

School Story

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Extract

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1941-1942

Drift

Though this child's drift

Seems by a divine doom channelled

Gerard Manley Hopkins
'The Bugler's First Communion'

Chapter One

Angus? Baker? Dermott-Powell? Ellerman? Mawsom? Notting? Snider? Good. Look sharp and let the man from Winters' photograph your Election...'

Almost without realising it, I have begun to tell the story I vowed I would never tell at all; a story I have avoided telling for a lifetime. It has always lain there waiting – lurking; during the past months it has thrust itself forward, at first merely nagging, but now insistent.

Perhaps you will not be able to believe what I have to say, holding it instead to be mere fiction – the work of a not very pleasant imagination. If only you could be right; I would prefer that, because if you cannot believe it then maybe I shall be able to persuade myself it never really happened at all and that what I am about to write is the figment of a mind distorted by age.

The photograph is real enough. It shows our 'Election' – the seven of us who were shepherded in Great Quad that autumn afternoon. Every intake into Ansell's was known as an 'Election' because we laid claim to being the original Ansell's Hall, where all Queensmen (as Scholars are still termed) had been housed until the latter part of the nineteenth century. After that, in the wake of other more searching reforms recommended by the Clarendon Commission, they were distributed amongst all the 'Houses' that then comprised the School. Already, for more than a hundred years, it had chosen subtly to hold aloof from nearby Cranchester by affecting to pronounce the School 'Ca'aster' out of deference to an early nineteenth-century Master whose antiquarian

speculations suggested that the small market town had once been the site of a Roman fort.

On the desk in front of me, sharp and bright as if it had been taken yesterday:

Angus. Guileless, eager, freckled face and sensitive mouth. You can clearly see in his well-groomed dark hair, that curious flash of congenitally premature silver which he could never disguise even by the dint of most careful brushing.

Baker. Square face, horn-rimmed glasses, straight hair cut slightly too short so that there was a border of pale skin between it and the holiday tan. Baker was almost plump then. I remember, on the first night, when he leaned his hands on the table, the small rolls of flesh at the wrist.

Mawsom looks straight into the camera as though, although frightened, he is determined not to show it. His clothes are neat. His features are neat too, but his eyebrows are curiously arched over his grey eyes and they give the effect of being in a permanent state of questioning surprise.

Notting. Small for his age, but big-boned and solidly built, with short blunt fingers and a fringe of mousy hair which, even in the photograph shows signs of the endless battle he waged to make it succumb to the parting that was *de rigueur* at Ansell's.

Snider is beside him, considerably taller than anyone else, almost willowy, with dark straight hair and deep-set eyes. The photograph does not show his hands which are behind his back, so you cannot see the long, slender fingers. Snider had the most perfect half-moons above the cuticle that I had ever seen. His were the hands of a musician, but he was not a musician, in fact he was tone deaf. However, in Biology practicals he undertook dissection with a precision and delicacy that was quite exceptional.

Dermott-Powell. The most delicately formed of the group, with rather secret eyes, wide lips and even teeth, features which must have been perfectly set off by the wide collar and scarlet cassock of the famous cathedral where he had been Head Chorister. The black and white print cannot show the way his auburn hair gleamed in sun.

Even at that first meeting, when we were all more or less subdued and apprehensive, he exuded a sort of sparkle that was exciting and

disturbing at the same time. We sensed that there was something which set him apart from the rest of us; as though he had crossed some threshold of which the rest of us were totally unaware. It was not until many years later, that I recognised what none of us then, at the age of thirteen, could have defined.

I had attended a lecture on Caravaggio. The hall was sparsely occupied for it was a cold November afternoon and I was already regretting my decision, when a slide of a youthful John the Baptist was projected onto the screen. In the sensual prettiness of the artist's beggar-boy model, I first recognised for what it was, the knowing ambivalence which I now detect in the Dermott-Powell looking out at me from the photograph.

