

## Chapter 22 – School Days End

The last year of school brought both excitement and concern, with emotions peaking in the third term. For pupils like John, excitement for the future was the dominant emotion. For others, like Parker, concern about the exams was primary. After dinner one evening, the boys chatted about their plans.

‘So, Ziyambi, have you decided what you’re going to do with your career?’

‘Not yet, Parker, but I’m applying to Oxford University to study for a Bachelor of Arts (BA). What about you? Are you still intending to join the army?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘With your father being a major-general, I expect you’ll go to Sandhurst?’

‘Yes, if I’m accepted, but they require a good A-level result for the officer training course.’

‘And if you don’t get in?’

‘I’ll still join the army. Non-commissioned officers can reach the rank of company sergeant major, which isn’t too bad.’

‘What are you planning, Fellowes?’

‘Like you, Ziyambi, a BA at Oxford, and then I’ll follow my father into the civil service.’

‘And you, Mansell?’

‘I’m going to the London School of Economics (LSE), and afterwards I’ll take articles with a firm of chartered accountants.’

‘That leaves you, Ponsonby?’

‘Cambridge, to do a Bachelor of Science (BSc).’

‘What branch?’

‘Physics.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘Heaven knows. You haven’t said what you’re doing, Ziyambi, after you graduate from Oxford?’

‘Same as you, Ponsonby, Heaven knows.’

John loved his school days. He’d made what he imagined would be lifelong friends, people at the right end of British society. And soon, he’d be studying at one of the best universities in the world, where he’d increase his circle of influential friends. After he graduated, he’d marry Aneni, and they might even come to live in England.

Just before his final exams, John got a letter from Norah advising him the judge would be in London when school broke up for the year. Instead of going to Heathrow, he should take a taxi to the Cumberland Hotel opposite Marble Arch. The judge booked rooms for them there.

The weekend before the school’s A-level exams was the first time John experienced any nervousness about his studies. He’d prepared well for the exams, but his friends’ pre-exam nerves were infectious, and he was not immune. The next twelve days proved arduous for everyone, but soon enough, the exams were over. Everyone felt relieved and looked forward to the principal’s farewell tea party before going home for the long, end-of-year holiday.

The principal held his farewell tea in the lounge suite attached to his office. Only the upper sixth form boys leaving the school attended the tea. As expected, Sebastian Bromley gave a short, stirring speech to the boys, urging them to uphold the school’s good name and strive to

do well in their chosen careers. The tea ended with Mr Bromley serving a small glass of sherry for each boy. He held up his glass, saying, 'A toast, gentlemen, to the future.'

'To the future!' the boys responded, eagerly sipping their sherry.

Following their last school dinner that night, the boys were free to go. Mansell and Fellowes left when their parents picked them up soon after dinner. The others planned to leave in the morning after breakfast. The classmates' sudden farewell left John feeling somewhat abandoned. Fellowes, he'd see at Oxford, but he wasn't sure when, or if, he'd see Mansell, Ponsonby, and Parker again. They'd all been friends for six years, and suddenly, two were gone.

The next morning after breakfast, John shook hands with Ponsonby, and Parker, his best friend, as they departed. He'd taken care to swop home addresses and phone numbers with all within the group. Ten minutes later, Arthur, his regular taxi driver, arrived. 'Good morning, Sir. Heathrow?'

'Not this time, Arthur. Can you please take me to the Cumberland Hotel at Marble Arch?'

'No trouble, Sir. May I ask why the change from Heathrow?'

'My mentor is staying at the hotel, and he's booked a room for me. We're spending a few days in London.'

'Very good, Sir. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.'

At the Cumberland Hotel, Arthur retrieved John's suitcase from the boot and shook hands with him. John gave Arthur a ten-pound note and a hug.

'Well, it's goodbye, my old friend. I don't expect we'll be seeing each other again.'

'Goodbye, Sir, it's been a pleasure knowing you for these past six years.'

John watched Arthur drive off into the busy London traffic before turning to enter the hotel. He walked up to the reception counter and introduced himself and enquired about his reservation.

'Yes, Mr Ziyambi, your room is ready, and there's a message waiting for you.'

John opened the envelope and read the contents. It was from Judge Barclay, saying he'd meet him in the dining room for lunch at one o'clock. The note was signed, Hugh Barclay. A bellhop carried his suitcase to the lift and on to his room, where he showed him the facilities. The young man hovered, and John was unsure what he should do, so he gave him a pound. The bellhop thanked him and left.

For John, it was the most luxurious room he'd ever seen. Although smaller than his room at home, it boasted a private bathroom and superior furnishings, including a double bed and a television, neither of which he'd experienced before now. Time flew, and when John glanced at his watch, he was surprised to see it was almost midday. He hung up his clothes in the cupboard, put his wash bag in the bathroom, and caught the lift down to the lobby at a quarter to one.

