

Afar and Asunder¹

A School Reunion: A Playlet

By

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¹ Taken from the first line of the school song 'Forty Years On'; the adverbial particle 'asunder' is now virtually archaic, but it implies extreme and violent separation. In the playlet, two destinies go in opposite directions; two characters are so diverse that their school experiences seem to have taken place in different universes and finally, two lovers who felt destined for each other discover that they have been parted 'afar and asunder' for thirty years by a tragic misunderstanding.

Cast

Miss Witherington: A begowned² academic lady in her mid-fifties who belongs to the ‘jolly hockey sticks³’ Oxbridge brigade. (It was as likely for her to remove her gown in public as it would have been to remove her Harris Tweed skirt to reveal layers of petticoats. Some third year girl pupils had speculated as to whether Miss Witherington wore her gown in the privacy of her own home. One bold spark⁴ who ventured to ring her doorbell on the pretext that she had lost her Latin dictionary and desperately needed to look up a word for her translation exercise was quite shocked to see an unbegowned Miss Witherington appear at the door. Stunned, the spark reported to her friends that it was almost as if Miss Witherington had answered the door in nude.)

Bill Mallinson: A slightly portly engineer who exudes health and wealth

Ian Bancroft: The counterpart of Bill Mallinson, who exudes an air of disease, depression and defeat

Mark: Very much the conservative, academic type who wears prominent spectacles, a woolen tie and black brogues

Jane McGill: A busty, bitchy barmaid

Ralph Carter: A handsome suave Romeo despite being in his late forties

Julia Wright: A svelte Juliet also in her late forties

² It was and still is in many elite schools *de rigueur* for teachers to wear academic gowns. In the fifties, it was compulsory for undergraduates at some universities to wear their gowns even in public.

³ This is not really a derogatory phrase, but refers to typical English ladies who are relentlessly optimistic and generally innocent of the darker side of life.

⁴ ‘A bright spark’ is a more usual collocation referring to an intelligent, but possible mischievous child.

Scene I

Winter 1995. The Main Hall of the now independent Queen Elizabeth mixed grammar school in Cleckfield, West Yorkshire. A buffet is set out for the school leavers of thirty to thirty-five years ago. The guests are drinking their champagne aperitifs.

Miss Witherington: *(Rings the school bell very loudly for silence)*

I am absolutely delighted that so many of you could leave your exotic retreats to venture back into the grim north⁵ and come to our thirty to thirty-five year school leavers' reunion. As you can see from our both sumptuous and scrumptious⁶ buffet, your contributions suggested on the invitation cards have been put to good use, but some contributions were so generous that we have been able to splash out on the Bollinger bubbly rather than our traditional sweet or dry sherry aperitif.

Some of you may remember our old school song: '*Floreat schola, ancilla artium in rerum naturaeque*'⁷, but, alas, educational progress has required its abolition and it has now been replaced by that old Harrovian favourite 'Forty Years On'⁸, but let us all join in and be rather outrageous by making an audacious amendment and sing instead: 'Thirty Years On':

(Either sung by the cast or faded in from the recordings on the internet)

Thirty years on, when afar and asunder

Parted are those who are singing today,

When you look back, and forgetfully wonder

What you were like in your work and your play

⁵ Northern England is associated with bleak moorland, heavy industry and poverty and so the 'grim north' is a standard collocation.

⁶ School slang for delicious

⁷ This is entirely fictitious and means 'Let the school flourish as the servant of science and arts.'

⁸ 'Forty Years On' is the official school song of Harrow, a prestigious boys' school and was inappropriately adopted by many state grammar schools, including mixed schools. The tramp of the twenty-two men refers to cricket and football teams, at that time, an exclusively male domain.

Scene II The Hare and the Tortoise

‘The bitch goddess success’ (*William James*)

Bill Mallinson and Ian Bancroft are each holding a glass of champagne, but Ian has already piled up his plate as high as possible.

Ian: Hello, there. I think I can recognize you. You are William Mallinson of the upper sixth science set.

Bill: Well, done, old boy, I am dreadfully sorry, but I don't think I can quite place you at the moment.

Ian: Oh, that's all right. I know that, unlike you, I have changed rather a lot. You may vaguely remember a certain notorious Ian Bancroft.

Bill: Golly, and more to the point, gosh⁹. Of course, I can remember you. You were that mathematical prodigy from the lower sixth who was put into the upper sixth special paper maths set¹⁰. You used to deliberately get old Horsfall completely baffled by your questions even though Horsfall had been fifth wrangler¹¹ when he got his Cambridge first. I remember that I was only a budding and a very plodding engineer at the time. You seemed to disappear into outer space in that summer when we were taking our A Levels.

Ian: Not exactly, old chap, it was more a case of disappearing into the Biblical ‘outer darkness’.

Bill: But you must have sailed through the Cambridge entrance exams.

Ian: Again, not exactly, old chap. I never took them.

Bill: Never took them!!! Why ever not?

Ian: I was basically expelled, but more accurately asked to leave quietly to avoid any scandal for all parties concerned.

Bill: But you were a model pupil and marked out for head boy.

Ian: I had been extracting benzoylmethylegonine in the back cellar of my parents' house.

⁹ Rather pretentious harmless swear words.

¹⁰ Traditionally, sixth-formers (those preparing for higher education and the professions) were divided into arts (i.e. humanities) and sciences. The ablest mathematicians were further subdivided into special paper sets who were preparing for Oxbridge entrance exams and equally difficult examinations for scholarships at other universities. The special paper exams required a more creative approach to their chosen subjects.

¹¹ The Cambridge University degree in mathematics has the reputation of being the most difficult exam in the country (some would say in the world) and the best students who gained first class honours degrees were ranked in order of merit and were dubbed ‘wranglers’.

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