

DEAR TEACHER

The Alternative School Logbook 1979–1980

Jack Sheffield



CORGI BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

DEAR TEACHER
A CORGI BOOK: 9780552157735

First published in Great Britain
in 2009 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Chapter 8 was first published as *An Angel Called Harold* in 2008

Copyright © Jack Sheffield 2009

Jack Sheffield has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior
consent in any form of binding or cover other than that
in which it is published and without a similar condition,
including this condition, being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship
Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organization.
All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper
carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at
www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in 11/15pt Palatino by
Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Chapter One

Beatrix Potter and the Pest Controller

86 children were registered on roll on the first day of the school year. Following a Health & Safety directive from County Hall, Star Wars light sabres were banned. The Pest Control Officer visited school.

Extract from the Ragley School Logbook:
Tuesday, 4 September 1979

'So where's our Damian's light sabre, Mr Sheffield?'

It occurred to me that the beginning of another school year just wouldn't be the same without the pit-bull presence of our least favourite parent, Mrs Winifred Brown.

'I haven't seen it, Mrs Brown; what does it look like?'

'It's three foot long an' it glows blue in t'dark . . . at least, it would if my Eddie got off 'is backside an' put t'batt'ries in.'

Dear Teacher

I removed my Buddy Holly spectacles and began to polish them to give me thinking time. 'And when did it go missing?'

'E brought it t'school jus' afore all you teachers went off on y'cushy six-week 'oliday.' Next to her, five-year-old Damian lifted his sinister Darth Vader mask, dispelled all thoughts of Empire domination and proceeded to pick his nose.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Brown. I'll ask Mrs Grainger to look in her Lost Property box.'

'Y'better do that 'cause it cos' me a fortune.'

With that I retreated quickly and shut the office door.

'An' ah'll be back at quarter t'three,' she shouted. 'Our Damian needs some shoes from t'Co-Op,' and she stormed out.

It was just after 8.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 4 September 1979 and my third year as headmaster of Ragley Church of England Primary School in North Yorkshire had begun.

Anne Grainger, the deputy headmistress, walked into the office from the staff-room clutching a copy of Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse*.

'May the force be with you, Jack,' said Anne with a grin.

Anne, a tall, slim brunette in her mid-forties, was always a reassuring presence. Her patience was legendary and she certainly needed it as our Reception Class teacher.

'Force?'

'Yes, you know, as in *Star Wars*.'

A distant memory of sitting next to Beth Henderson in the Odeon cinema in York, watching *Star Wars IV, A New Hope*, flickered across my mind. I recalled that Beth had asked me why the film had begun at episode IV but all I could think about was how lucky I was to be sitting next to such a beautiful woman.

Anne shook her head in mock dismay and grabbed my arm. 'Come on,' she said, 'Vera's giving out the new registers,' and we walked out of the office, past the little cloakroom area and into the staff-room.

Miss Vera Evans, our fifty-seven-year-old secretary, looked imperiously over her steel-rimmed spectacles. 'May I remind you all to mark your pupils present in black and the ones who are absent in red.' Then she handed out the new attendance registers.

'Your word is our command, Vera,' said Sally Pringle.

A tall, freckle-faced thirty-eight-year-old with bright ginger hair, Sally taught the younger junior children and her lively dress sense was a world away from Vera's immaculate Marks & Spencer's pin-striped business suit. Vera frowned and glanced at Sally, who was picking absent-mindedly at the hand-stitching on the pockets of her voluminous tie-dyed tangerine dress. She never fully understood Sally's humour.

'Thanks, Vera,' said Jo Hunter.

Jo was a diminutive, athletic twenty-four-year-old with long jet-black hair who taught the older infants. She looked thoughtfully at her name on the front cover of her class register, written by Vera in neat copperplate

Dear Teacher

handwriting. After being Jo Maddison all her life, her new married name still intrigued her.

