

A BLOW TO THE HEAD

by Gary Simpson

*The scene is the main hall of a local fairly high-profile secondary school. Around the hall are balloons and streamers, together with a large banner saying 'Good Luck Mr Masterson'. The hall has been decorated to mark the retiral of the current headmaster, **William Masterson**, who, as the scene opens, is mingling with the first few invited guests. During the introduction, the cast mingle with the audience as they arrive, and greet them as 'old boys'.*

The headmaster is, if you will forgive the pun, a member of the old school; he has been headmaster of the school for twenty years and in that time has earned something of a reputation as a disciplinarian; however his fairness has also meant that he has earned the respect of the majority of pupils in his charge and so has retained his popularity. The exchanges he has with the pupils and parents who arrive are therefore quite warm; reminiscences feature highly in his conversation - he is a man at a cross-roads in his life, but tonight is a night for firmly looking back.

*Also present are his faithful school secretary, **Joyce Williams**, who has been in post at the school for even longer. She too is familiar with many of those who are attending, but can never quite remember their names. One of the first to arrive is **Murray Evans**, an ex-pupil who left the school a year earlier as head boy. He is a keen sportsman, but is by no means all brawn, having recently given up a promising academic career. As the action begins, **Joyce** sees **Murray** and moves towards him...*

JOYCE Murray Evans! Is it really you?

MURRAY Yes, Miss Williams.

JOYCE Oh, please, now, Murray, not so formal - you're not head boy now you know. Oh, the headmaster will be *thrilled* to see you, I just know he will. You were always his favourite, you know.

MURRAY *(trying to sound convinced)* Is that right?

JOYCE And how's Janice, and the baby?

MURRAY Not bad, although she does lose a little of her charm at three in the morning.

JOYCE Janice?

MURRAY The baby. *(Reaching into his jacket pocket)* Here, I've brought hundreds of photographs to bore the socks off everybody.

JOYCE *(studying a photograph)* She's beautiful. Who is she like?



MURRAY Janice says she's got my eyes but I can't see it myself.

JOYCE Aw. You certainly have a way with a camera. *(She hands back the photograph)* Janice is a lucky girl. If only I'd been 20 years younger I'd have had you myself. Ooo, listen, before I forget, will you sign the headmaster's card? *(She produces a greeting card, marked 'Good luck from all of us')*

MURRAY Certainly. *(He briefly searches vainly for a pen)*

JOYCE *(handing him one)* Here.

Murray begins signing the card, using his right hand.

JOYCE Where is Janice, by the way?

MURRAY Oh, baby sitter problems. Well, that is, she wants to make sure that Rachel is settled before leaving her with the baby sitter. First time she's been out without her.

JOYCE Ah.

*As the two talk, **Geoffrey Anderson**, the sports master, approaches from behind Murray. He is hardly dressed for the occasion, in a track suit. He surprises Murray, who does not see him approach, speaking sternly*

GEOFFREY Evans, why weren't you at training practice this morning?

*Murray turns, surprised but is then relieved to see **Geoffrey**, smiling.*

MURRAY Mr Anderson! You had me going for a moment there.

GEOFFREY *(shaking Murray's hand, laughing)* See this fellow, Miss Williams? Finest swimmer this school ever had.

MURRAY Well...

GEOFFREY It's true. Married life is obviously suiting you. Put on a few pounds, I see.

MURRAY Blame the home economics department. Taught Janice every trick she knows. I swear she could poison me with arsenic and make it taste nice.

JOYCE *(Handing Geoffrey the card)* I wonder if you wouldn't mind signing Mr Masterson's card, Mr Anderson?

GEOFFREY Of course. How many Ds in ‘riddance’?

JOYCE (*Shocked*) You wouldn’t.

Geoffrey signs the card, using his right hand.

GEOFFREY No, you probably right. More’s the pity. (*He hands back the card*)

Janice Evans, Murray’s wife, has entered the corner of the room. She is the ex-head girl. Murray has caught sight of her.

MURRAY Oh... there’s Janice now. Will you excuse me? (*He leaves them*)

JOYCE He’s a nice boy.

