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I *Black Candles*

The greatness of Carne School has been ascribed by common consent to Edward VI, whose educational zeal is ascribed by history to the Duke of Somerset. But Carne prefers the respectability of the monarch to the questionable politics of his adviser, drawing strength from the conviction that Great Schools, like Tudor Kings, were ordained in Heaven.

And indeed its greatness is little short of miraculous. Founded by obscure monks, endowed by a sickly boy king, and dragged from oblivion by a Victorian bully, Carne had straightened its collar, scrubbed its rustic hands and face and presented itself shining to the courts of the twentieth century. And in the twinkling of an eye, the Dorset bumpkin was London's darling: Dick Whittington had arrived. Carne had parchments in Latin, seals in wax, and Lammas Land behind the Abbey. Carne had property, cloisters and woodworm, a whipping block and a line in the Domesday Book – then what more did it need to instruct the sons of the rich?

And they came; each Half they came (for terms are not elegant things), so that throughout a whole afternoon the trains would unload sad groups of black-coated boys on to the station platform. They came in great cars that shone with mournful purity. They came to bury poor King Edward, trundling handcarts over the cobbled streets or carrying tuck

boxes like little coffins. Some wore gowns, and when they walked they looked like crows, or black angels come for the burying. Some followed singly like undertakers' mutes, and you could hear the clip of their boots as they went. They were always in mourning at Carne; the small boys because they must stay and the big boys because they must leave, the masters because respectability was underpaid; and now, as the Lent Half (as the Easter term was called) drew to its end, the cloud of gloom was as firmly settled as ever over the grey towers of Carne.

Gloom and the cold. The cold was crisp and sharp as flint. It cut the faces of the boys as they moved slowly from the deserted playing fields after the school match. It pierced their black topcoats and turned their stiff, pointed collars into icy rings round their necks. Frozen, they plodded from the field to the long walled road which led to the main tuck shop and the town, the line gradually dwindling into groups, and the groups into pairs. Two boys who looked even colder than the rest crossed the road and made their way along a narrow path which led towards a distant but less populated tuck shop.

'I think I shall die if ever I have to watch one of those beastly rigger games again. The noise is fantastic,' said one. He was tall with fair hair, and his name was Caley.

'People only shout because the dons are watching from the pavilion,' the other rejoined; 'that's why each house has to stand together. So that the house dons can swank about how loud their houses shout.'

'What about Rode?' asked Caley. 'Why does he stand with us and make us shout, then? He's not a house don, just a bloody usher.'

'He's sucking up to the house dons all the time. You can see him in the quad between lessons buzzing round the big men. All the junior masters do.' Caley's companion was a cynical red-haired boy called Perkins, Captain of Fielding's house.

'I've been to tea with Rode,' said Caley.

'Rode's hell. He wears brown boots. What was tea like?'

'Bleak. Funny how tea gives them away. Mrs Rode's quite decent, though – homely in a plebby sort of way: doyleys and china birds. Food's good: Women's Institute, but good.'

'Rode's doing Corps next Half. That'll put the lid on it. He's so *keen*, bouncing about all the time. You can tell he's not a gentleman. You know where he went to school?'

'No.'

'Bransome Grammar. Fielding told my Mama, when she came over from Singapore last Half.'

'God. Where's Bransome?'

'On the coast. Near Bournemouth. I haven't been to tea with anyone except Fielding.' Perkins added after a slight pause, 'You get roast chestnuts and crumpets. You're never allowed to thank him, you know. He says emotionalism is only for the lower classes. That's typical of Fielding. He's not like a don at all. I think boys bore him. The whole house goes to tea with him once a Half, he has us in turn, four at a time, and that's about the only time he talks to most men.'

They walked on in silence for a while until Perkins said:

'Fielding's giving another dinner party tonight.'

'He's pushing the boat out these days,' Caley replied, with disapproval. 'Suppose the food in your house is worse than ever?'