‘And you will recall,’ continued Vera, ‘that last year County Hall banned skateboards in school . . . Well, this year they’ve banned something called a “light sabre”, which I understand is a toy that resembles a broomstick.’

‘Quite right, Vera,’ I said, recalling my conversation with Mrs Brown.

Anne gave me a knowing look, picked up her new register and hurried off to check her Lost Property box. Jo gathered together a collection of posters on ‘The Seashore’ and set off back to her classroom, where she stood on a chair to write the date on the top of her chalkboard. Meanwhile Sally put her new register in her hippy, open-weave shoulder bag, selected a garibaldi from the biscuit tin and walked out of the staff-room – but, noticeably, without her usual enthusiasm.

Vera smoothed her beautifully permed greying hair and passed me a cup of milky coffee. ‘Here’s to another good year, Mr Sheffield.’

I smiled as Vera continued to call me ‘Mr Sheffield’. She had always insisted this was the proper manner to address the headmaster.

‘Thank you, Vera.’ I looked at my watch. ‘Almost time for the bell.’ With a spring in my step I pushed open the giant oak entrance door and walked down the worn steps under the archway of Yorkshire stone. In the playground, a group of mothers clung on to their new starters, while

the other children removed the embarrassment of their new school shoes by scraping them against the Victorian school wall, discussed the merits of Chopper bikes and swapped magazine photos of David Cassidy and Donny Osmond.

As I walked towards the school gates a few mothers looked over their shoulders at the arrival of Mrs Dudley-Palmer in her distinctive Oxford Blue 1975 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow. She got out of her car and approached me, clutching seven-year-old Elisabeth Amelia and five-year-old Victoria Alice.

‘Good morning, Mr Sheffield,’ she said with a polite smile. Mrs Dudley-Palmer was a short, plump thirty-five-year-old who thought of herself as a cut above the rest. She was wearing a stylish light-grey coat with a mink-fur collar. ‘I’ve brought my Elisabeth Amelia back to your charming little school but I have an appointment at a private school in York this afternoon. I’ll call in later today to let you know my decision whether or not to send her there.’ Mrs Dudley-Palmer had made it clear that when Elisabeth Amelia reached the age of eight she would switch to private education. However, it was often difficult to take Mrs Dudley-Palmer seriously as she seemed to live in a world of her own and her distinctive wide-eyed stare gave her a surprisingly startled look.

Leaning against the school wall, Mrs Margery Ackroyd, mother of Tony, Theresa and Charlotte, nodded towards Mrs Dudley-Palmer. ‘All fur coat ‘n’ no knickers,’ she

Dear Teacher

whispered to her friends. They all laughed. 'Off y'go, Tony,' she said. 'Look after y'sisters an' keep that lid on y'shoebox.'

Meanwhile, at the school gates, seven-year-old Jimmy Poole, a small, sturdy boy with a mop of curly ginger hair and a distinct lisp, was staring up towards the heavens.

Curious, I walked up to him. 'Hello, Jimmy. What are you looking at?'

'Mith Maddithon thaid you can tell the time by looking at the thun,' said Jimmy, still squinting up at the sky.

'Your teacher's called Mrs Hunter now, Jimmy.'

'It's that big polithman'th fault,' said Jimmy knowingly.

I glanced up at the sun. 'So what time is it, Jimmy?'

He shook his head mournfully. 'With I knew, Mr Theffield, but I can't thee the numberth.' Celestial mysteries quickly forgotten, he wandered off to play conkers with Tony Ackroyd, who put down his shoebox and took out a conker threaded on to a length of baling twine.

As I walked through the throng of excited children, I glanced up at the silent bell in the tall, incongruous bell-tower. It was the highest point of our Victorian school building with its steeply sloping grey-slate roof and high arched windows. In the entrance hall I checked my wristwatch and, on the stroke of nine o'clock, I pulled the ancient bell rope to announce the beginning of another school year.

