Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Stars

Gervase Phinn

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Extract

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GERVASE

I was not a particularly clever or confident child, never the bright little button who sat on the top table with all the clever children, with his hand always in the air to answer the teacher's questions, the talented artist, sharp at number work, the good speller, the one who won all the cups, captained the school team, took the lead part in the school play. I was a member of the unremarkable majority – the average pupil, the big hump in the academic bell, the 'nothing special' sort of child, ordinary, biddable, quiet.

Last year I visited my former infant school headmistress, the redoubtable Miss Wilkinson. She was a 101 years old but still had the shining eyes of the great teacher.

'You have done very well, Gervase,' she said, shaking my hand. 'All those books you have written. Doctor this and professor that – you have more degrees than a thermometer.' Then she added with a twinkle in those shining eyes, 'And you were never one of the brightest in the class, were you?'

'No, I wasn't,' I replied. 'I suppose I was a pretty average child but if I've achieved anything in life it is because of my parents and teachers like you who believed in me and encouraged me.'

'And you do recall,' she asked, 'when you wet yourself?'

'Of course,' I replied. The occasion remains ingrained in my memory.

At the infant nativity play, I was one of the extras. The curtains opened and there I stood, on the otherwise empty stage, next to the cardboard stable, six years old and stiff as a lamp-post. I was the palm tree. I was encased in brown crêpe paper with two big bunches of papier mâché coconuts dangling from my neck, a clump of bright green cardboard leaves in each hand and more arranged like a crown on my head. My mother had knitted me a pale green woollen balaclava helmet through which my little face peeped. I was so excited and stared out at all the faces in the audience.

Then someone in the front row laughed and that started off others laughing, too. They were laughing at *me*! It was the first occasion anyone had laughed at me and I felt so alone and upset and had wriggled nervously. I looked for my parents and, seeing them in the second row, I focused on them. They, of course, were not laughing. I began to cry and then, frozen under the bright lights and frightened, I wet myself. It seeped through the brown crêpe paper, leaving a large dark stain in the front. The audience laughed louder. I was devastated.

On the way home, my face wet with tears, my father held my small hand between his great fat fingers and he told me that I was the best palm tree he had ever seen. My mother told me that I was the star of the show. I knew full well at the time that they were not telling me the truth,

but it was so good to be told. I felt so secure and so loved.

'And do you remember, Miss Wilkinson,' I asked her now, 'what you said to me when I came off the stage? Instead of being cross, and telling me I should have gone to the toilet before the show, as some teachers might well have done, you put your arm round me and said, "Don't worry, love, it's not the end of the world. Why, when I was your age, I used to wet my knickers, too."' There was a short silence. Then a small smile came to my former teacher's lips. 'It's funny how things come full circle.'

In this collection of stories, anecdotes and poems, the shining stars are the children, all of whom I met over my years as a schools inspector in the great county of Yorkshire. They will, I hope, delight you as they did me, with their blunt observations on life, their disarming honesty and their irrepressible humour. For me, whatever their background and abilities, they will forever be my bright little stars.

☆ 1 ☆

THE WAY I AM

I'm just an ordinary sort of boy,
Not the centre of attention,
The best of the bunch,
Apple of the teacher's eye,
The one everyone remembers.
It's just the way I am.

I'm just an ordinary sort of boy,
Not the high flyer,
Captain of the team,
Star of the school play,
Top of the class.
It's just the way I am.

I'm just an ordinary sort of boy,
But I'm not invisible.
I do exist!
I'm as different as anyone else,
There's nobody like me.
And to my family, I'm pretty special.
So please, sir, please, miss – notice ME sometimes.
I am what I am.

☆ 2 ☆

TRACEY
ASKS QUESTIONS

I was accompanying the new Chairman of the Education Committee around a village primary school. He was certainly viewed with much interest when he entered the small classroom and, with his red cheeks, great walrus moustache and hair shooting up from his square head, it was not surprising. He was introduced to the very nervous teacher who was taking the class, and then sat down solidly, legs apart, on a tiny red melamine chair designed for very small children.

