



HOBSON'S  
CHOICE

& 15 other twist-in-  
the-tail short stories

Clive West

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# FOREWORD

It's one of those wearisome and pretentious forewords, you're thinking. Well, perhaps it is and, in which case, you are hereby given permission to skip the page and move straight on to the stories. However, if you'd like to know a bit more about what drove me to write them, then do read on as I hope that you'll then get more from your reading. You also have my promise that I'll try to walk a tightrope between giving away spoilers and being too elliptical.

*A Good Education* is a period piece and it draws on my own direct personal experience of bullying in an English public school. With its dark and sinister passageways, constant bullying, and sadistic teachers, such a place would not be somewhere I'd ever send a child (although I recognise that times have now changed).

*Hobson's Choice* centres around my lifelong interest in how seemingly small and insignificant events can become major forks in our passage through life. It's a chilling and dark story which I personally consider to be among the strongest that I've ever written. I hope my readers find it thought-provoking.

I wrote *Dear John* as a cautionary account aimed at those who are busy making plans that rely upon the good intentions of others. No-one, no matter how close they are to you, will ever have exactly the same agenda as you. So, be warned.

It is said the present is the key to the past and the future and I've come to subscribe to this point of view. I firmly believe that our emotions, desires and propensity to commit acts of both good and evil, are largely unchanged in tens of thousands of years, and if our species survives that long, will be the same as they are now thousands of years hence. The technology may change but the end user and all their imperfections will not.

My two Sci-Fi stories - *Lucky Charm* and *The Return Of The Centaurus* - both reflect this reasoning and I have steered away from describing fantastical gadgetry in favour of a study of how humans might cope in the situations that the technology gives rise to.

Although a staunch scientist and confirmed non-believer in such things, I do love a good ghost story, and I remember the eager anticipation I had for the BBC's 'Ghost story for Christmas'. This was always a production based on one of the eerie tales written by the talented M R James. *An Enduring Smile*, *The Racing Line*, *Seeing Is Believing* as well as *A Good Education* all have a supernatural air about them.

Spaghetti westerns were the success story of my childhood and Sergio Leone created some vile 'bad guys' who you knew would meet suitably unpleasant ends. The bad guy being the one with a black hat (in a metaphorical sense if not a literal one) has since been done to death and something more subtle is required for the modern reader. I've derived great pleasure from dreaming up some bad guys of my own and then finding alternative endings to the 'grand finale shoot out'. Both *Every*

*One A Winner* and *Moving Up* deal with greed and what it can make people do, while *Last Orders*, *Seeing Is Believing* and *A Day At The Beach* look at other dark facets of the human psyche.

The logical consequences of the lynch mobs which gather outside some high profile criminal trials has always troubled me. The “Hang ‘em high” brigade usually want to string up the defendant long before the trial has got past the preamble stage but the whole idea of a trial is to establish guilt – something which explains the ‘not guilty’ option for juries. Punishing the wrong person (as has occasionally been known to happen) is not just wrong in itself, it also sends a dangerous message to the real perpetrator. This is why the making of snap and ill-informed judgements bothers me.

To show what I mean, *The Watcher* and the much more gentle, *Lost* are warnings to those who would be hasty in forming such opinions. *No Walk In The Park* is another chip off this block although coming at the idea from a very different angle.

On a different note, *The Bench* could be a stage play with the whole story being centred around an ordinary park bench. It’s an idea I’ve been throwing around in my head for sometime now and it harks back to the way in which I perceive fate as being a tangled web of probability lines.

So, those are my tales and I hope that you derive as much pleasure from reading them as I have done from writing them.

*Clive West*

*Italy, January 2012*

*PS I’m also including a sneak preview of my blockbuster novel, The Road. I hope you enjoy reading it!*

# *A GOOD EDUCATION*

The grey and austere walls of the Mercer's School for Boys seemed better suited to crushing the spirit rather than building it. Well, that was the humble opinion of one of the humblest members of its fraternity. Mornington, like the London underground station, nicknamed 'Moon' as a consequence of his mind's tendency to disappear into outer space during lessons, had just turned thirteen, that early Autumn of 1961.

The bell chimed for the end of the mid-morning break, however Moon was never quite sure whether the sound was to be welcomed or dreaded. The pealing signified the end of the period of organised bullying by his peers, but the commencement of the period of more subtle but equally sadistic bullying by his teachers. It seemed as if there was never any reprieve.