As he emerged from the lift, he saw Judge Barclay enter the hotel.

'John, my boy, how are you?'

'Well, thank you, Sir.'

'I'll just wash my hands in the restroom and remove the grime from the London public transport. I won't be a minute, and then we'll go straight in for lunch. Are you hungry?'

'Yes, Sir, always hungry.'

'Good lad!'

Seated in the dining room, Hugh Barclay continued. 'I had dinner with your principal, Sebastian Bromley, earlier in the week. He assures me you will get excellent results for your A-levels and will have no difficulty getting into Oxford. He was most complimentary about you. Not just for your academic achievements, but also your character and leadership. You are a credit to your mother and me.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'This afternoon, we're going to Savile Row to see my tailor, who is waiting for me to try on my new made-to-measure suit.'

After lunch, they walked along Oxford Street before turning right into Regent Street. John found the shops mesmerising, staring wide-eyed as they passed the endless windows full of attractive items.

'Have you seen much of London, John?'

'No, Sir, I've only ever seen the drive from Heathrow to school.'

'We have a few days in London, so I'll show you the sights.'

They arrived at Savile Row and walked its length past several famous tailors to the end of the street where Hugh Barclay's tailor stood. The sign above the door read Gieves and Hawkes.

The staff recognised Hugh Barclay. 'Judge Barclay, Sir, welcome back. Your suit is ready.'

Hugh Barclay tried on the suit, while the tailor fussed around him, checking the fit. They both approved of the result.

'Now, I'd like a suit for my young friend here who's going to Oxford University in October.'

'Yes, Sir. Might I suggest a charcoal super 120 worsted wool suit? It's a serviceable fabric for everyday wear, and it won't show too many creases.'

It was an excellent choice, and John stood admiring himself in the mirror. He liked what he saw.

'And while we're about it, please can you take all his measurements for future orders?'

'Certainly, Sir.'

'And please send them to my tailors in Milan and New York.'

'It will be a pleasure, Sir.'

'Can you arrange for the suits to be delivered to my hotel?'

'Of course, Sir.'

They left the shop, with John feeling he'd crossed a boundary into a different world, and already he liked it.

'Thank you, Sir, for the suit.'

'You've earned it, John. You deserve everything that comes your way. Your mother and I are proud of you.'

On their walk back to the hotel, they stopped at a cosy pub where Hugh Barclay introduced John to Scotch on the rocks.

'It's an acquired taste, but once you get used to it, you can grow to love it.'

It didn't take John long to reach that milestone. Over the next few days, Hugh Barclay showed him the famous sights of London and shared several more Scotches in a variety of cosy pubs.

When it was time for them to return to Rhodesia, they checked into first-class, which intrigued John. ‘Do the Rhodesian currency restrictions allow enough money for people to fly first-class?’

‘No, they don’t, but I have money in England. I was born here, and when my parents passed on, they left me a considerable sum.’

Before heading to the first-class lounge to wait for their flight to be called, they walked around the duty-free shops, viewing the expensive goods on display. John was glad he didn’t wait to buy a present for Aneni at the airport. Throughout the year, he’d saved part of his pocket money and bought her a beautiful orange wool scarf from a shop in the village near his school.

In the first-class lounge, coffee and snacks helped time pass, and it didn’t seem that long before the boarding call for their flight was announced. First-class passengers boarded the plane last. Unlike economy-class, there was no crush of passengers in the aisle searching for a space in the overhead lockers. Yes, this was the way to fly!

Soon, the attentive air hostesses came to take their orders for drinks and dinner. Despite the snacks in the first-class lounge, the aromas from the passing dinner trays increased their appetites. After they’d eaten and the dinner things cleared away, Hugh Barclay and John settled back into their comfortable seats for the long flight to Johannesburg. The gentle hum of the engines soon put them both to sleep.

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When the Vickers Viscount arrived in Salisbury with the travel-weary pair, Norah and Mortimer were at the airport to meet them. The drive home in the Bentley seemed an appropriate end to John’s amazing week with Hugh Barclay in London. The experience changed his perspective on so many things. He wasn’t any longer a boy, but a young man.

John’s return to Salisbury pleased Philemon and the other servants who’d seen him grow up over the past twelve years. Now, each evening, he shared a glass of Scotch with Hugh Barclay. He noticed the judge only ever drank one glass of Scotch each day, even during their stay in London. The judge’s cocktail parties and dinners were the only exception, where he might indulge in a second glass.

Uppermost, in John’s mind, was a visit to the village to see Aneni. With two weeks of his holiday passed, he was desperate to be with her. Norah and Hugh Barclay both advised against the visit as there’d been rumours insurgents were active in the area.

‘If you must go, John, you’ll have to catch the bus. I don’t want your mother to risk such a trip. And as you know, I’d rather you didn’t go, either. But if you must, try to persuade Aneni and her mother to change their minds and come to the city. The offer still stands for them to stay here.’