

Chapter 1

In which Edgar Hatter recollects his holiday, arrangements are made for tomorrow and term grinds to a start

Monday, 19th August

Edgar Hatter settled himself into the old, threadbare easy chair, and looked round the staff room at the old faces, brown and fresh from long days soaking up the summer sun.

It had been a glorious, hot summer - and Edgar had made the most of it. Only two days ago, he had been sitting outside the *Hostellerie des Alpes* in a little seaside village in Provence, with a glass of *Entre Deux Mers*, a crusty, hot, freshly-baked baguette and a large piece of *bleu d'Auvergne*; and thinking how beautiful the world was.

Now he was back. Back from the land of dreams - back to the reality of life at the Herbert Rammell Middle School. With a cracked green cup of lukewarm Nescafé. The gruelling Autumn Term loomed ahead like an endless dark tunnel.

Edgar was thirty-five years old and already balding, and during his fourteen years at the chalk face, had managed to develop a *joi de vivre* and a sense of humour that had eluded many less cynical members of his profession. He was a single man, a fact that any observant person may have deduced from his slightly scruffy appearance and his apparent indifference to settling of dates and times for school activities.

As he let his grey eyes wander around the room with its high, flaking ceiling and half-tiled walls, it struck him how it always looked so clean and organised at the beginning of a new term. But he knew that within a few days it would revert to its usual jumble of unmarked dog-eared exercise books piled high on the window-shelves like so much waste paper; the coffee tables would disappear under a sea of unread brochures from book publishers, and the few notices now neatly pinned to the notice boards would be covered by a whole plethora of literature, each new addition being pinned carelessly over an earlier edict usually with one solitary drawing pin.

All the familiar faces were there ... Matthew Walker, History, already having a go at Henry Crate, the Deputy Head, over the pile of builders' rubble he had found in the middle of his form room; the French department planning how many trips to France they could wring out of the Head this year; the PE staff (all two of them) normally only to be seen flitting in and out of the staff room in mud-spattered tracksuits en route to their next activity, and now almost unrecognisable as they made their annual appearance in mufti. Over in the far corner sat Bill Bracegirdle, Head of Design, trying to explain the intricacies of the timetable to Lloyd Evans, a new member of his Department.

Edgar flipped idly through the bundle of duplicated papers he had found in his pigeon-hole and resigned himself to the inevitable tedium of the next forty-five minutes while Algernon Bott, MA outlined the 'Arrangements for Tomorrow'.

The Head cleared his throat, and took control. He was a small, rotund man with a shiny red face and an almost completely bald head. He was wearing (as he always did), a rather well-worn dark blue suit and a pin-stripe shirt.

'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to make a start. We've quite a bit to get through, and I'm sure you don't want to be here any longer than necessary on such a glorious afternoon.'

Edgar sighed. He could think of better things to do with his last day of freedom.

The Head placed his hands face down on the grimy, varnished table before him, leaned back decisively in his chair, muttered something to Lucinda Smiles, his Second Deputy who sat at his side beaming at everyone, and waited as the room subsided into a fairly expectant silence.

'Let me welcome you all back once again and I know that you will all be looking forward to the new term.' No we're not, thought Edgar. Just looking forward to Christmas. 'Firstly, a welcome to a new member of staff.' Algernon beamed at a young, slim, attractive girl with long, dark hair, who was sitting apprehensively in the Science Department corner. 'Miss Goodbody will be joining the Science Staff, to replace Mr. Ratchet. I understand she will be taking over responsibility for Biology.'

Appreciative smiles were cast in Miss Goodbody's direction as the younger male members of staff summed up their chances of jumping into bed with the Science Department's newest acquisition.

The Head continued without so much as a glance at Lloyd Evans, the new teacher in charge of woodwork.

'Now, I would like you all to look at the Arrangements for Tomorrow, which Mrs. Grace has been kind enough to run off this morning. Perhaps it would be best if I take us through them...'

Edgar sighed again, and settled down to make himself as comfortable as possible whilst the Head read ponderously through the document. Edgar had cultivated a technique of sleeping with his eyes open for such occasions, and it was forty-five minutes later when he again became aware of the proceedings. Algernon had finished, and was asking for comments.

'Headmaster,' (Bert Gruttock of Rural Studies always prefaced his remarks at staff meetings with 'Headmaster', whether from a sense of respect or one of mock servility was never clear.) 'I hope we aren't going to have a repeat of last year's fiasco when nobody actually went out to the children to organise them when the bell went at ten to nine.'

Bert, with his flaming, bushy red beard, and his old, muddy wellington boots which no-one had ever seen him without even at staff meetings, never minced words. 'Can we expect,' he continued in his broad Yorkshire accent, 'that somebody will be delegated to t' job this year?'

'Mr. Crate?' The Head turned to his Deputy. Henry Crate was effectively (or in Edgar's view, ineffectively), the Administrative Head of the school. Henry had almost nodded off when he heard his name mentioned, and had considerable difficulty understanding what was going on.

'Er, yes, er, what actually is the problem?' he stammered, taking off his glasses and wiping them with a pristine white handkerchief.

'Have we delegated members of staff to supervise the children coming in tomorrow morning?' prompted the Head patiently.

'Well, er, no, not exactly. I've given the duty rota to the Secretary to type up, so we have every expectation that the arrangements for the morning which are - er - included in the er - rota should be made available to all members of the staff at the earliest opportunity this week.' Henry Crate never used one word when twenty would do.