It was the early autumn of 1979. Mrs Thatcher was

settling into her new job as prime minister, Cliff Richard was top of the pops with 'We Don't Talk Any More' and Larry Hagman, as the scheming JR Ewing in *Dallas*, was about to become television's greatest villain of all time. Suddenly denim jeans were no longer flared: instead, they were straight, and stone-washed or paint-splattered. Stephen Hawking, regarded as the greatest scientist since Einstein and a cruel victim of an incurable disease of the nervous system, bravely announced there were 'black holes' in space. Back on earth, some things didn't change and Yorkshire's Geoffrey Boycott continued to grind out his runs in the Test Match against India at the Oval.

As I rang the bell I looked through the open entrance door and watched the late-comers scurry through the gates and dash up the cobbled driveway. Beyond the wrought-iron railings Ragley village was coming to life. On the village green, outside The Royal Oak, old Tommy Piercy was sitting on the bench next to the duck pond and feeding the ducks. All the shops on the High Street – the Post Office, Diane's Hair Salon, Nora's Coffee Shop, Pratt's Hardware Emporium, the Village Pharmacy, Piercy's Butcher's Shop and Prudence Golightly's General Stores & Newsagent – had opened their doors. Early-morning shoppers with their wickerwork baskets walked down the High Street, which was flanked by pretty terraced cottages with reddish-brown pantile roofs and tall chimney stacks. Only the occasional noisy farm tractor disturbed the peace of this picturesque Yorkshire village.

Dear Teacher

I walked into my classroom, sat at my desk and surveyed the twenty-three expectant faces in front of me. This was my third class of upper juniors in Ragley School and it was heart-warming to see their excitement at their new tins of Lakeland crayons, pristine exercise books, new HB pencils and a Reading Record Card complete with their name on the top.

A new boy, ten-year-old Darrell Topper, had put a note on my desk. I opened it and smiled; it was one for the collection. It read: 'Please excuse our Darrell from PE as his big sister took his shorts for hot pants.'

After registration I checked each child's reading age using the Schonell Graded Word Reading Test while they completed some simple comprehension exercises. Sadly, eleven-year-old Jodie Cuthbertson seemed to have regressed during the school summer holiday. In answer to the question 'How many seconds in a year?' Jodie had written: 'January 2nd, February 2nd, March 2nd . . .'

When the bell rang for morning assembly, I felt that familiar sense of history. For over a hundred years the headteacher had gathered all the children of Ragley village together to begin another school year. My theme this morning was 'Friendship' and I spoke about how we should look after one another – especially the youngest children, who had just begun full-time education. I tried to encourage the new starters to speak.

Benjamin Roberts, a confident four-year-old in Anne's class, raised his hand. 'My name is Ben,' he said. He

frowned. "Cept when I'm naughty," he added as an after-thought; 'then my mummy calls me Benjamin.'

'So, Ben, what did you want to say about friendship?' I asked.

'Well, my uncle Ted is my best friend and we went fishing at Scarborough,' said Ben.

'And what happened?' I asked.

'E sat in 'is little boat all day and came back with crabs.'

Anne gave me her wide-eyed 'Well, you did ask' look from the back of the hall and I moved on to Tony Ackroyd, who wasn't looking his usual cheerful self.

'What about you, Tony?' I asked.

'M'best friend is Petula an' . . . ah think she's gone for ever.'

'I'm really sorry to hear that, Tony,' I said and, not wishing to dwell on the loss of a family member, I moved on to the next child. After Jimmy Poole had described the antisocial antics of his Yorkshire terrier, Scargill, – or, as Jimmy called him, 'Thcargill' – I said, 'So, boys and girls, we must all be friends.'

Suddenly, the twins, six-year-old Rowena and Katrina Buttle, waved their hands in the air simultaneously. 'Our mummy says we're like different-coloured crayons . . .' said Rowena.

' . . . But we all live in the same tin,' said Katrina.