'It's his last Half before he retires. He's entertaining every don and all the wives separately by the end of the Half. Black candles every evening. For mourning. Hell's extravagant.'

‘Yes. I suppose it’s a sort of gesture.’

‘My Pater says he’s a queer.’

They crossed the road and disappeared into the tuck shop, where they continued to discuss the weighty affairs of Mr Terence Fielding, until Perkins drew their meeting reluctantly to a close. Being a poor hand at science, he was unfortunately obliged to take extra tuition in the subject.

The dinner party to which Perkins had alluded that afternoon was now drawing to a close. Mr Terence Fielding, senior housemaster of Carne, gave himself some more port and pushed the decanter wearily to his left. It was his port, the best he had. There was enough of the best to last the Half – and after that, be damned. He felt a little tired after watching the match, and a little drunk, and a little bored with Shane Hecht and her husband. Shane was so hideous. Massive and enveloping, like a faded Valkyrie. All that black hair. He should have asked someone else. The Snows for instance, but he was too clever. Or Felix D’Arcy, but D’Arcy interrupted. Ah well, a little later he would annoy Charles Hecht, and Hecht would get in a pet and leave early.

Hecht was fidgeting, wanting to light his pipe, but Fielding damn well wouldn’t have it. Hecht could have a cigar if he wanted to smoke. But his pipe could stay in his dinner-jacket pocket, where it belonged, or didn’t belong, and his athletic profile could remain unadorned.

‘Cigar, Hecht?’

‘No thanks, Fielding. I say, do you mind if I . . .’

‘I can recommend the cigars. Young Havelake sent them from Havana. His father’s ambassador there, you know.’

‘Yes, dear,’ said Shane tolerantly; ‘Vivian Havelake was in Charles’s troop when Charles was commandant of the Cadets.’

‘Good boy, Havelake,’ Hecht observed, and pressed his lips together to show he was a strict judge.

‘It’s amusing how things have changed.’ Shane Hecht said this rapidly with a rather wooden smile, as if it weren’t really amusing. ‘Such a grey world we live in, now.’

‘I remember before the war when Charles inspected the Corps on a white horse. We don’t do that kind of thing now, do we? I’ve got nothing against Mr Iredale as commandant, nothing at all. What *was* his regiment, Terence, do you know? I’m sure he does it very nicely, whatever they do now in the Corps – he gets on so well with the boys, doesn’t he? His wife’s such a nice person . . . I wonder why they can never keep their servants. I hear Mr Rode will be helping out with the Corps next Half.’

‘Poor little Rode,’ said Fielding slowly; ‘running about like a puppy, trying to earn his biscuits. He tries so hard; have you seen him cheering at school matches? He’d never seen a game of rugger before he came here, you know. They don’t play rugger at grammar schools – it’s all soccer. Do you remember when he first came, Charles? It was fascinating. He lay very low at first, drinking us in: the games, the vocabulary, the manners. Then, one day it was as if he had been given the power of speech, and he spoke in our language. It was amazing, like plastic surgery. It was Felix D’Arcy’s work of course – I’ve never seen anything quite like it before.’

‘Dear Mrs Rode,’ said Shane Hecht in that voice of abstract vagueness which she reserved for her most venomous pronouncements: ‘So sweet . . . and such simple taste, don’t you think? I mean, whoever would have dreamed of putting those china ducks on the wall? Big ones at the front and little ones at the back. Charming, don’t you think? Like one of those teashops. I wonder where she bought them. I must ask her.’

I'm told her father lives near Bournemouth. It must be so lonely for him, don't you think? Such a vulgar place; no one to talk to.'

Fielding sat back and surveyed his own table. The silver was good. The best in Carne, he had heard it said, and he was inclined to agree. This Half he had nothing but black candles. It was the sort of thing people remembered when you'd gone: 'Dear old Terence – marvellous host. He dined every member of the staff during his last Half, you know, wives too. Black candles, rather touching. It broke his heart giving up his house.' But he must annoy Charles Hecht. Shane would like that. Shane would egg him on because she hated Charles, because within her great ugly body she was as cunning as a snake.