However, it is, of course, Ellerman who dominates the group. Even after all these years, he comes across as a magnetically beautiful boy with a quality quite different from the cherubic good looks of Dermott-Powell and many other children of similar age. Despite the Cranchester uniform, Ellerman still seems elegantly proportioned. He looks just as Public School boys are meant to look. In fact he looks as, at the time, we felt *we* were expected to look. Fair springy hair, not quite curly or ostentatious, carefully parted; genuinely smiling lips; blue eyes; an open intelligent face. On that first day, I remember, he seemed to glow with stored sunlight for his appearance was enhanced by the fact that his skin had been tanned to a golden colour by an outdoor holiday to which tennis, cricket, sailing, swimming had all contributed. So must Ganymede have looked among his contemporaries.

There are half a dozen other photographs, each one quite unfaded because, from the time I left Ansell's until this afternoon, I had never taken them from this large brown envelope of thin 'utility' paper. Ellerman never lost his outstanding good looks. He developed, painlessly it seemed, from being a beautiful child into a strikingly handsome young man. He suffered none of the usual adolescent ugliness and skin rash so common at fifteen and sixteen. Here is another, later, photograph. Notting, drawn and thin-faced, almost sullen, dark hollows beneath his eyes. Mawsom and Angus have lost their open attractiveness. Baker looks like a concentration-camp guard and Snider seems almost emaciated, but Ellerman looks superb.

In the last, Ellerman is very much Head of House; from the moment of first meeting it was obvious that he was the archetypal 'Golden Boy'. It came as no surprise to discover that he was a superlative natural games-player. I think that our whole Election was so conventional, so seduced by the schoolboy *cliché* that it would have been astonishing had he not been a fine sportsman. There is one other photograph, a snapshot in a worn, much re-addressed envelope.

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When I walked through Lodge that first time it was the conclusion of a two-day journey. Small for my age, I was timid, apprehensive and terrified by a vast congregation of boys, all of whom were taller, stronger, more purposeful and far more confident than I.

Although it has never struck me before, I realise I must have been considerably younger too; it occurs to me now that I spent every birthday on the train returning to Cranchester for the Spring half.

It had been boat, sleeper and an overnight stay in London with a godfather I did not recognise, a big kindly man who had been at Ansell's with my father. On the following day I boarded the Cranchester train, awed and impressed by the fact that it was even pulled by a locomotive bearing the name of the school.

I sat for more than three hours in a corner seat and throughout the whole of that time I spoke not one word. Nor was any word addressed to me. Yet I was wearing school dress with an Ansell's tie and every single passenger on the train, boy and adult, was in some way connected with Cranchester.

Five other boys in the compartment ignored me completely, although they talked animatedly amongst themselves. One, daringly, smoked a cigarette out of the window whilst his companions pulled down the blinds on the corridor side. I might just as well have been the Invisible Man and I cannot remember that I ever recognised any of them again, so little did I regard their faces.

I was in limbo.

Subsequently I remember treating new boys in the same insensitive

way. On one occasion I had been asked to look out for a distant relation – cousin or second cousin unable to get a place in Ansell's so had to make do with Jonquil's or Pettifer's, I cannot remember which. I glimpsed him at the London terminal, recognising his distinctive red hair and I deliberately walked in another direction. Twelve hours later we came face to face crossing Great Quad.

'Oh! Hello. I think I caught a glimpse of you at the station yesterday,' he said, the relief clear in his voice. 'I was going to say "hello" then, but lost sight of you in the crush.'

I knew just how he felt, but I remember replying, 'Just as well you didn't. It's not "on" to talk with "frogs" until they've been through Lodge.' In Ansell's new boys were never called 'frogs' – a tradition respected even by the other Houses.

I was at the time all of fifteen and I doubt he was as many months younger. I gave him no more than a nod for the rest of that Half and, as he was not an Ansell's Man, I don't think we ever exchanged a word thereafter.

'Ca'aster' education began the moment you set foot on your first school train. It took you over and it never let go, even after your final Half when, convinced that as of right, the world was your oyster, you stepped from a school train for the last time.