GEOFFREY He’s a fool. You know I taught him everything he knows. Could have swum for England if he’d put his mind to it. What does he do? Takes a promising sporting career *and* a scholarship to Cambridge and throws it all away to marry that Martin girl. I thought he knew better.

JOYCE Well, you should know. Didn’t you take the sex education class that term?

GEOFFREY Er, yes...

JOYCE (*Looking Geoffrey up and down*) Got dressed for the occasion, then, I see?

GEOFFREY What, get all smarted up for old Hitler going? Glad to see the back of him. (*More seriously and plausibly*) Thursday night. Football practice.

JOYCE And do you have to be so blatant about your dislike of the headmaster? There’s no need to let the whole world know how you feel about him.

GEOFFREY The whole world already *knows* how I feel about him. What’s the matter? Getting nervous? Still want to get into his trousers, is that it?

JOYCE (*Suggestively*) You know that’s not true.

GEOFFREY (*Not entirely convinced*) All right. Look, I’ve been thinking. I think we should wait a couple of days before sending the letters out. Let

me lean on the old man a bit tonight, see if I can't make him see reason.

JOYCE *(Suddenly very pale)*. They've already gone.

GEOFFREY *What?*

JOYCE Send them out on Tuesday, you said.

GEOFFREY *Next* Tuesday, not this... you stupid...

JOYCE *(panicking)* What do we do now?

GEOFFREY Nothing we can do, but sit tight and keep our heads. Look out, here comes trouble.

*The retiring headmaster, **William Masterson**, approaches.*

WILLIAM Mr Anderson! *(Acknowledging Joyce)* Miss Williams...

JOYCE *(Guiltily)* Headmaster...

WILLIAM *(to Geoffrey)* I got your little note. *(A moment's silence as they stare at each other)* We obviously need a meeting.

GEOFFREY I couldn't agree more.

JOYCE If you'll excuse me, I'll just go and see to the caterers.

GEOFFREY I'll help. I think I can smell something.

*Joyce and Geoffrey go off together, leaving the Headmaster as **Murray** approaches with **Janice**.*

WILLIAM Well, look at you two. *(Shaking Murray by the hand)* I'm so glad you could come.

MURRAY Mr Stephens invited us specially. We wouldn't have missed it. It must feel very strange for you. Retiring.

WILLIAM Yes. I know it's difficult to believe now, but this school was nothing until I arrived. Made it what it is today. Twenty years. It's a long time. See all these people? Bankers, lawyers, doctors... one or two are even teachers, God help them. Most of them have been through my hands, one way or another. Makes you feel as if you've left your mark on the world, as they say.



MURRAY Well, we certainly won't forget you in a hurry, shall we, dear?

JANICE *(Shyly)* No.

*They are joined by **Rosemary Masterson**, the Headmaster's wife. She has had a couple of drinks, and is carrying a wine glass. Although not completely drunk, she is a little disinhibited and her normally flamboyant style is even more pronounced than usual.*

ROSEMARY William, you are neglecting your duties. Leaving me chatting with that horrid Stephens man. You were quite right, he is the most crushing bore. This couple look *much* more interesting. I demand to be introduced.

WILLIAM Murray Evans, last year's head boy... and Janice Martin, now Janice Evans, last year's head girl... my wife, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY Married? How wonderfully old-fashioned of you. Did you want to or have to?

WILLIAM Rosemary, really...

ROSEMARY *We had to*, didn't we, William dear? Father never really liked him and when he heard, well, he hit the roof and it was either tie the knot or Willie joining the foreign legion. If we'd tied a knot in Willie to begin with it probably wouldn't have been a problem! Ha, ha... Still, I wasn't the first and I probably...

WILLIAM Look, I'm sure these two aren't interested in ancient history, dear. There's Madame Chablis, the French assistant, we haven't spoken to her yet. Come on...

ROSEMARY Oh, right. *Au revoir* then...

William drags Rosemary away.

JANICE What a repulsive woman. What on earth does he see in her?

MURRAY Beats me what any woman sees in him.

Joyce re-enters.

JOYCE You two are looking very serious. Either you're not enjoying our little soiree or you've just met the headmaster's wife.

JANICE We were just trying to figure out what he sees in her.

