

Wednesday 19th January

“You must love it here,” said Mr Holloway without looking up.

“I try and live up to the high standards of journalism established over the years and enshrined in our constitution, reminding our loyal readership of their duty to the King...”

“Shut up,” he said. I did. “Sarcasm is my department,” he added. I did not disagree.

He picked a box from behind his desk and slammed it down in front of me. “Know what this is?”

“Paper, sir, recognise it anywhere, used in much of the Empire for...”

He looked at me. I stopped talking, but left my mouth open for effect, suggesting that I was going to add comments about pens, ink, pencils, rubbers, the difficulties of communicating with India and my specific experiences in the south of Africa soon to be renamed South Africa.

We play this game, Mr Holloway and I. It is a ritual. As is the fact that editors always interview mere mortals with themselves sitting down, leaving the poor scribbler standing.

I put on a look which I thought was one that showed me to be ready to face the complaints of the established readership (although it was unknown even for me to generate a box full). It was also my look for not revealing that I had had a few too many last night.

Mr Holloway, his glasses slipping to the end of his overlong nose, picked up the first letter, coughed, and adjusted his specs up the said feature fractionally. He looked me in the eye before indicating the pile on the desk. “A selection from the past three weeks,” he said, and started reading from the top copy.

“Sir, ‘Gatekeeper’ clearly knows a thing or two about football in London, but I am sure you will agree he is not knowledgeable about the Association game in the rest of the country, and since most professional football is played outside the capital city it seems pointless to keep him writing about a sport of which he geographically knows so little and on which he has such biased views.

“His deviation into his personal opinion about the local public houses, the commentary of supporters who have imbibed too much prior to the game, and his view of their hats, the dress code of the club manager and popular songs sung in a public house after a game, is to say the least irrelevant, and ultimately demeaning to a publication that I have been purchasing for over ten years...”

He looked up. “Biased,” he said, and turned to the next.

“Sir, when ‘Gatekeeper’ has nothing to write about, surely it is better for him to write nothing, rather than to regale us with tales of what he did on the streets of London the night before... While ‘Won’t you come home Bill Bailey’ is undoubtedly a jolly tune, I am not sure it warrants four paragraphs, when the central theme is supposedly what happened in the football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool.”

He looked up again. “This is a newspaper which carries sport, and not your own personal social diary,” said the boss. He picked up a third. “Sir, ‘Gatekeeper’ may have had a good time playing in his band at a public house on the night

before the last home match for Fulham, but do we really need to read about it in your august daily journal? His views on ladies attending matches and his comments on the seating arrangements in the directors' box are irrelevant, and his talk of hearing pins drop is surely erroneous. As for his commentaries on the fish pie, I can only conclude that the writer has criminal tendencies and, as such, should be reported to the police rather than given space in your publication. In terms of the notion that the inside left of Manchester United is a German spy, I can assure you his name is Smith and not Schmidt..."

"I'm sorry sir," I said. "I had the idea..."

"Do you think it is possible," he said, "for me to conclude without you interrupting me?"

I said nothing. The boss grunted, but chose not to pick up another letter. We indulged in a period of silence during which his glasses travelled one quarter of an inch further towards the floor.

"Would you like me to write back to these people and apologise?" I said at last.

"I would like you to get so drunk one night that when one of your musical fellows lights a cigarette near you the alcohol in your body ignites and you explode on the spot, leaving me with no problem other than the need to attend your funeral without doing a jig. The last man covering football in London on a regular basis retired because he couldn't stand the strain. You could do the decent thing..."

Mr Holloway was staring into space as he spoke, and I wondered if he had gone to a land where Mr Wells' Martians stalked the streets before the common cold killed them off. But, against all odds, he once again gathered himself together. "You think you are so bleedin' smart don't you, son?" he said.

I stayed silent for a moment, but when I was sure he was going to say no more, I said, "No, sir, in the face of that box of complaints I feel rather stupid."