Characteristically, that moment too was governed by tradition, for no Castonian might wear his Old Castonian tie until his feet had touched the platform of the London terminal. I recall only one case where this custom was flouted and, as a dare, the tie was donned during the course of that final journey. Despite a subsequent career which has been both impeccable and distinguished, I have never seen the name of the culprit on a Castonian Association List. Possibly he never asked to be restored, but it would not surprise me in the slightest to learn that his offence was considered too heinous to be absolved, despite the fact that on the List are names of several Castonians who have been imprisoned and one who was lucky to escape hanging for a particularly notorious crime just after the war. Presumably, though criminal, they had never offended against Cranchester's exclusive and idiosyncratic code.

Ansell's had, in addition, its own code which was even more individual,

idiosyncratic and persuasively chauvinistic; for example our Toast on ‘Tassel Night’ was ‘Ansell’s and the School’; in every other House ‘the School’ came first. It engendered such an intoxicating ethos that within twelve hours of our arrival at the age of thirteen, we thought of ourselves as ‘Ansell’s Men’ first and Castonians a long way second.

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I have been at considerable pains to obscure the true identity of Ansell’s and Cranchester, however diligently records of the top dozen Public Schools might be perused; I have changed all names completely. So should there be, by chance, somewhere in existence a Division List, or school roll, which includes an Angus, an Ellerman, a Dermott-Powell, then quite certainly it is the wrong school and the coincidence would be far more worthy of report than the ‘discovery’ itself. The real Ellerman for instance, has none of those letters in his name, though he does now have a title.

I reveal that Cranchester is one of the top dozen schools, because it is important that no one shall be tempted to dismiss the story as something that could only happen at a latter-day Dotheboys Hall, peopled by unsophisticated boys and low-calibre masters. On the contrary, Cranchester is very well known, even to those who have never been there. The distinctive Old Castonian tie often appears on television when notable men in politics, commerce, or public life are interviewed and writers of plays frequently invoke it to characterise certain stereotypes.

The saddest casualty of the necessity to conceal the identity of the real Cranchester has been the abandonment, for obvious reasons, of its unique, evocative and hallowed ‘language’. Nonetheless it would be impossible to convey what happened without invoking the atmosphere of a community cocooned far more effectively by its own language and customs than by any encircling wall. To resolve this problem, I have borrowed appropriate phrases, words and slang from several other schools. If therefore you feel a surge of excitement as you identify a phrase, and think ‘Good Heavens! It must be...’, naming your own school, then beware, for I have left unchanged only those words which the real ‘Cranchester’ has in common with other similar establishments.

Although many Castonians may not recognise their school, Ansell's Men will recognise their 'House', despite its change of name, because I have altered none of the internal geography, none of the customs. However, unless they have been far more successful than I in expunging the past, I do not expect that those of our Election will wish to identify themselves.

I, certainly, am now hardly identifiable as one of the seven small boys gazing out from the photograph on the desk in front of me. Nevertheless, I discover that even after all these years, when some of those who were central to the story are no longer living, I still lack courage enough to identify myself unequivocally. Furthermore, even were the seven of us brought together again, I believe I could and would, dissemble convincingly enough to keep the others uncertain of authorship and preserve my anonymity.

Why then, you may ask with justifiable impatience, do I bother at all? Why expect any reader to take an interest in events which took place long ago, concerning people whose names have been altered, who attended a school which has been thoroughly disguised and written by an anonymous author? Why go to such exceptional lengths to conceal identities and still feel it is worth relating the story?

I cannot offer you a satisfactory explanation, because I am not sure that I really have one. I can only say that, despite those vigorous assurances to myself and all my vows that I would never relate these events, in my heart of hearts I always knew there would come a time when the necessity to tell the story would push everything else from me. That moment has arrived. Like the Ancient Mariner, I must now tell somebody – because until I have finished I shall be able to do nothing else.

Three specific events jogged my hand. Coincidences? Perhaps. Each in itself was insignificant, even trifling. Three months ago. I was driving through the West Country in glorious summer weather, with the roof of the car open. I checked on an appointment, to discover that, for reasons outside my control, it had been cancelled. I had not long returned from a lengthy and dusty sojourn in the United States and, because I

unexpectedly had half a day to spare, I decided to take my time about returning to London. Abandoning the main road, I dawdled through tangles of deep lanes and villages with attractive, unlikely, names. Then I decided, on a whim, to stay overnight at one of those small country pubs where, against all expectation, they provide outstanding food.