At times like these I realized why I loved being a teacher. I might not have the best-paid job in the world but it did have its rewards.

Dear Teacher

'Time for t'bell,' announced Jodie Cuthbertson, our new bell monitor.

It was half past ten and I had volunteered to do the first playground duty. I collected my coffee from Vera and walked on to the school field, where Jimmy Poole was standing all alone.

'Hello, Jimmy. Why are you standing here while all your friends are playing with a ball at the other end of the field?' I asked.

'Becauth I'm the goalkeeper, Mithter Theffield,' said Jimmy simply.

Nearby, five-year-old Terry Earnshaw was taking his role of Luke Skywalker very seriously and he eventually defeated five-year-old Damian Brown, the nose-picking Darth Vader, by flicking the elastic on his mask on to his ears. Meanwhile, the Buttle twins, as the two androids, C3PO and R2D2, tried valiantly to save Jimmy Poole as the lispig Obi-Wan Kenobi. Finally, with a pragmatism that resided somewhere between the Communist Party and the local Co-Op, seven-year old Heathcliffe Earnshaw said pacifically, 'OK, let's all rule t'G'lactic Empire.'

At the end of playtime I looked into Jo's classroom, where a group of children had resumed their paintings as part of their 'Seaside' project. Six-year-old Hazel Smith was painting blue stripes across the top of her A3 piece of sugar paper.

'Is that the sky?' I asked cheerfully.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. 'No, Mr Sheffield, jus' paint.'

'Ah, yes, of course,' I said, feeling suitably reprimanded.

'An' this is Mary the Mermaid,' explained Hazel. 'She's got a lady top 'alf an' a fish bottom 'alf. She's a good swimmer an' she won't get pregnant.' It occurred to me that children seemed to grow up faster these days.

On a nearby table, Elisabeth Amelia Dudley-Palmer seemed to prove the point. She was busy trying to complete her School Mathematics Project card concerning long multiplication. Jo walked in, glanced at her exercise book and frowned.

'You need to work hard at your mathematics so you will be good at sums,' said Jo.

'Don't worry, Miss,' said Elisabeth Amelia. 'Daddy has an excellent accountant.'

At twelve o'clock Jodie rang the dinner bell and I walked into the school office as Vera was checking Anne and Jo's dinner registers.

'What's for lunch?' I said. Anne Grainger leaned out of the doorway and sniffed the air. Her sense of smell was renowned. She could recognize a damp gabardine raincoat at fifty yards. Today, however, it was the unmistakable smell of damp cabbage. Anne, with the experience of twenty-five years of school dinners behind her, sniffed the air like a French wine taster. The merest hint of the subtle bouquet of Spam fritter reached her sensitive nostrils and she nodded in recognition. 'Spam fritters, mashed potato and cabbage,' she said confidently.

Dear Teacher

While the sweet pear-drop smell of the aerosol fixative, used to prevent pastel drawings from smudging, was obvious to the rest of us, the higher echelon of school odours had really only been mastered by Anne and Vera.

‘Correct,’ agreed Vera, half closing her eyes in deep concentration, ‘with perhaps the merest possibility of diced carrots.’

Jo stared in awe at this exhibition of advanced sensory perception, folded up her wall chart of ‘Seaside Shells’, and walked into the school hall to join the queue for her first school dinner of the year.

I followed her and saw Heathcliffe Earnshaw pushing into the front of the queue. ‘Go to the back of the line, Heathcliffe,’ I said.

‘But there’s somebody there already, Mr Sheffield,’ replied Heathcliffe, quick as a flash.

Just behind me, Anne Grainger turned away to stifle her laughter while I scrutinized the cheerful face of the ex-Barnsley boy. There was definitely something about him that you couldn’t help but like.