"In the name of the Almighty," he continued, picking up the box, bringing it down hard on the table and then pushing it towards me, while his voice simultaneously rose an octave and he tried to turn the resultant sounds into a shout, "those were the only complaints! This is a box of letters from readers so demented that they are saying that they agree with you, think you are humorous, witty and amusing, wish to argue with you about what the best popular songs are, dispute whether the whole of Newcastle United should be deported as aliens, and (in five cases) are proposing marriage." I must have opened my eyes wide because he then told me to stop looking like a monkey, even if I wanted to parade like one.

"Let me remind you, you deviant little urchin who – some of these correspondents seem to mistakenly believe – has learned to write. Let me remind you, the Chronicle is a newspaper. In fact, this is THE newspaper of the working man. And you are hired as a writer on... what are you hired as a writer on?"

"Football, sir"

"Oh yes, the subject of which I am editor. And because I am editor I know that football has nothing whatsoever in any form to do with telling people how to spend their evenings and what flowers they should be wearing, nor the price of a

pint in the public houses around Tottenham, Chelsea and Fulham. Nor even how far from civilisation Woolwich is. Or Clapton. You have managed to be insolent not just to me, but to the whole ruddy readership.

“And the mere fact that you get more letters than the rest of this journal put together while writing stupid childish gibberish, which I only let through because I had my eyes closed after a difficult night what with my daughter being ill at the moment, and we sometimes have a blank space because an advertiser pulls out at the last moment, does not make you clever.”

“No, sir,” I said.

“No, sir,” he mimicked, “which in the strange and bizarre world you infest means ‘I’m going to do this again,’ so let me tell you something....” He paused and at last told me to sit down.

“Listen, listen once, tell me you have understood – and for once mean it - and then go and do as I say. I have a job for you. Can you do it?”

“Does it involve my knowing something about Greek mythology?” I asked, and then seeing his face wished I hadn’t.

“You know what I did with that piece you wrote in which you suggested there are more anarchists in London than people who vote Unionist?”

I told him I didn’t.

“I took it to the fifth floor and showed it to the old man, exactly as I have taken your previous pieces on ‘social reporting’ along with a collection of the letters that we have received about your work in the past month.

“I told the chairman of this journal that part of the reason for our rise in circulation last year was that we had added a little background ‘flavour’ and a little local colour to the sports stories, as we had a writer who liked to write about such things. I said your writing was helpful because it was often something we could hold for a number of days without it going out of time, and then slip in when an advertiser slipped out. And I said that we had some letters from readers who liked your work.

“And then I passed over your little piece on how much GK Chesterton had to drink when writing *The Man Who Was Thursday*, plus your work comparing the boots worn by supporters at Spurs and Chelsea and how it related to the chances of each team of being thrown out of the League for being too boring, and your chat up lines with the local ladies, and what music you were playing at the White Hart with your band this week.

“And you know what he said to me – our chairman? He said, ‘At this moment we need a big story – a story that we break, a story that keeps us ahead of the opposition.’ He said, ‘if this clown of yours can land us such a story, let him write it however he likes. But if we do spies any more we need a new angle, a bigger picture’.”

There was another long silence. “I’ll tell you how we are going to do this.”

I gave a grunt which could be interpreted (by those who know my grunts) as “this could be interesting, so please do go ahead and reveal unto me exactly what it is that you know,” or not, as the case might be.

“You wouldn’t know a bigger story if it hit you on the chin, so I’ll give you one and watch you fall over.”

Since I am the man whose English teacher said, "What this street urchin does to the English language should be a criminal offence," none of this was new. Mr Holloway was giving me an assignment.

"Now the distasteful bit," he continued. "I am instructed to give you a pay rise of half a crown a week as of today. I fought against it, of course, but I got outvoted. You are going to Woolwich – your favourite resort – and you are going to cover two meetings there as well as the game on Saturday. There's a shareholders' meeting before the game and an open public meeting after the game – and you will attend both. If you can bring in a couple of German spies while you are at it, so much the better. Is that sufficiently slow and clear for your simple brain?"

"Yes, sir," I said, not sure how to take this. "But..."

"Yes?"