After a while he was approached by Tracey, a little girl who stared and stared at his round, red face and drooping moustache. Then the following conversation took place.

'What is it?' asked the little girl.

'What's what?' retorted the visitor.

'That on your face.'

'It's a moustache.'

'What does it do?'

'It doesn't do anything.'

'Oh.'

'It just sits there on my lip.'

'Does it go up your nose?'

'No.'
'Could I stroke it?'
'No.'
'Is it alive?'
'No, it's not alive.'
'Can I have one?'
'No.'
'Why?'
'Well, little girls don't have moustaches.'
'Why?'
'Because they don't.'
'Can I have one when I grow up?'
'No.'
'Why not?'
'Because ladies don't have moustaches either.'

The little girl thought for a moment, tilted her head on one side before answering. 'Well, my grannie's got one!'

☆ 3 ☆

OLIVER
AND THE SCHOOL SUSPECTOR

The children sat straight-backed and silent at their desks, looking nervously at me. Their teacher – a tall, thin woman with a pale melancholic face, and dressed in a prim white blouse buttoned up to the neck – scanned her class with an expression that would freeze soup in cans.

'Mr Phinn is a school inspector,' she told the children. 'He will be testing your reading this afternoon.' She turned in my direction and in a sharp voice announced, 'They are very good at reading, Mr Phinn.'

'I am sure they are,' I replied.

'And you will find that they are competent, too, at arithmetic.' She turned to the class and fixed them with a gimlet eye. 'Are you not, children?'

'Yes, miss,' they chorused unenthusiastically.

'And I bet you have a lot of fun in school,' I said. I didn't mean to sound sarcastic but, judging from the teacher's expression, it must have appeared like that.

'Mr Phinn,' she said with a slight smile, 'we do have a lot of fun in this school.' She stared at her class. 'Don't we, children?' The children stared impassively. 'We really do have so much fun, don't we?' she repeated a little louder.

There were a few nods. I caught sight of a small studious-looking little boy at the back with large glasses and a mop of unruly red hair. He shook his head. The teacher had spotted him, too.

'Yes, we do, Oliver! We're always having fun.' She fixed him with a rattlesnake look and gave a little laugh. It was not a pleasant little laugh. 'Too much to say for himself, that young man, Mr Phinn,' the teacher confided in me in an undertone. 'We do have a lot of fun.'

As I passed Oliver on my way out, I heard him mutter, 'I must have been away that day.' I suppressed a smile.

'Oliver,' continued the teacher quickly, her face now rather more leering than smiling and her voice with quite a sharpness of tone to it, 'would you go and ask the school secretary to ring the bell for dinnertime, please, there's a good boy.' The last phrase was said with some emphasis. 'And shall we all now say "Goodbye" to Mr Phinn, children?'

'Goodbye, Mr Phinn,' the class intoned.

'Goodbye,' I said.

Oliver and I walked down the corridor together. 'Can I ask you something, Mr Phinn?' he said.

'Of course.'

'How do you become one of these suspectors, then?'

'Inspectors, Oliver.'

'How do you become one?'

'Well, you have to work hard at school, read a lot of books and when you go up to the big school you have to pass your exams and that takes a long, long time.'

'How old do you have to be?' he asked.

'You have to be twenty-one to be a teacher, even older to be a school inspector, so you have a long way to go.'

'And then you can sit at the back of classrooms and watch people?'

'That's right.'

'And hear children read?'

'That's right.'

'And look at their writing?'

'And look at their writing,' I repeated.

The little boy looked up and then scratched at the shock of red hair. 'And you get paid for it?'

'And you get paid for it,' I told him. He still looked very thoughtful, so I said: 'Would you like to ask me anything else?'

'No, not really, but . . .' He paused.

'Go on, Oliver. Have you got something to tell me?'

'Well, Mr Phinn, I was just thinking, that when I'm twenty-one, you'll probably be dead!'