After lunch, back in the staff-room, Vera was reading the front page of her *Daily Telegraph* and shaking her head in dismay. Mr Mark Carlisle, the education secretary, was considering the introduction of a Continental-style school day starting at 8.00 a.m. and closing at 2.00 p.m. as part of the government cuts of £600 million per year. Also, the Yorkshire Ripper had claimed his twelfth victim in Bradford and had sent a tape recording to George

Oldfield, head of the CID in West Yorkshire, taunting the police in a Wearside accent.

‘What a world we live in,’ said Vera in despair. ‘It can’t get worse.’

But at that moment it suddenly did . . . much worse!

Anne came into the staff-room, white as a sheet. ‘Jack . . . everybody . . . I’ve just seen a mouse . . . a big mouse!’

Jo and Sally immediately lifted their feet off the floor and Vera leapt towards her metal filing cabinet and pulled out her ‘Telephone in emergencies’ folder.

‘Where was it?’ I asked.

‘Walking bold as brass into Ruby the caretaker’s cupboard, so I slammed the door and locked it,’ said Anne.

‘We need to ring the pest controller at County Hall immediately, Mr Sheffield,’ said Vera.

I nodded and smiled grimly. Vera was wonderful in emergencies. ‘Thanks, Vera. We’ll do it now.’

Thirty minutes later a dirty green, rusty old van pulled up in the school car park. The words ‘Maurice Ackroyd, PEST CONTROLLER’ were crudely painted on the side of the van. I walked out to meet him.

‘Ow do,’ said Maurice. ‘Ah’m Maurice the Mouseman from Pest Control.’ His huge front teeth and wispy moustache reinforced my belief that Maurice was born for this vocation. He was a small, unshaven, wiry man wearing a battered flat cap, in spite of the hot weather, and a filthy collarless long-sleeved shirt with the cuffs firmly double-buttoned. His baggy cord trousers were held up

Dear Teacher

with a length of baling twine and his trouser-leg bottoms were tucked firmly into his socks. A pair of shabby steel-toe-capped builder's boots completed the ensemble.

'Hello, er, Maurice,' I said. 'Thanks for coming. I think we've got a mouse.'

Maurice sucked air through his teeth and then shook his head. "'Owd on, 'owd on, not so 'asty, Mr Sheffield. It could be rats, tha knaws,' he said with a hopeful glint in his eye.

'Rats! I hope not,' I said in alarm.

'Rats is everywhere, Mr Sheffield – y'never far from a rat,' said Maurice, nodding in a very knowing way.

'But we should have to close the school . . . and it's the first day of term.' I could already see the headline in the *Easington Herald & Pioneer*.

'Don't fret, Mr Sheffield: 'elp is at 'and,' said Maurice with false modesty, while stroking the words 'PEST CONTROLLER' on the side of his van with obvious affection. Then he leaned back and surveyed the school building like Clint Eastwood before a gunfight. 'Ah allus start by giving it two coats o' lookin' over. Y'gotta think like t'little buggers afore y'catch 'em.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' I said.

'Ah come from a long line o' rodent-catchers, tha knaws. Rodents 'ave allus run in our family,' said Maurice proudly.

'Oh, that's good,' I said unconvincingly.

He wrinkled up his pointed nose and sniffed the air. 'We use t'psychol'gy,' he added proudly.

'I see,' I said . . . but I didn't.

Afternoon lessons were haunted by the thought that I would have to shut the school and it was a gloomy group of teachers who assembled in the staff-room at afternoon playtime to hear the verdict of Maurice the Mouseman.

'It's norra rat,' proclaimed Maurice.

'That's a relief,' said Anne. 'So I presume it's a mouse.'

'It's a mouse, all reight,' he said. 'Ah caught a glimpse of it in t'caretaker's cupboard.'

Suddenly Tony Ackroyd appeared at the staff-room door. He looked nervous.

'Hello, Tony,' I said. 'What's wrong?'

Tony looked up at Maurice. 'Ello, Uncle Maurice,' he said.

I looked in surprise at Maurice. 'So Tony is your nephew?'

'That's reight, Mr Sheffield. 'E's our Margery's eldest.'

