

THE SCHOOL

Expelled! I am to be expelled. Ever since this morning when the ambulance arrived, it has been inevitable. I sit on a hard chair outside the headmaster's office, waiting. Every boy and every teacher in the whole school knows my time is up. Brother Edmund, the headmaster, has no real choice.

The room is strangely silent after all the noise of the school grounds outside. It smells faintly of pipe tobacco and linseed oil. Through the window, I can see light sparkling on the surface of the Swan River, and the far-off market gardens on the South Perth foreshore. I take a deep breath and wipe my sweating palms on my uniform shorts. It is six months to the day since I sailed down from Broome and joined Christian Brothers College in St George's Terrace in Perth.

My experience at school has not been what I expected. I thought it would be fun to be surrounded by boys my own age, but they just seem like excited, eager puppies a lot of the time. And I detest the pettiness, sarcasm, cruelty and vindictiveness of some of the Brothers. Wherever did the school manage to find such a bunch of peculiar, twisted coots?

After living in the tropics my whole life, I have been cold all the time I have been down south in Perth, even on supposed warm days, and frozen half to death in winter. The dormitory where I sleep with twenty other boys is a long, draughty room with uncomfortable iron beds, thin blankets and cold water to wash and shower. You would have thought after my time serving on the Black Dragon, and facing all manner of discomfort and danger at sea, that school would be like a holiday. Funnily enough, it sort of is, though more like a holiday in the darkest depths of hell.

Many lessons leave me feeling dumbfounded and dimwitted. Algebra is incomprehensible. No matter how long I sit in a classroom, the stupid X is always going to be a stupid X and nothing else. Trigonometry is especially bad, though I can see a use for it in navigation, so I try harder, but no matter how much work I put in, I never score high marks. The only subjects I like are English and Geography and I have learnt to study maps in depth, but

not enough to want to stay at school for a second longer than I have to.

I loathe the place. Not a day goes by when I don't want to be back on the deck of the Black Dragon heading into an unknown horizon, and another adventure, not knowing what dangers lurk ahead. I miss Bosun Stevenson shouting out orders, I miss Mr Smith watching out for my welfare, and I really miss Sam Chi's cooking as here the food is mostly horrible, and I am hungry all the time. I especially miss standing beside Captain Bowen at the ship's wheel with a keen wind and sea spray blowing in our faces and the Black Dragon whipping across the top of the waves at breakneck speed.

Every day at school, except Sundays, we are woken at sunrise for a cross-country run along the riverbank, then it is back for breakfast, usually something ghastly. This is followed by cold showers and then mind-numbingly boring lessons, accompanied by the Brothers lashing out with their canes, flinging chalk and blackboard dusters about classrooms and, above all, shouting a lot. The only part of the day I look forward to is the late afternoon when we play cricket on the school oval, and I usually get to shine, hitting cricket balls all over the ground.

During the winter I played football. All the running about gave me a chance to warm up. I wasn't good at it,

but there were a few bullies on the team, and the rough and tumble of the game was a chance to give them a taste of their own medicine without getting caught by a Brother. I hate bullies. No one at school bullies me, but I see other kids getting picked on and it makes me wild.

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Brother Edmund calls for me to enter. He glances up from his highly polished desk as I come in. I stand and wait while he finishes writing a letter.

‘Master Read,’ he says, quietly, a few moments later, his tone serious as he rises and passes me the letter to read. I see his gaze linger on my bruised and deeply reddened knuckles.

Brother Edmund isn’t usually an overly stern man and even shares an occasional joke with the boys, but this time his face is set hard and uncompromising with no trace of a smile.

The letter is addressed to my guardian, Captain James Bowen of Broome. Surprisingly, it doesn’t say I am to be expelled. Instead, it reads, *It is no longer in the best interest of the school, nor Master Read, for him to remain at Christian Brothers College. Master Read is to leave the school grounds immediately upon receipt of this letter, and*

he will, forthwith, cease all communication with anyone enrolled or involved, etc., and so on, and so forth, and basically, ‘get out of my sight as soon as possible you despicable excuse for a human being.’

‘Thank you, Brother Edmund,’ I say quietly. Thanking him is stupid considering everything, but I cannot think of a single other sentence even remotely appropriate.

‘I am afraid I have some more bad news for you, Master Read,’ he continues. ‘Normally, this would be the end of such a sorry state of affairs ...’ He pauses again, obviously carefully composing his next sentence, ‘but I visited Brother Christian in the hospital this morning, and he has insisted that you be charged by the police with his assault. I tried to talk him out of such a protracted course of action. But his mind is made up and he could not be persuaded.’

