Oh pity the poor glutton - Whose troubles all begin - In struggling to turn - What's out into what's in*". And below that was mounted the bottom end of a school tie, with a name carefully written on the white diagonal stripe. It was Melvyn Johnson – a rather fat boy in my class who always seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of Mars Bars. I then glanced at other pages, inscribed "**Greed**", "**Sloth**", "**Wrath**", "**Envy**" and "**Pride**". All had a quotation and mounted portions of a school tie, each carrying a name of boys I knew. Then I found that one page, already headed "**Lust**" followed by "*Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing*" was not yet complete!

I now knew what the scissors were for! No way was my tie going to end up on that page - not that it would have been justified! I slipped out of the door quickly; Miss Shepherd was still on the phone.

I kept quiet about the incident; I didn't want to be teased about taking a girl to watch ants! But just two days later another boy was taken to the Head because his school tie was in a sorry state and he blurted out a story about Miss Shepherd. Miss Shepherd was immediately sent home escorted by the Head's deputy, the prim Miss Fosset, who reported that Miss Shepherd had some very rude pictures and embarrassing sculptures. And she discovered the nearly-completed album of the "**Seven Deadly Sins**".

Miss Shepherd was obviously frustrated and deranged; she never returned to the school. I'm sure the school wanted to keep the whole thing quiet, but the story soon got around. Melvyn Johnson and the other five boys were teased unmercifully and their truncated ties were pulled out.

But of course my tie was still complete!

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