'Oh, I see,' I said. 'So what is it, Tony?'

Tony's cheeks flushed. 'Mr Sheffield, ah'm reight sorry, ah should've told y'sooner,' said Tony, 'but then ah saw Uncle Maurice's van.'

'Told me what, Tony?' I said.

'Ah brought Petula this morning t'show you, but then she went missing,' he said. 'Ah told yer in assembly.'

'Petula?'

'Yes, Mr Sheffield: m'pet mouse.'

'You have a mouse called Petula?'

'Yes, Mr Sheffield,' replied Tony, as if it was entirely

Dear Teacher

logical. 'Me mam named 'er after Mrs Dudley-Palmer, 'cause me mouse 'as staring eyes.'

'Oh, I see,' I said, trying not to smile.

'An' ah thought me uncle Maurice might kill 'er if 'e didn't know it were Petula.'

'Well, I'm glad you've told me, Tony, but you should have let me know straight away. We've been very worried.'

'Ah'm reight sorry, Mr Sheffield,' said Tony forlornly.

Maurice looked down at his little nephew and then up at me.

'Don't worry, ah'll use psychol'gy,' he said, stroking the side of his nose with a gnarled forefinger. 'Ah've got jus t' thing in t' van.' He scurried off eagerly and returned moments later. 'Ere it is . . . carbolic soap. Petula will love it,' he said, holding up a large bar of potent-smelling soap that would have stopped a clock at ten paces.

'Can ah tek Tony to 'elp me?' said Maurice.

'Er, yes, of course, but be careful, Tony,' I said.

With that, uncle and nephew trotted out into the entrance hall and carefully opened Ruby's cupboard. We could hear their raised voices.

'Use that broom 'andle, Tony, t'coax 'er out,' shouted Maurice, 'an' ah'll get me wire basket ready.'

At that moment, Vera walked through the little corridor that linked the school office to the staff-room. 'Excuse me, Mr Sheffield, but Mrs Dudley-Palmer is in the office and would like a word.'

Mrs Dudley-Palmer was standing next to the open office door. 'Oh, hello, er . . . Mrs Dudley-Palmer, what can I do to help?'

'Well, Mr Sheffield,' she said, taking out an expensive-looking school prospectus, 'you will recall I have a difficult decision to make about Elisabeth Amelia's future as she will be eight at the end of this school year.'

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'It would be a shame to lose such a delightful girl from our school.'

Petula Dudley-Palmer studied me for a moment. 'It's kind of you to say so, Mr Sheffield. However, I've just returned from York and the school is very appealing.'

'I'm sure it is,' I said, looking at the impressive coat of arms above some Latin script on the prospectus.

'And then I shall have to decide what to do with Victoria Alice as she would eventually follow her sister.'

'I understand,' I said, 'and we should be sorry to lose Victoria Alice as well. She's such a happy and well-behaved little girl.'

'Yes, she's the one who takes after me, of course,' said Mrs Dudley-Palmer with a self-satisfied smile.

Suddenly, five-year-old Victoria Alice ran in from the playground and stopped outside the door. 'Hello, Mummy. I've just kissed Terry Earnshaw,' she said proudly.

Mrs Dudley-Palmer was rooted to the spot. 'How did that happen?' she asked in horror.

'It was difficult, Mummy. Molly Paxton had to help me catch him.' Then she ran off and into class.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Dudley-Palmer. She stepped into

the office and looked down at the prospectus as if she had finally made up her mind. It suddenly appeared as if Ragley School did not come up to expectations. As she was pondering what to say next, the silence was broken suddenly by loud voices from the staff-room.

'Is everything OK now?' asked Vera anxiously.

"'Tis now," said Maurice.

Little Tony, with a big smile on his face, propped the broom handle in the staff-room doorway and set off back to the classroom.

'I'm pleased to hear that,' said Vera.