The following morning, after a leisurely breakfast, I began, with genuine reluctance, to make my way back to the motorway. I had been paying only casual attention to the map when all of a sudden (Chance? Fate?) I found myself driving up wide, sleepy Market Street in Cranchester.

The old, almost forgotten, choking panic overcame me. I stopped the car. Until that moment I had not registered that I was anywhere near the school. I felt beads of perspiration round my eyes, my heart pounded.

Eventually, when I had recovered, I got out – to find myself facing Winters, the photographer. I crossed the road to Crandall's, a coffee-shop with bow windows and dim interior. It was still the same. Small wooden booths with chintz curtains ranged down the back of the shop from a communal 'front parlour' with wooden tables and chairs. Even the respectable middle-aged lady who approached for an order seemed timeless.

I was fifteen again, in stiff collar, black jacket, striped trousers and much-polished shoes, feeling rather emancipated to be able to sit there and order coffee. Crandall's was out of bounds to Ansell's Men in their first two years, unless accompanied by someone senior, or a relation. As far as I know it was no regulation of, nor reflection on, Crandall's. It was just one of the many hierarchical privileges which threaded our lives like veins and arteries.

I sat sipping coffee, toying with a cherry bun I did not want, procrastinating – pretending to myself that I might still ignore the dusty road at the end of Market Street, with its signpost to the exquisite little church of St Peter and St Paul on the left; to 'Cranchester School' straight ahead.

Can I really have been so completely unaware that I was so close to Cranchester? Had I been subconsciously pretending I didn't know where I was, but daring to test myself? Certainly I was not conscious of such an intention, otherwise I could not have felt so much at ease the previous

evening and at breakfast. Or, after all those years of shutting out, had I been drawn back by some ineluctable force born of a deeply buried desire for absolution, a subconscious need to exorcise, once and for all, the ghosts which still haunted me however much I wanted to suppress them?

Fifteen minutes later I was walking through Lodge, vaguely recognising the fit, elderly head porter in his dark green uniform with its gold buttons. I heard myself asking if I could look round. Even then I was, I suppose, unconsciously obscuring my connection, because Old Castonians simply walk through Lodge with a casual 'Good Morning', confident that Cranchester is still theirs and that they deserve to be recognised.

'Of course, sir, it's the Half.'

'Half' is the Cranchester word for 'Term'; a Cranchester school year consists of three 'Halves' – never 'halves'. However, it also means the break in the middle of the morning moreover, even more confusingly *'the Half'* means the half-term exeat.

He emerged from his glass-fronted cubby-hole, offering a simplified map of the school on a board with a handle. 'Visitors find this useful. We're standing here, sir, where the red dot is. Buildings available to visitors are outlined in green, sir. You can drop this back when you return.'

'Thank you very much.'

'I expect you'll be from the States, sir,' he offered in his West Country burr. 'We've lots of visitors from America these days.'

'Clever of you to guess, I thought I'd managed to eliminate my accent,' I added, playing up to his mistake on the spur of the moment.

'I can always tell, sir. I worked with the Americans during the war for a bit. Until I was wounded.'

I remembered him then. Sergeant Major Starlight; he arrived late in the war and was, at that stage, far the youngest member of the ground-staff. He had, then, a curious pallor and a pronounced limp. We were told that he had been awarded the Military Medal in Italy.

I had never been back to the school since the early morning I left so ignominiously; never replied to, or even opened, the trickle of notices, appeals and invitations that pursue a Castonian across the world throughout his life, but it was only at the moment of confirming, implicitly, Starlight's mistaken view that I was an American visitor, that I was aware how much

I did not want him, or anyone else, to know that I was a Castonian. In fact, I suppose I was safe enough without resorting to becoming an ‘American’. No porter would dream that any Castonian might decline to claim his birthright! However, at that same moment, I also knew that, had boys and masters been around, I should have turned tail and hurried to my car parked on the great sweep of gravel.