JOYCE Janice, dear, I've known Mr Masterson for twenty years. Let's just say that his life is much richer for knowing his wife. And I don't mean spiritually. Quickly, dear, before they come back, you wouldn't sign the headmaster's card, would you? *(She hands her the card)*

JANICE *(A little uneasy)* Oh, really, I don't know what to say...

JOYCE *(Sweetly)* You'll think of something, dear. You managed to get Rachel settled, then?

Janice uneasily signs the card with her right hand, handing it back to Joyce.

JANICE Eventually. It's the first time we've left her with a sitter. *(Looking a little anxiously at Murray)* I do hope she'll be all right.

MURRAY Look, we've left her the number of the school and Dad's lent me his mobile phone. If she's worried, she'll ring.

JANICE Maybe I should give her a ring, what do you think?

MURRAY I think you'll wake the baby.

JANICE You're right, I shouldn't...

JOYCE Look, if it's going to spoil your evening, go and use the phone in the school office. I'll give you the key...

MURRAY No, it's all right. I've got Dad's mobile here. *(He reaches into his pocket and produces a mobile phone which he hands to Janice)* Go on.

JANICE *(to Murray)* You don't think I'm being silly?

MURRAY No. You're not the only one who's wondering how she is.

JANICE Okay. I'll use it outside, the reception will be better. *(To Joyce)* Excuse me.

Janice leaves.

MURRAY *(Apologetically)* She worries too much.

JOYCE Hmm... maybe. Are things all right with you two? Mr Anderson says you gave up your scholarship.

MURRAY Well... wife and child to support, you know how it is.

JOYCE No, I don't. What are you doing?

MURRAY Dad's got me working in the shop, doing some driving... it's not much, but it's enough to see us by. And we're together, that's the main thing.

JOYCE Hmm, yes... I don't know... (*Murray is curious to know where this is leading*) Well... I mean it was obvious that you and Janice were going to get married someday... the whole school knew that, but it's a shame it turned out this way... so unexpected. (*She has gone too far*) It's none of my business, I'm sorry.

Robert Stephens, the deputy headmaster approaches. He has obviously always had a soft spot for Murray. Like the headmaster, he wears the traditional teacher's gown.

MURRAY (*seeing Robert approach*) Mr Stephens!

ROBERT (*Shaking hands with him*) Murray! I'm so glad to see you. When you didn't phone I thought you might not be coming. Where's Janice?

MURRAY Phoning the baby sitter. First night nerves.

ROBERT (*Understandingly*) Ah.

JOYCE Mr Stephens, would you mind signing the headmaster's card? (*She hands it to him, with a pen*)

ROBERT Certainly.

Robert begins signing the card, using his left hand.

JOYCE You've signed it, haven't you, Murray? (*Murray nods*) Dear me, I'm forgetting who's signed it and who hasn't now. (*To Murray*) Sign of old age, you know.

MURRAY (*Tongue-in-cheek*) Probably.

JOYCE (*Not really offended, she knows him too well*) Here, enough of that, young man. I don't know what you taught him at this school, Mr Stephens, but a few manners wouldn't have gone amiss. If you'll excuse me...

Joyce heads off, looking around for the next signature.

MURRAY Oh dear, I think I've offended her.

ROBERT Mmm. *(Smiling)* You may know a lot about backstroke, my boy, but I can see you have a lot to learn about women. *(They exchange an uneasy glance and a momentary uneasy pause)* I hear you gave up your scholarship.

MURRAY Who told you?

ROBERT Mr Anderson. He rather delights in that sort of thing. Why, Murray, why?

MURRAY Look, I know I should have told you myself, but well... to be honest, I was afraid to. I know how many hours you put in trying to get me through that chemistry exam, and I know how much this place at Cambridge meant to you, but you don't realise how much it costs to go to university these days. Dad couldn't afford it...

ROBERT Maybe I could have helped...

MURRAY You've done enough all ready. Look, please try to understand. I'm trying to stand on my own two feet now, and it isn't easy. There's Janice and the baby to consider and well, a chemistry degree these days just isn't worth the paper it's printed on... I mean, look at... *(he stops, abruptly, but too late)*

ROBERT *(finishing the sentence for him)* Look at me.

MURRAY That's not what I meant.

ROBERT Isn't it? What has she done to you?