‘Oh,’ I reply, sounding pathetic. This past year I have sailed thousands of miles across treacherous seas and faced death many times over, been caught in a cyclone and almost drowned, shot at with cannons and rifles, faced headhunters, and have nearly been hanged, and all I can say now facing the headmaster is, pathetically, ‘Oh.’

He continues, ‘I have informed Captain Bowen in a telegram to Broome of your situation.’

‘What do I do in the meantime, Brother Edmund?’ I

ask. 'I don't know anyone in Perth. Do I book into a hotel?' The posh Palace Hotel is only a few hundred yards along the Terrace from the school, and I could certainly afford to stay there for weeks, or probably forever. Even better, the Esplanade Hotel in Fremantle where Emma lives is only a train ride away.

Before he can answer, a short knock on the door sounds, and the headmaster's secretary steps in. 'Excuse me, Brother Edmund. The police have arrived.'

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The journey in the black police wagon is not going to be pleasant. When the constable opens the door, the stink of puke and pee and every other human stench imaginable hits me. As we trundle shakily along the school carriageway, I stare out of the bars of the small window, and all the while I wonder how my life has turned into such a mess so suddenly. Rather than to the Palace Hotel, I am on my way to prison. Prison! Even the word sends a shiver through me. I will soon be a convict. A real-life, government-issue convict with broad black arrows on my clothes, and a ball and chain. Do they still use those? I let out a deep sigh of hopelessness. I never considered this could happen to me. My ma will be so ashamed. Among her customers at the

Smuggler's Curse hotel are some seriously bad coves who have done hard time in the past, but I don't imagine she ever expected her only son to end up as one of them. I have a sudden vision of Ma receiving the headmaster's letter and her reaction. It doesn't bear thinking about. Ma does not get upset easily, but when she does, her first response to bad news or bad behaviour is often to lash out in anger. More than a few drunks at the bar of her hotel have learnt the hard way to behave themselves or curb their foul language, flaming fools.

We travel westward along the Terrace, past the lush gardens of Government House on the left and the large, red brick Church of England cathedral on the right side of the road. As the police wagon turns right at the big Government building into Barrack Street, one of the new electric trams whines by, clanging its bell as the conductor shouts out the name of the next stop. The street is noisy and crowded with people all hurrying along like they are about to miss out on lunch. No one stops to talk to each other like they do in Broome. In fact, Perth is nothing like Broome at all. It is incredibly noisy with the sound of iron wheel hoops grinding on roads covered in horse droppings, the air is full of smoke. Bicycles by the score rush by and, standing outside many businesses, carhorses wait while their wagons are slowly unloaded by sullen-looking boys

dressed in brown aprons. Some stop work to stare at me. Others laugh and wave. I don't wave back.

I feel like an aristocrat being carried on a tumbrel to the guillotine during the French Revolution. I certainly hope my fate is going to be better than any of those toffs, though I am not counting on it. The driver cracks his horsewhip as we cross over Wellington Street and steers the wagon over the railway bridge and then immediately turns left and then right into a stable yard in Roe Street, just near the corner.

I climb down the steps of the wagon and look about forlornly at the big new sandstone police-court building. My heart is beating fast as it gradually dawns on me what I have done and what the consequences might be. My mouth is dry, and I feel my hands are shaking. 'So it has come to this,' I murmur. I am no longer destined to become Captain Red Read, master of the schooner Red Dragon, as I hoped, but Red Read, convict. 'Such is life,' I sigh, sounding more like a dramatic actress than Ned Kelly about to be hanged.

'What did you say, boy?' demands one of the constables, a tall bloke with a small scar under his eye.

'Nothing, Constable. Just saying a prayer,' I lie.

'Well pray hard, boy,' continues the constable. 'Extra hard. Tomorrow you face Police Magistrate Roe. He knows just how to handle violent little thugs like you. Now come

with me, you brat.' He grabs me roughly by the collar and hauls me along, my feet hardly touching the ground as I try to keep up with him.

He opens a heavy door studded with boltheads and throws me through it, then shuffles me down a stone-floored corridor to a small room at the end, our footsteps echoing all the way. It is not a cell but is very much like one and contains only a table with a chair on each side. 'Sit here. Don't move. Don't make a sound. Senior Constable Kelly will be along shortly to take your statement.'