I abandoned the cool shadows of Lodge and, as I came into the sun, was once again the apprehensive boy I had been on that first occasion so many years before. Great Quad is the most magnificent part of the Foundation, its huge honey-coloured flagstones once paved the refectory of a noble monastery dissolved by Henry VIII. Cranchester School spreads out from it like a small village. It is enclosed on three sides by the original academic buildings which had, as the School flourished and expanded, been gradually supplemented by incorporating the scattering of dwellings and little farms of the small hamlet which had originally sprung up in the protection of the monastery

Like so much else connected with Cranchester, its boundaries are singular. There is no gate, despite the implications of ‘Lodge’, nor are there any walls, because the founder died with spectacular nobility on the battlefield before he had fulfilled his intention ‘to bilde the gretest Scole in the Realme’. Bounds are therefore known only to Castonians and consist of a field here (‘Meadow’), a hedge there (‘Hawthorn’), a footpath (‘Parsons’), a stream (‘Splash’) and even an enormous ancient oak, known perversely as ‘Acorn’. Typically, we at Ansell’s rejoiced at the fact that our fag door (‘Door’) was the boundary in that particular direction. It meant that the House (which lay on the far side of ‘Door’) was technically ‘out of bounds’ and thus, some argued, beyond jurisdiction of the High Master – a claim never tested in The Digger’s time!

A Castonian with permission for ‘Leave Out’ showed his ‘Leave Slip’ at Lodge and, on his return, handed it in, from where it eventually found its way back to the Housemaster. If he had no Leave Slip, or could not be bothered to get one, he walked across the fields, taking care not to

get caught. The wooden box marked 'Leave Slips' is still in evidence, so presumably the custom continues.

As I paused, heat glancing down from the surrounding buildings and beating up from the ancient flagstones, I very clearly remember saying aloud to myself, 'I shall not visit Ansell's,' but knowing, even as I said it, that I would be unable to prevent myself. However, once more attempting to maintain the fiction that I had willpower enough to be my own master, I deliberately turned into the lobby of Old Library, a handsome sixteenth-century building, housing a fine collection of early printed books and an official 'Antiquarian Archivist' to look after them.

Doors to some of the Division Rooms were unlocked and I was struck by the light airy colours – one even had a blue ceiling – overhead projectors, posters, pictures, tables with melamine tops and comfortable plastic chairs. One room remained as I remembered them all. There were the heavy oak-and-iron double desks; a high dais with steps below a wall-length blackboard, still carried the massive master's desk. Decoration here was unchanged, the lower half of the walls deep chocolate and the upper half coffee-coloured, both darkening with age. Light bulbs under glass shades (white underside, green topside) hung suspended with that peculiarly naked appearance on long flex from a high, discoloured, ceiling. There were three tattered maps by the board. One showed **The Classical World**, another, **The Modern World**, glowed with great areas of British Empire pink. The third was a **Physical Map of the World**. The room smelled of dust, chalk, old paper and dry decay. The lintel above the door read 'Dr Larchfield', in cracked and yellowing letters.

Larchfield joined the Common Room during my last Half, slight of stature and looking younger than most of the Praefectors. Except for the fact that he had seemed so very youthful I could remember nothing of him at all.

Then, inevitably, before I knew it, I found myself on the familiar path and, surrendering to the inevitable, opened Door. Originally, Ansell's had been a fine Georgian house replacing an earlier Jacobean farmhouse destroyed by fire. A large rectangular three-storey building had been grafted onto the back of it in the nineteenth century in order to

accommodate some fifty boys. From the front where the Housemaster lived, it still looked the elegant little mansion it had once been.

At the centre of the addition, at the back, lies a rectangular space open to the sky. We called it 'Yard' and it gave rise to 'Yard Fives' ('YF' for short), a game peculiar to Ansell's, the main object of which was to strike a fives-ball so that it bounced off one of the many pipes and window ledges to disadvantage your opponent. Hitting windows (which were numerous) incurred penalty points; a broken window meant 'three-up', however senior. We were so expert that I can remember only one broken window in the whole time I was there.

Yard looked exactly as I remembered first seeing it, incredibly dusty, with a few blades of grey grass at the edge. To each side of me were familiar battered blue-painted doors. I turned the handle on the right – I never remember it being locked. The familiar claustrophobia engulfed me at once; my stomach tightened to that unforgettable tang of lineament, stale sweat and dampness which always characterised 'Big Change'.