'Can we make some temporary arrangement for tomorrow morning, then,' replied the Head patiently, 'until the rota is pinned up?'

All eyes were on Henry, who appeared to be in a cataplectic trance. There was a pause of several seconds before he answered. 'Yes - er - that should be all right,' he said eventually, and replaced his glasses.

Edgar sat back and let it all flow over him. This was the eighth time he had sat through this discussion, and from his experience of the previous seven he knew that tomorrow would be complete chaos anyway. Bill Bracegirdle brought him out of his reverie.

'I see from the timetable for tomorrow,' Bill boomed, 'that no allowance has been made for a fire drill. In view of last term's fiasco, could I propose that we make it a priority?'

'Well,' replied Algernon, 'Henry is in charge of the timetable. What do you think, Mr. Crate?'

Henry again roused himself. 'Hmm, yes, I would think that would be all right...' he muttered vaguely.

'When do you think we could fit it in, then, Henry?' asked Algernon patiently.

Henry collected his thoughts, and gazed vacantly at the piece of paper in front of him on the desk.

'Well, I would think - er - just after lunch break would be satisfactory.'

'Does that answer your question, Bill?' asked the Head, and Bill nodded. Nobody else cared a hoot about when the fire drill took place, so it was accepted.

'Now, if there is nothing else,' said the Head, looking round at the once eager faces now already showing their first signs of weariness, 'may I just remind you all that we start tomorrow morning at ten to nine prompt and trust you will make the best of what's left of the holiday.'

A buzz of conversation broke out, and Edgar turned to the two members of his staff who were seated at his right. 'Ah well,' he said, 'here we go again. Shall we just nip upstairs and I can let you have the finalised set lists.'

Tuesday, 20th August

The first day of term was wet. Well before the first coaches ground onto the school forecourt to spill their excited, chattering cargoes into the muddy pools that all but covered the pitted tarmac, the rain had been coming down in sheets. It was, beyond any shadow of a doubt, an 'In Day'.

Which is why, at 8.50, those of the staff who were of Edgar Hatter's disposition were to be found ensconced in the staff room drinking coffee out of cracked, pale green cups. Those newer members of staff from whom the first flush of enthusiasm had not yet worn off were fussing round in their classrooms getting things ready for the coming battle. Edgar was chatting to Geraldine Thirdborough, his number two, about a discussion he had had last term with Cecil Bagshawe, the County Adviser for Mathematics about a new scheme he had agreed to try out in the Spring term.

Suddenly, Geraldine glanced up at the clock on the wall. 'Shouldn't the bell have gone by now, Edgar?' she asked. 'It's nearly nine o'clock.'

Bill Bracegirdle, lounging in an arm-chair and sipping his third cup of black coffee of the morning overheard her remark. 'Who's bothered?' he grinned. 'Probably Henry's not told Albert. He has a break from nine till ten anyway, so I guess there's time for another coffee.'

It was twenty past nine before Henry Crate actually realised the bell had not gone, and he appeared in the staff room doorway in a state of panic.

'Could some of you help to get the children in?' he asked the staff room, with a touch of hysteria in his voice. 'I don't know what's happened to the bell, and there appears to be a riot going on in the yard.'

'Why, what's up, Henry?' asked Edgar, glancing up from his crossword.

'I was just sitting in my office having a cup of coffee, and a ball came through the window. There's glass everywhere. I dashed outside to catch whoever had done it, but I wasn't fast enough. Got clean away - though I did catch a glimpse of two boys.'

A smile came to Edgar's lips. Henry had been spotted once by Pauline Plackett taking his pet tortoise for a walk, and she swore that it had been *straining at the leash*. Speed was not Henry's forte.

'Anyway,' continued Henry, 'something seems to have gone wrong with the bell, and we need some help to get the children into school.'

Now this was exactly the sort of situation that 'Major' Tom Horrocks revelled in. He stood up importantly, twirled his large moustache, buttoned up his Harris Tweed jacket and marched towards the door. He was followed rather more reluctantly by a few of the more aggressive male members of staff. It was doubtful if the 'Major' had ever actually seen active service, and even more doubtful if he had ever actually been a major, but that never prevented him from recounting tales of his commando training to his pupils. He had even spent one entire lesson showing a whole class of first years how to tie a bowline in the window cord. 'Never know when you're going to need it,' he had told them.

So Tom took control of the emergency as a general would a battle. He stalked out into the yard, then realising his error, hastily retreated from the rain to the shelter of a leeward wall, before addressing the whole crowd of wretched, dripping children.

'Right,' he roared. 'Every man inside to their new form rooms. First years go straight to the Hall.'

There was a sudden surge towards the main door, like water to a plug hole when the plug is suddenly removed. The volunteers who were attempting to control the sudden influx of six hundred drenched inmates of Herbert Rammell were all but trampled underfoot in the heaving mass of children fighting to get through the door and out of the rain.

Edgar, it need hardly be said, was savouring the last of his coffee in the staff room. Lucinda Smiles was in her office rearranging a vase of flowers for the tenth time. Henry Crate had tottered back to his room, and was ineffectively attempting to contact Albert Grummitt the caretaker with a view to having his shattered window replaced.

'Ah, well,' mused Edgar to no-one in particular, 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more....', and getting to his feet, set off in the general direction of the chalk face. A new school year had begun.

END OF CHAPTER 1

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