I wait for what feels like forever but is probably only half an hour I suppose, as I don't have a watch. Eventually, a large, jolly-looking policeman dressed in a tight-fitting navy-coloured tunic comes in and sits in the other chair. He scrapes it on the floor while making himself comfortable. 'Well,' he says, opening a cardboard file containing half a dozen sheets of paper.

I nod, being polite, while all the time wanting to get up and run away as fast as my legs will carry me. For one stupid second, I toy with the idea of bolting. But where?

'Well, what do you have to say for yourself ...' he looks down the top sheet, '... Red?' Before I can reply he flips over the paper. 'Oh, I see your guardian is Captain James Bowen. How in the devil did that happen? Black Bowen? Well, I'll be. I've met him myself a few times over the

years. There's a name to be mindful of.'

'I was ship's boy on his schooner, the Black Dragon,' I say proudly, 'After we returned from the Straits in Asia, Captain Bowen sent me to school at Christian Brothers.'

'This is not good, boy. Not good at all. This association with him I mean. I know for a fact that Magistrate Roe and your Captain Bowen go back a long way. There's bad blood between them. Very bad. They hate each other with a passion. It's a hatred like no other I gather.'

I wonder what he is talking about.

He leans back in his chair and folds his arms across his ample stomach. 'Now in your own words, tell me why you think you are here.' He pulls a pencil from behind his ear and licks the tip of the lead.

'It was Brother Christian, our dormitory master,' I begin. 'This morning, while we were getting dressed, Brother Christian started yelling at poor Albert Thomas. I don't know what Albert did. Brother Christian was shaving, and he grabbed his shaving strop and started laying into him. Really whacking him hard with the thick leather belt, he was. Albert is small for his age, but Brother Christian had a crazy look in his eyes. He was yelling, and thrashing and thrashing him. Albert was on the floor screaming, and couldn't get up as he had his hands in the air trying to protect his face. I thought Brother Christian was going to

kill him, or at least cripple him for life.'

'So, what did you do, Red?'

'Well, first off I hauled Brother Christian off Albert. He got even angrier and swung at me with the razor strop. I wasn't going to have that. It had a metal buckle on the end. I grabbed him by the front of his cassock, and let him have a haymaker straight in the face, then I gave him a taste of what he had been doing to poor little Albert.'

'So it seems,' Constable Kelly says, looking down again. 'According to the hospital report I have here, it looks like you did more than that. As well as a broken nose, he has several cracked ribs, several teeth knocked out, black eyes, both of them, and scores of welts on his body. It also says here you kicked him in the privates. That must have hurt.'

I nod, wanting to comment that it didn't hurt me a bit, but, instead, I more sensibly say, 'I wanted him to stay down. I was so wild. Poor little Albert is so defenceless. He is so small. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair, so I put the boot in as well.'

'So it appears,' he says, looking back at his sheet of paper. 'Several times. It looks like you've beaten the living daylight out of him.'

'It wasn't the first time he had hurt the smaller boys. He is a cruel brute, and he's a right ...'

Constable Kelly's eyebrows raise suspiciously.

'A nasty bully,' I finish, stopping myself. I was going to say such a bad word. The worst word I know, and I know some pretty foul ones, let me tell you. Mixing with sailors is good for the vocabulary, even if you can't use most of the words in public.

'Let me see your hands,' he says.

I hold them forward. The cuts and swelling now look even more painful and inflamed than earlier in the day. They hurt like crazy as well.

'Hmmm. Hurt?'

'Yes, sir, a bit.'

'Who taught you to fight?'

'Rowdy. One of the crew on the Dragon,' I explain.

'Rowdy?' he asks. 'Rowdy Cooper?'

I nod again.

'I wondered where he had got to. Broome, eh? He could really handle himself when he was younger, he could. I had to feel his collar a few times. Usually assault or affray.' He nods as if confirming his own story and picks up the file. 'Well, Master Read, here's how it is going to go from now. I will write a report for the magistrate, who you will face in the morning. Magistrate Roe is a tough nut to crack. He is new and trying to impress, though I don't know who. I will put in a good word for you: extreme provocation,

extenuating circumstances, defending a friend, etc., but your connection with Black Bowen will work against you,' he says, and shakes his head doubtfully.

'Thank you, Constable Kelly,' I reply. I wonder what he means about the magistrate and the Captain having bad blood. What could have happened between them?