MURRAY Who?

ROBERT You *know* who.

Offended, Murray storms off. Geoffrey Anderson, who has witnessed the exchange, arrives to gloat a little

GEOFFREY Do I detect that the teacher's pet has just bit the hand that fed him?

ROBERT Go away.

GEOFFREY Tsk, tsk. Touchy. Listen, you're not the only one who's upset because little Evans minor there has gone off and done the decent thing by marrying Janice Martin.

ROBERT That slut. She's probably slept with the entire school.

GEOFFREY Including you? (*Smiling at **Robert**'s pause and indignation*) No, of course not.

ROBERT What's that supposed to mean?

GEOFFREY (*Wounded*) Absolutely nothing.

ROBERT Just because I don't spend my every waking moment thinking about sex, unlike some people. I've seen what you get up to in that darkroom. A few sporting photographs, eh? When did pornography become an Olympic sport, then? Looks as if you might win the gold medal.

GEOFFREY A man has to have some pleasures. Of course, I can see they wouldn't be to *everyone's* taste.

ROBERT It's maybe just as well for you that they're getting another headmaster for next term.

GEOFFREY It may be just as well for everybody. Then we might have someone who actually does something rather than talk about it all the time. Don't you worry about Murray Evans. You might see a return on your investment sooner than you think.

ROBERT What do you mean by...

*Janice approaches them as they talk, unseen by **Robert**.*

GEOFFREY (*seeing **Janice** approach*) Later...

*Seeing who is coming, **Robert** moves off, leaving **Geoffrey** to talk to **Janice** alone. She is still carrying the mobile phone.*

GEOFFREY Janice. Or should I call you Mrs Evans now?

JANICE Mr Anderson. You haven't seen Murray, have you?

GEOFFREY Not for a while. Expecting a phone call?

JANICE Oh... no. Just been trying to phone the baby sitter, but the battery's flat. First time we've left Rachel alone.

GEOFFREY How old is she now?

JANICE Four months.

GEOFFREY You've kept your figure. Been training?

JANICE Oh, no... no time for exercise. Get enough of that looking after Rachel. I've brought some photographs, if you'd like to see them. *(She produces a photograph from her bag)* Not up to your standard, of course.

GEOFFREY She looks like her father.

JANICE *(After a slight pause)* I got your letter.

GEOFFREY *(a little uneasy)* Sorry?

JANICE The photographs of Murray. They came months ago, I'm sorry, I meant to write and thank you.

GEOFFREY You've had your hands full.

JANICE Yes. We've framed some and put them up in the lounge at home. Where did you get them done?

GEOFFREY Here.

JANICE Oh?

GEOFFREY Mr Stephens lets me use his facilities in the science building. I'll be happy to show you around the darkroom sometime if you'd like. You never know what might develop.

JANICE I'd like that. Listen, I'd better find Murray. Miss Williams said I could use the phone in the office.

Rosemary Masterson approaches.

ROSEMARY You ought to watch yourself with this fellow, my dear. I hear he's quite a man with the ladies.

GEOFFREY *(Smiling sweetly)* In your case, Mrs Masterson, I'll make an exception. Excuse me.

Geoffrey moves away as Janice attempts to contain her amusement.

ROSEMARY Of all the ruddy cheek. Well, my dear, you appear to have lost your husband and so have I. Let's drink to that.

Joyce approaches too, brandishing the headmaster's card.

JOYCE Ah, Mrs Masterson, I've been trying to catch you.

JANICE Oh, excuse me interrupting, but Miss Williams... could I possibly use the phone in your office to phone the baby sitter after all? I can't get Murray's phone to work, the battery's flat.

JOYCE Of course, dear. *(She reaches into her pocket and produces the office key)*

JANICE Thanks. I'll be right back.

Janice leaves.

JOYCE Mrs Masterson, while I've caught you... could I ask you if you'd like to sign the headmaster's card?

ROSEMARY Well, I'm not really one of the school, dear...

JOYCE Yes, I know, but it's from everybody, and you're the last. I just thought it might be a nice momento of the evening. Something to remember us all by.

Rosemary takes the card and pen, and signs it with her right hand.

ROSEMARY *(As she writes)* You still love him, don't you?