I passed instead through the door on the left to be greeted by a different but equally familiar smell – dry, dusty, tinged by an indefinable odour of long-finished cooking.

Immediately to my right and behind my back were the worn stairs to 'Big Dorm', with their iron banister. Ahead, in the dim light, my eyes picked out the flimsy doors of 'Little Studies' which lined 'Corridor' and, at the far end, the much heavier door into 'Libe'.

That was unlocked too. Sun poured in through windows with heavy bars on the outside. The tiny 'Cells' projecting from the walls, like spokes on a rectangular wheel, seemed unchanged, although perhaps a bit more battered. At the centre of the room was 'Long School', complete with 'Cranton's Throne' and, at the far end, the familiar shabby wooden lockers.

A Time Machine?

Even the chairs looked the same; the benches on each side of Long School certainly were. The familiar vast fireplace, with its brass-topped fireguard glinting in the light, gaped like a cavernous mouth. I moved the length of Libe in a dream and on through the door at the far end into 'Din. Room'.

Nothing had changed there either. High Table on its discreet dais; four

other long tables polished and shining, flanked by polished and shining benches; at the end of each table, farthest from High Table, four carvers with high backs and arms. The heavy wooden chairs at High Table are probably museum pieces (tradition has it that they belonged to the Founder) each one distinguished by some piece of individual design and the hierarchy of Praefactors was thus reflected by the chair each occupied. The Housemaster's chair, at the centre, with a higher back, is undecorated except for an exquisitely carved coat of arms which seemed to surmount The Digger's head like a dark crown.

Praefactors and Housemaster all sat on one side of High Table, overlooking the assembled House. Visitors sat either end; except for one occasion I never recall Praefactors being displaced. On rare occasions, when there were more than two visitors, the extra guests were seated opposite the Praefactors with their backs to the rest of us.

Behind High Table, I could see the names of previous Housemasters, each ungilded set of initials and dates meticulously carved into the dark panelling at the end of the incumbent's reign. We had to learn them by heart: 'Jonah; Elwell; Livingstone; Gunther; Rawison; Wrighton; Rigwell; Holden-Smith; Dulverton; Winsell; Seymour', and now, of course, Jowling and his successors. Going closer, as well as 'D.I.G. Jowling, 1921-1947, I could make out, A. St. J. Winderton, 1947-1961; J. Le P. Orme 1961-1970'. I realised I would have known who was the present Housemaster had I ever read the copies of *The Castonian* which I always binned unopened. Had I not known what I did, I would never have noticed how subtly the date after The Digger's name had been altered, so expertly had the extraneous carving been filled; even the grain matched.

The Digger!

Suddenly, silently, hardly seeming to have aged at all, he was there before me, daunting as ever in his black MA gown, long flapping, sleeves with their half-moon cut-outs. Over six-foot, broad-shouldered, quietly well-tailored, bottom waistcoat-button undone. (He always turned back his right cuff when at his desk, something we secretly envied; our own war-time austerity suits had no cuff-buttons.) Immaculate shirt-cuffs gathered by discreetly embossed gold links. His shirt was always crisp and fresh. Who, I wonder, laundered them daily for him? (Our had to

last a week, even ten days in the darkest days of the war and our twice-a-week, ill-starched collars became limp and grubby within hours.) Curiously, I can't recall the tie he was wearing, but I do remember that it was only for Confirmation Classes he ever donned a clerical collar – and then so thin that it showed like a mere cord.

Strong hands, despite almost delicate, ring-less, fingers, still powerful enough to beat any racquets player in the School: legendary hands which had struck six sixes in one over at Lords, winning that famous Varsity Match.

Neatly barbered wavy black hair (no hint of grey yet?). His clean-shaven jaw-line chiselled as if by wholesome plain living and reticent physical self-confidence: no incipient jowl, heightened colour, or any other sign of over-indulgence. White, even, teeth; firm but not cruel mouth and straight brows above disconcertingly shrewd grey-blue eyes.