"Woolwich, sir?"

"Woolwich Arsenal."

"But there's no underground out there."

"There's no underground to Tottenham."

"Hardly the same, sir. Woolwich is in..."

"Kent, yes I did geography at school. And here's something else you can do for me. Lay off the public house bit. We are not a paper that supports drunkenness. Come back with proof that half the people in Woolwich are working for the Kaiser, and write up the game under Dick's name and in his style. The report of the meeting and anything else you dig up is you. Understood?"

"Sir, why am I writing Dick's column?"

"Because, dear boy, he read your column, took your advice and played with the Monkey Parade, and his wife has kicked him out, and he isn't at work, and she doesn't know or care where he is. He's probably spent last week's wages and I, fool that I am, am trying to save his job and his life and his marriage. And that is one very good reason why you do not celebrate getting drunk. The other is that we are taking a neutral line on the proposed licensing laws – we encourage a restriction on the time the pubs are open because drink is a social evil, but a lot of our readers enjoy a drink so we are against any restriction on their pleasure. Is that clear?"

I told him it was, by and large, as far as my brain could handle such complex information, clear. He accepted that and looked down at his notes. "Got a report of talking dogs in Birmingham. You know anything about that?" I considered the matter and told him that, upon reflection, I didn't.

Annie, who brews interchangeable cocoa and coffee in the basement canteen, saw me upon my arrival in her domain and made the usual flutter of the eyes saying, "You get the empty?" which she always says to anyone called into the boss's office. The more I try to tell her I am a success, the more she puts the damper on and suggests I am losing my job. I grabbed her and gave her a kiss which took the room into uproar. I was onto the staircase just as the international news editor came down to see what the noise was about.

Thursday 20th January

Since Mr Holloway had clearly noted my thoughts on Chesterton, I decided to expand on my new found fame, and worked through the day writing on the “anarchist threat”. I used George Barrett (whom I had met last year in a pub in Walthamstow where he was whipping up a crowd while I was discussing dog racing with the daughter of a tipster) as an example of your typical anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary: a great speaker but he always wears strange hats.

That gave me the theme – you can tell anarchists by their headwear which should make it easier for the police to pick them up. (That ought to be true since you can tell the daughters of tipsters by their...).

Ah, I thought. (I often think “Ah”.) Take this further. Can you tell murderers by their socks? The more likely a man is to murder a fellow, the more likely he is to wear red socks. Or the other way round. Do red socks cause murder? Or does murder cause the murderer suddenly to put on red socks? There was possibly more in the latter so I ran with that.

As for stiff collars, I decided to take care. Mr Holloway wears a stiff collar. Boots and shoes were safer. If I watched what Mr Holloway wore, cut them out of the article, and then divided up the rest of the country according to footwear, that should give a few laughs and keep me safe in the office.

I could also link it to the general election. A survey of people voting, analysed by their hats, socks and shoes, which will tell us the result before polling finishes next month. No one could complain then that I was focussing on the low life of the city. Only the upper crust go voting.

Maybe the band could do an original song. “You can tell him by the socks he wears.”

Friday 21st January

Yesterday I had dutifully put off thinking about my problem of how to get into a shareholder’s meeting of Woolwich Arsenal without being a shareholder. I had also manfully set aside the issue of how to get more life out of the story that as a nation we were over run by spies from Italy and Germany. It had been done to death in every paper (including ours) every day for the past three years.

Ever since *Spies of the Kaiser (Plotting the Downfall of England)* had been published in The Weekly News, the Mail had run a daily lead story on its “Spies on every corner” lark, the Post had done its bit about how all the governesses of the children of the rich are German spies, and the Times, which ought to know better, had done “How many Italian organ grinders does London actually need?” My contribution had taken us back to basics with a spoof on the Mail piece called “Pies on every corner”.

We’d done our bit too, but truth be told, we’d never had a unique line. Until now that had not been my problem – I just wrote football with a social edge. Now, suddenly, I’d cracked a joke too far and got lumbered with the job of taking the whole load of rubbish in a new direction.