JOYCE *(A little taken aback)* I don't know what you mean.

ROSEMARY Poor Joyce. Good old faithful Joyce. For twenty years you've organised him, marshalled him, given him his early morning cup of coffee... and in all those years, he hasn't given you a second glance, has he? I feel sorry for you. Never mind, dear. Look on the bright side. At least you won't have that repulsive Robert Stephens to look after next year. William's seen to that.

JOYCE Mr Stephens is a good man.

ROSEMARY Is he? He's an ineffectual wimp, everybody knows that. He'd ruin all the hard work William's put into this school and you know it.

Murray approaches.

MURRAY Miss Williams, have you seen Janice? Mr Anderson said she was looking for me.

JOYCE She's gone to my office, to see if she can phone. Your mobile isn't working.

MURRAY I don't believe it. She's always been hopeless with anything mechanical. Ask her to set the video and the garage door goes up and down.

JOYCE Has anyone seen the headmaster? *(The others look blank)* Oh, dear. It's nearly time for the presentation. Excuse me, I'll see if I can track him down.

Joyce leaves.

ROSEMARY Poor Joyce. Twenty years on and still chasing after him, but never quite catching him.

MURRAY Miss Williams?

ROSEMARY Oh yes. My husband has quite a way with the ladies, young man. Maybe you haven't noticed.

MURRAY I hadn't, no... but somebody else has, it seems.

*He produces a letter from his jacket pocket and hands it to **Rosemary**, who looks at him curiously, then accepts it. She reads it, but there is not the reaction of horror and anger that **Murray** is expecting. Instead, merely a raised eyebrow and dignity bordering on indifference.*

ROSEMARY Well, I must say the grammar is a little crude. I must ask William to have a chat with the English department.

MURRAY *(Angrily but not so loudly as to attract attention)* To hell with the syntax. What about the content?

ROSEMARY *(Handing the letter back to him)* Well, that's clear enough.

MURRAY *(Astonished)* Not surprised?

ROSEMARY My dear boy, you don't think that you're the first, do you? My husband may not know that I know him as well as I do, but he's always had a eye for the ladies. Heavens, he was engaged to be married when he met me. If he wants to indulge in a little extra-curricular activity, what do I care? It's still *my* bed he comes back to at night. And we have a very fulfilling sex life, thank you. *(Suggestively fingering his lapel)* If you ever need a few tips from a mature woman, well, let me know... *(She titters mockingly)*

*Murray is about to leave in disgust, as **Joyce** and **Robert** approach. **Robert** has removed his teacher's gown.*



JOYCE Murray, has the headmaster passed this way?

MURRAY No.

ROBERT What's wrong?

JOYCE Have you seen the headmaster? I've got Mr Allen and Mr Anderson scouring the school for him. It's past time for the presentation and we're running out of vol-au-vents.

ROBERT I've just come from the science department and he wasn't there.

Geoffrey runs in.

GEOFFREY (*Breathless, to Joyce*) Have you got the key to the Music Room?

JOYCE It's in my office.

GEOFFREY No, it isn't. I've just been there. There's a light on in the Music Room, but the door's locked. I thought I heard someone, but it was difficult to tell.

ROSEMARY Is it my husband?

GEOFFREY I don't know. We might need to break down the door. Come on, Murray.

Geoffrey and Murray rush off, followed by Robert. They meet Janice, coming the other way.

JANICE What's going on?

ROSEMARY The seventh cavalry have just gone to rescue a burglar from the Music Room.

JOYCE Did you get through?

JANICE Eventually. She was phoning her boyfriend.

JOYCE Is everything all right?

JANICE Not really. He lives in Australia.

JOYCE With the baby.

JANICE (*Smiling*) Yes, fine.

There is a sudden, loud crash of a door being broken down offstage.

ROSEMARY What was that?

JOYCE Good heavens!

Geoffrey runs back on in a panic.

GEOFFREY Quick! Phone an ambulance.

JOYCE Why, what is it?

GEOFFREY It's a big white car for taking people to hospital.

The Inspector enters.

INSPECTOR Hello, hello, hello. What's going on here?

ROSEMARY Who are you?