Those eyes. Their uncompromising gaze – stern, unbending, luminous apparently with straightforward decency and their expectation of the highest standards of integrity – penetrating your very soul. Once and once only, in sheer terror had I dared meet it with a lie. Now I knew he was about to tax me with my craven dishonesty. Momentary paralysis before I stepped hesitantly forward and offered my hand.

Twenty-five years dead, he vanished.

Ghosts.

Back in the present I found my half-outstretched hand trembling violently.

Below, over a fireplace complete with fire-screen incorporating the Cranchester coat of arms, on a broad over-mantel, two glass cases – one at either end. Each contains a cap. It is the same cap – dark maroon, with thin blue piping at the peak; one has a 'Tassel' of gold and the other of silver. Football and Cricket caps vanished at the outbreak of war when Cranchester magnanimously responded to the national emergency by suspending a rule which had decreed 'no Castonian may go bareheaded'. However, in Ansell's the much-coveted Tassels continued to be awarded. Evidently they still are.

Between the two cases, on a little stand, is a dark, oak board with a worn crest of Sir Thomas Cranton, the Elizabethan soldier-poet who died of his wounds with such elegance. His quaint 'Grace Before Meat' is carved on the board and Head of House read it out at the beginning of every meal; at the end he reads the companion piece, 'Grace After Meat'.

Ansell's Men who have been Tasselled – gold for Football and silver for Cricket – and, on the long wall opposite High Table, the names of Praefactors in black (red for Head of House). I found my own name. It came as a shock to see how many more had been added; it was the first time I had ever been genuinely conscious of my age. Ellerman's name is there – in red, silver and gold.

M.R.E. Ellerman

I see him in the mind's eye. An elegant figure, seemingly never muddy, wearing those Cranchester shorts which appear to be slightly wider at the pocket than the waist (thus accentuating the taper of the legs) and the blue-banded maroon jersey sidestepping, without apparent haste, an onrush threatening to engulf him, before setting off on that characteristic run with its deceptive half-swerve and astonishing acceleration. Tasselled for both Football and Cricket in his first year; Head of House; Captain of Cranchester Football; Captain of Cranchester Cricket; Captain of the School.

Next to the door to 'Private' (as the Housemaster's quarters were known) a narrow oak shelf on which stand nine silver tankards, each one slightly different and at least two centuries old. 'Praefactors Pots' were used daily at High Table. There were pewter or silver tankards enough for every boy in the House on special occasions, each one contributed by an Ansell's Man of the past whose name is inscribed on his donation. I had my hand out to lift down the Pot I had once used when I heard, or imagined I could hear, a noise in the adjoining kitchen. I left like a thief, hastening back into Libe, down Corridor and, without thinking, up the stairs.

The door to Big Dorm stood open. There had been no structural alteration at all. It still seemed to accommodate about forty boys; at the

far end, the small fireplace and, to its right, the door into 'Tosher'. On each side of a wide central gangway bed-spaces still separated by wooden partitions which did not go up to the ceilings and which, because of an imagined kinship with loose-boxes, were called 'Mangers'.

But there were differences. The partitions were now white-painted, with beams and ceilings in imaginative light blue. The beds themselves (they seemed to me the identical iron frames) were cheerful with tartan blankets and even duvets instead of the uniform red top-blanket I remembered so well. There were the same narrow stone-mullioned windows, one to each Manger, only now they boasted bright curtains, each individually chosen it seemed, and the heavy curtains at the end of the Mangers were varied and welcoming, no longer the dull brown hangings which provided our only privacy. On most partition walls were large posters. I felt reassured, thankful that time had, not after all, stopped still, and closed the door gently.

Outside, in the gloom once again, I could feel the chipped wall behind me; I knew that to my left lay the stairs and the passage to 'Upper Studies', but most acutely I was aware of the door now directly in front of me across the little landing, although I was willing myself not to look at it. To no avail. As if mesmerised, I moved forward and felt again in my fingers the dints in the familiar fluted brass door knob as they turned it. Then I was standing again in the threshold of 'Big Study'.

Big Study!