Mrs Dudley-Palmer and I could hear every word but the speakers were out of sight.

'All t'better for seeing Petula,' said Maurice, holding up the caged mouse in triumph.

Petula Dudley-Palmer stiffened slightly.

'Well, I'm sure you have an expert eye,' said Vera.

'Petula's allus been such a 'andsome creature,' said Maurice, pushing a piece of carbolic soap towards the tiny mouse.

Mrs Dudley-Palmer smiled and I stepped forward quickly and shut the door between the office and the corridor to the staff-room.

'Well, must be on m'way,' said Maurice and he strode out towards the car park.

In the office, Mrs Dudley-Palmer gave a beatific smile and replaced the prospectus in her leather handbag. 'Do you know, Mr Sheffield, that was most fortuitous.'

'Really?' I said.

‘Yes, it’s always nice to know that one is held in such high regard in the village.’

‘Er, yes,’ I said. ‘I agree.’

‘Perhaps my darling little girls should stay at Ragley after all.’

‘Well, er, that would be good news,’ I said and we walked out into the entrance hall, where Vera was standing next to the open staff-room door. The smell of strong soap filled the air.

‘Oh, carbolic soap, Miss Evans,’ said Mrs Dudley-Palmer, sniffing appreciatively. ‘That takes me back to when I was young. I’ve always had an attraction to carbolic soap.’

Vera smiled and looked to the heavens as Mrs Dudley-Palmer walked out to her Rolls-Royce.

‘An eventful day, Mr Sheffield,’ said Vera.

I glanced at my watch. I should have been back in my classroom. ‘I’ll tell you about it at the end of school,’ I said.

There was a sudden banging on the office door. ‘Oh dear,’ I groaned, ‘whatever next?’ I picked up the strange-looking broom handle and opened the door.

Mrs Winifred Brown was standing there, clutching little Damian Brown’s hand. ‘Ah’m tekking ’im now,’ she said and then looked down at the broom handle in my hand. ‘Oh, y’found it, then,’ and she grabbed it.

‘Pardon?’

‘Y’found ’is light sabre, then?’

The penny dropped. Ruby’s spare broom handle

was in fact Damian Brown's *Star Wars* weapon. I was speechless.

Jo Hunter, who had been standing quietly behind me, stepped forward. 'I would appreciate it, Mrs Brown,' she said very firmly, 'if you would try to avoid Damian missing school. This is not the best start to the term for him to miss the last lesson of his first day.'

Mrs Brown looked down at the slight, quietly spoken infant teacher and sneered. 'Prob'ly jus' as well. Ah saw t'pest controller's van 'ere an' ah shouldn't be s'prised to 'ear from our Damian that y'riddled wi' vermin.'

Jo Hunter stepped forward and raised herself to her full five-feet-three-inches and stared up at Mrs Brown. 'Let's have an understanding, Mrs Brown,' said Jo in a determined voice. Winifred Brown took a step back. 'If you promise not to believe everything Damian says happens in school, I'll promise not to believe everything he says happens at home.' Jo had clearly struck a nerve. The colour drained from Mrs Brown's face and she retreated quickly. Jo closed the door and muttered, 'I'll give her vermin!'

Anne and Vera both clapped in appreciation. 'Well said, Jo,' said Vera.

'And now it's time for another little mouse,' said Anne as she held up her Beatrix Potter book. I walked back to class with her and watched as she sat down with her children in the carpeted Book Corner. Anne surveyed the expectant little faces of the four- and five-year-olds at her feet. Then she held up the picture on the front cover

Beatrix Potter and the Pest Controller

of the book and said slowly and clearly, 'Our first story of the year, boys and girls, is *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse*,' and she winked in my direction. I nodded as I recalled the classic story of the little wood-mouse who strove to keep her house in order in spite of numerous unwanted visitors.

As I walked back to my classroom, with the end of our first day of school approaching, it occurred to me that Beatrix Potter definitely knew what she was talking about.