INSPECTOR Inspector Something's A. Foot, Ma'am, C.I.D. Class of '77, bronze medal in lifesaving and first aid certificate. Can I be of assistance?

GEOFFREY Thank goodness, Inspector. It's the headmaster. The bleeding man's in the Music Room.

INSPECTOR You mean he's in the bleeding music room?

GEOFFREY No, he's in the Music Room, *bleeding*.

INSPECTOR Ooo. I'd better have a look then. *(To Joyce)* Perhaps you'd better phone an ambulance, miss.

JANICE Why, what is it?

INSPECTOR We've had that one, miss. It didn't go down well the first time.

The Inspector exits.

ROSEMARY Do you think he'll be all right?

JOYCE *(Reassuringly)* I'm sure he will.

ROSEMARY I should go to him.

JOYCE *(Stopping her)* There's nothing you can do.

ROSEMARY You're right.

JOYCE Besides, there's probably blood everywhere.

Rosemary bursts into tears.

JOYCE They're probably applying pressure to the gaping wound as we speak.

*Rosemary cries even louder, and is comforted by **Janice**.*

JOYCE Yes, the Inspector is probably using all his finely-tuned clinical expertise to stem the torrential blood flow.

ROSEMARY *(Sniffing, a little comforted)* Do you really think so?

JOYCE And not succeeding.

*Rosemary wails even louder. The **Inspector** returns, leading **Robert, Murray and Geoffrey**.*

ROSEMARY Inspector, is there any news?

INSPECTOR Mrs Masterson, I'm afraid you must prepare yourself for a shock.

ROSEMARY His jacket will need to be dry cleaned.

INSPECTOR Worse than that I'm afraid. I hardly know how to tell you. Women tend to faint at this point.

ROSEMARY Please, inspector. In my life I've seen more than my share of adversity. Don't hold back. I have to know.

INSPECTOR All right. I'm afraid he's dead.

*She faints immediately into **Robert's** arms.*

JOYCE Did he manage to say anything to you, inspector, before he died?

INSPECTOR Yes, he did.

JOYCE What?

INSPECTOR *(Letting out a dying gasp)* Yuuuuuuu.... so not much help there, I'm afraid. *(To the audience)* Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid that once

again the long arm of the law is a little short-handed and I will have to ask your assistance in solving this despicable crime.

GEOFFREY You mean...

INSPECTOR Yes, I'm afraid that Mr Masterson was murdered.

All gasp.

INSPECTOR I must ask that none of you leave the room. As all these people sitting here look quite respectable and I, of course, am beyond reproach I must assume that one of you six committed the dastardly deed.

All look at each other accusingly.

INSPECTOR Now if you'll excuse me I shall return and make notes at the crime scene. *(Choosing a member of the audience)* Sir, I must ask that you take it upon yourself that no-one leaves until I return.

The Inspector leaves, heading back towards the Music Room.

JOYCE *(to Geoffrey)* You fool. What have you done?

GEOFFREY Me?

ROBERT Yes, you. Everybody knows how much you hated the headmaster. But I never thought you would stoop as low as this.

MURRAY Yes, what did you say as you were signing his card? How many D's in 'riddance'?

GEOFFREY *(to Robert)* You can talk. Masterson wasn't exactly flavour of the month with you, was he?

ROSEMARY He always said you were poison. That it would be a disaster if you were appointed head in his place.

JOYCE I can't believe that Mr Stephens would hurt anybody.

ROSEMARY *(to Joyce)* And what about you? Poor love-sick Joyce. Madly in love with the headmaster all these years. Couldn't stand to see any competition. Is that why you sent that letter to Murray Evans?

JANICE What letter?

JOYCE I'm no fool. I know the headmaster has been bleeding you dry all these years. Rumour has it there's little left. Was he worth more to you dead than alive, Rosemary?

ROSEMARY Why you...

Rosemary advances on Joyce, but is held back by Robert as the Inspector reappears.

INSPECTOR Ladies, ladies, please! I must ask you to desist immediately.

ROSEMARY Why shouldn't I kill the little bitch?

INSPECTOR The hot-pot's arrived.

All suddenly relax and look hungry.

INSPECTOR Ladies and gentlemen, while I question the suspects further, I shall leave you with details of the scene of the crime.

All exit.