

Oh Brother!

By Philippe Smyth

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" 'Bout ye Bertie ..have you got oul' Biffo's homework done?"

"Hardly . No chance of even gettin' five minutes peace round our place. Did you?"

"Did a wee bit. Couldn't find out anything about the Alps though ..."

"Stuff the Alps, my da hasn't even taken me up Cavehill ..."

It was a Friday morning, January 1917, and it wasn't what you'd call a warm one.

The solid stone school-building was hard to heat, and so far no one had seen to lighting the fire in the grate behind the teacher's desk. Bertrand McNamara had arrived into the dingy classroom of St Malachy's a few minutes later than he was meant to, and was trying to ease himself into his place beside Artie McKenna as deftly as possible. What was keeping the aul' bugger anyhow? Brother Hagan was never late to call the roll, and he demanded punctuality from his pupils. Bertrand hoped he'd gotten away with it this time. He was just at the stage of disentangling his arms from the straps of his satchel when a voice boomed from behind him.

"McNamara! why aren't you in your seat? And why is there no homework book opened on your desk? Well, boy?"

Bertrand shuddered. His mother had asked him to post a letter on his way to school. That had taken him all the way round by the Law Courts and made him late.

"I ...I had to do a message for my ma, Sir ... I'm sorry I'm late for class."

"Lateness is not permitted, McNamara. Go to my desk."

Bertrand's shoulders sank as he stepped out from his place and began the short journey to meet Brother Hagan at the front of the class.

"Right hand, boy."

Bertrand obediently held out his right hand, palm upwards, ready for Brother Hagan

to deliver three sharp strokes from his slim, wooden cane. His eyes squeezed tight shut as he strained hard to keep himself from retracting his hand after each lash.

"And the left ..."

Bertrand reluctantly obliged and received a further three strokes of the cane. He was trying desperately now to hold back the tears that had begun to seep through his closed eyes. Returning to his desk, he fumbled in his satchel with numb, smarting fingers for his homework jotter and laid it out. Roll-call was duly taken.

With all his marks recorded, Brother Hagan closed the register book, leaned forward and clasped his hands together on top of his desk.

"Well now boys, who shall be the first to tell us something of Hannibal, the scourge of the mighty Roman Empire? John Casey, what is it that you have discovered about this great military leader?"

"Sir, he came from Carthage and he hated the Romans and he was always thinking about new ways he could beat them."

"And did he beat them? Who can tell me about any of his famous victories? Nulty...?"

"Sir, at the Battle of Cannae, Sir, in the Second Punic war, Sir ..."

Brother Hagan unclasped his hands and sat up. "Bring me your homework, boy."

Joseph Nulty folded his seat up behind him as he shifted out from his desk and approached Brother Hagan.

"Step up here, boy."

Joseph stepped up onto the wooden platform on which the teacher's desk stood.

Brother Hagan's arm shot out, grabbing the boy by the ear and dragging his head down to within a few inches of his homework book.

"Punic war, boy, Punic war ... kneel at the desk of penance and write out that whole page for me again, three times, neatly. McNamara, what seeds of wisdom about Hannibal have you brought along to share with us today? "

Bertrand straightened himself up. He hadn't found out very much about Hannibal, but he was finding out how much he hated Brother Hagan ...

"Elephants, Sir, he owned a lot of elephants and he led them over the Alps .."

"And why did he want to do that, McNamara?"

Bertrand had no idea why Hannibal would have wanted to do that.

"The circus, Sir. He had to take them to the Roman circus ..."

Brother Hagan was now on his feet.

"The Roman Circus, was it now, McNamara? Are you sure it wasn't Duffy's?"

Stifled sniggers went round the classroom.

"I ... I don't know, Sir, I mean, I don't think so, Sir ..."

"NO, I don't think so either, McNamara. Come up here, boy."

For the second time that morning, Bertrand found himself abandoning the relative safety of his desk and making his way up to Brother Hagan.

"Face the class, boy."

Bertrand turned round whilst Brother Hagan set about lashing the backs of his bare legs with his favoured leather strap.

"Being late for school is one thing, McNamara. Being late and not having your homework done is quite another. Not feeling so smart now, are we, boy?"

"No Sir", replied Bertrand as he began walking painfully back to his place.

The lunch-time bell brought some relief inasmuch as the boys finally got to escape from Brother Hagan's realm and go out in the school-yard, eat their pieces and kick ball about for a while. Inevitably, the ball ended up being kicked over the back wall into the adjoining RIC station. "Your turn to fetch it, Louis."

"No it's not, Artie, I never even kicked it over ...if you're so keen, you go round and ask the peelers for the ball."

"Not me. I went the last time and the big peeler said he'd give me a right hidin' if he caught me pokin' around on their property again."

"I'll go", volunteered Bertrand, thinking the day couldn't get much worse.

No objection being made to his offer, he started out along the back entry and on round to the front of the barracks. Five minutes later, he was back with the ball under his arm and a smile on his face.

"What are you looking so pleased about?" asked Artie. "You get to enlist or something?"

"No, they just gave me two shillings, that's all."

"That's all? That's more'n yer da gives yer ma at the end of the week! What'd they wanna do that for? Let's see this two shillings anyhow.."

Bertrand produced the two shiny coins from the pocket of his shorts.

"Think they saw the welts on the backs of my legs. They asked me if I was in Brother Hagan's class and would I like to be getting a new teacher some time."

"What'd they mean by that d'you think, Bertie?"

"Dunno .. anyhow, I told them we get Brother Corrigan in the afternoon, and that he's quite a good sort, and then they gave me the two shillings and told me to go and have a few treats."

"And treat your mates too, Bertie, that's what they said, didn'y they? Aul' Biffo gives us a good leatherin' every wee while too, don't forget."

"Aye, I suppose ... yous'uns got any money on yous ..?"

A brief spell of pocket-searching ensued, and the results gathered together in Artie's hand.

"Tuppence-ha'penny! That'll go far between the five of us .."

"No, Bertie, TWO and tuppence-ha'penny! That will go far ... let's go home through the markets and buy some winkles!"

"And Annie's sweetie shop on Cromac Street, and the wee pet shop .."

"Haul yer horses lads, you'll be wantin' me to get ye tickets for the fekk'n' circus next!"