The window looking out onto the chestnut tree was closed, so the room was stifling, musty in the hot sun. Two or three books lay on the bottom shelf next to the fireplace, as though left in haste only moments before. Even the dowdy, rubbed, velvet curtains look the same as those which had been hanging there on my first day in Ansell's. The battered carver with wooden arms occupied its customary position, as did the huge old Bible, now even looser in its battered cover by the look of it. Memory ran finger of coldness up my spine.

Ghosts.

I shut the door quickly, but with quiet restraint and hastened to the stairs. I hurried down, out into the sun and then actually ran along the shadowy passage until I was 'safe' again in the heat and light of Great

Quad. For the second time that morning I could feel my heart pounding and I knew that blood had drained from my face.

I did not feel up to facing the cheerful and obliging Starlight at once, so turned into Chapel with its faint smell of incense (although incense was never allowed at Cranchester). Somebody was playing the organ. I could not see who, for the organ loft is high and lost in gloom. 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring'. It was played delicately, almost abstractedly, lingering on some of the high notes as I had so often heard it at evening Chapel. Simultaneously a phrase of Mendelssohn's music came back into my mind; the recollection was so strong that, for a fleeting second, I was certain that my ears actually caught the words – *I waited for the Lord*.

There came a discreet cough at my elbow. For that instant, choking panic once more; lost in the past, I was a new boy again until, swept by an immense relief, reality flooded back and I knew that we had never met before. In the diffused light of Chapel he evidently noticed nothing amiss in my hesitation. He must have been about fifteen and I realised how timeless were the faces of all Castonians.

'May I help you, sir?'

'Was that you playing?' Did I accentuate my American accent?

'Not very good, I'm afraid,' he said with an endearingly deprecating smile. 'It's just that I love playing the organ.'

'It sounded all right to me. The Porter said you were all on holiday.'

'We are. I live here because my Father's a Housemaster. That is,' he continued in polite deference to a Transatlantic visitor who might find the concept incomprehensible, 'He's one of fifteen masters who look after boarding houses. I'm a day-boy in a different House. He teaches Modern Languages, but,' he hesitated and then continued reverting to his attractive half-confidential manner, 'actually, I'm not much good at Modern Languages.'

'Nor am I!' I said it to be companionable because, in fact, I've become quite an able linguist. We moved outside into the sun.

'I don't suppose you've anything quite like this lot in America,' he said lightly but half-apologetically. 'But it's quite fun. Nowadays. Better than it was when my father was here. At least,' he added as an afterthought,

‘It *sounds* a lot better from what he tells me.’ Then after a pause, ‘But he didn’t seem to mind.’

Just in time I stopped myself from asking the sort of question which would have betrayed my own Castonian origins.

At Lodge I handed back the map-board together with a five-pound note.

‘It must be a richly rewarding experience to go to school in buildings as historical as these,’ I said, knowing that I was perhaps overdoing the admiring American visitor.

‘Thank you, sir. That’s most generous of you. Yes, sir, the young gentlemen are very fortunate indeed.’

Still ‘young gentlemen’! We also had been ‘young gentlemen’ to Old Stubbington, even when he handed out a ‘Pink Slip’, with its ominous invitation – *The High Master requests the presence of...* – reserved for matters too serious to be disciplined by the Housemaster. Pink Slips were rare in my day; perhaps have now vanished altogether. Once upon a time they had signified a formal birching, the cost of the birch being noted on the slip by the head porter and sent to the victim’s father with the end-of-Half bill.

‘I met a very civil young fellow,’ I said, ‘playing the organ in the chapel. I gather he lives here.’

‘Quite correct, sir. His father’s one of the Housemasters.’

‘That’s all right!’ I put in, seeing that Starlight was intending to embark on an explanation, ‘He told me what Housemasters do.’

‘Well, sir, his father’s in a House called Ansell’s.’

Of course! I ought to have expected one more coincidence, ought to have known it would concern Ansell’s. Thanking my stars I had not bumped into the boy’s father during my surreptitious visit to the House, I said graciously, ‘Well, please tell his father, from me, that his son’s a credit to, er, Cranchester.’

It was Starlight’s reply that put me to flight.

‘Of course I will, sir. A very nice young gentleman is Mr Ashton’s son.’

Ghosts.