Fielding looked at Hecht and then at Hecht's wife, and she smiled back at him, the slow rotten smile of a whore. For a moment Fielding thought of Hecht pasturing in that thick body: it was a scene redolent of Lautrec . . . yes, that was it! Charles pompous and top-hatted, seated stiffly upon the plush coverlet; she massive, pendulous and bored. The image pleased him: so perverse to consign that fool Hecht from the Spartan cleanliness of Carne to the brothels of nineteenth-century Paris . . .

Fielding began talking, pontificating rather, with an air of friendly objectivity which he knew Hecht would resent.

'When I look back on my thirty years at Carne, I realise I have achieved rather less than a road sweeper.' They were watching him now – 'I used to regard a road sweeper as a person inferior to myself. Now, I rather doubt it. Something is dirty, he makes it clean, and the state of the world is advanced. But I – what have I done? Entrenched a ruling class

which is distinguished by neither talent, culture, nor wit; kept alive for one more generation the distinctions of a dead age.'

Charles Hecht, who had never perfected the art of not listening to Fielding, grew red and fussed at the other end of the table.

'Don't we teach them, Fielding? What about our successes, our scholarships?'

'I have never taught a boy in my life, Charles. Usually the boy wasn't clever enough; occasionally, I wasn't. In most boys, you see, perception dies with puberty. In a few it persists, though where we find it we take good care at Carne to kill it. If it survives our efforts the boy wins a scholarship . . . Bear with me, Shane; it's my last Half.'

'Last Half or not, you're talking through your hat, Fielding,' said Hecht, angrily.

'That is traditional at Carne. These successes, as you call them, are the failures, the rare boys who have not learnt the lessons of Carne. They have ignored the cult of mediocrity. We can do nothing for them. But for the rest, for the puzzled little clerics and the blind little soldiers, for them the truth of Carne is written on the wall, and they hate us.'

Hecht laughed rather heavily.

'Why do so many come back, then, if they hate us so much? Why do they remember us and come and see us?'

'Because we, dear Charles, are the writing on the wall! The one lesson of Carne they never forget. They come back to read *us*, don't you see? It was from us they learnt the secret of life: that we grow old without growing wise. They realised that nothing happened when we grew up: no blinding light on the road to Damascus, no sudden feeling of maturity.'

Fielding put his head back and gazed at the clumsy Victorian moulding on the ceiling, and the halo of dirt round the light rose.

‘We just got a little older. We made the same jokes, thought the same thoughts, wanted the same things. Year in, year out, Hecht, we were the same people, not wiser, not better; we haven’t had an original thought between us for the last fifty years of our lives. They saw what a trick it all was, Carne and us: our academic dress, our school-room jokes, our wise little offerings of guidance. And that’s why they come back year after year of their puzzled, barren lives to gaze fascinated at you and me, Hecht, like children at a grave, searching for the secret of life and death. Oh, yes, they have learned *that* from us.’

Hecht looked at Fielding in silence for a moment.

‘Decanter, Hecht?’ said Fielding, in a slightly conciliatory way, but Hecht’s eyes were still upon him.

‘If that’s a joke . . .’ he began, and his wife observed with satisfaction that he was very angry indeed.

‘I wish I knew, Charles,’ Fielding replied with apparent earnestness. ‘I really wish I knew. I used to think it was clever to confuse comedy with tragedy. Now I wish I could distinguish them.’ He rather liked that.

They had coffee in the drawing-room, where Fielding resorted to gossip, but Hecht was not to be drawn. Fielding rather wished he had let him light his pipe. Then he recalled his vision of the Hechts in Paris, and it restored him. He had been rather good this evening. There were moments when he convinced himself.

While Shane fetched her coat, the two men stood together in the hall, but neither spoke. Shane returned, an ermine