Along with his classmates, he scurried down the dark, oppressive corridors with their broken tiled floors that must have carried countless thousands of other wretched individuals during the school's five centuries of existence. His father had attended Mercer's (and hence his own enrolment) but his father had been a member of the first fifteen 'rugger' team, a corporal in the military training that the school proudly practised, and had excelled at just about everything.

In fact his father's old military uniform still fitted the old man's ramrod-straight back superbly, and no matter how physical an activity he engaged in while wearing it, no crease ever dared to appear.

Moon had attempted to appeal to his father about what life was like at Mercer's. He'd tried to describe the daily beatings he got from other pupils and the frequent thefts of exercise books from his locker that would leave him in hot water with his teachers over his missing homework. His father had merely given him a speech about how it was 'the same in his day,' had 'never done anyone any harm' and was all a 'bit of high spirits and horseplay'.

Even when a boy had drowned in the river the previous year, no-one seemed to want to question it. The incident was 'clearly' just a tragic accident and that was an end to it. Talk of the local Chief Constable being an Old Boy like Moon's father had been rife in the school but no-one had been certain of the rumour's veracity.

Moon suspected differently. He had not known the boy, Bodkins, particularly well, but he did know with the absolute confidence of a kindred spirit that Bodkins had been bullied just like he was being. That said, there was no point voicing this opinion as it would only get him into more trouble with his housemaster and, perhaps, even with the headmaster.

Moon was already on permanent detention which meant he had to place a pink report card in front of the teacher before every lesson. In a particularly despicable effort to gain cheap popularity, some of his teachers would then ask his

classmates what grade they thought Moon merited for his participation and performance – something which inevitably resulted in him getting a ‘D’ or an ‘E’ on his card. Naturally, these low grades would get him into even more trouble.

What lay behind Moon’s apparent lack of concentration was that he heard voices. It wasn’t anything spectral – no, he didn’t believe in ghosts or such, those were just silly stories set to frighten. His voices made suggestions about ideas and inventions that usually had no connection to the lesson going on around him. There was the rub.

For example, he was in a Latin lesson and the unfortunate phenomenon had begun. He was sat in the middle row, a place he secretly hoped would keep him apart from the back-row bullies and securely out of the mind of Mr Smallett, his teacher.

“Puer non puella amaverit,” droned Smallett. “What is wrong with that statement?” He paused briefly while his bird-of-prey’s eyes scanned the room looking for his next victim. “Mornington?”

Realising that they were all off the hook, the rest of the class turned in relief towards Moon who was busy sketching a plan of a house that used the sun to provide heat for ...

“Mornington! Are you awake, boy?” Smallett ranted, a globule of spittle hitting a boy in the front row who didn’t dare be seen to wipe it from his face.

“Yes, sir,” Moon answered with a shiver. Questions weren’t good and were to be avoided at all costs.

“Well, if you’re sure that we’re not taking up too much of your valuable time,” Smallett said sarcastically, using his hands, comedian-like, to invite peals of laughter from the other boys. “Perhaps you would care to enlighten us with the answer.”

Moon’s stomach dropped to the floor, what was the stupid question? He hadn’t even known there was one. “Um, could you repeat the question, please, sir?” he asked.

“Yes, of course, Mornington, I’d be delighted to run it by you again – see you afterwards for detention. Does any boy know the answer or, heaven forbid, do I have a class full of Morningtons?”

There was more raucous laughter and, while Smallett was writing the answer on the board, a few boys threw inky paper at Moon. Yet another detention, he groaned. It was rapidly getting to the crazy stage where he just couldn’t fit them all in. He’d probably end up with a detention because he couldn’t do all the detentions. Mercer’s ran on that kind of logic.

The rest of the day went much to programme. As per normal, he was pushed

back and back in the lunch queue and this made him so late getting to the food counter that the middle-aged, sour-faced kitchen lady had completely run out of the main course. She shrugged her shoulders, gave her best 'what's this got to do with me?' look, and dumped a portion of stodgy jam roll and tepid lumpy custard into his chipped white china bowl. He then had to bolt the food down to avoid being late for his lunchtime detention.

Lunchtime detentions usually consisted of picking up paper, sweeping the quadrangle, or carrying books or boxes for one of the masters. It all depended upon who was on duty. Some teachers were reasonably lenient but there were others like his housemaster who clearly found great amusement in thinking up new and ever more vicious punishments.

Today was the day that his housemaster was on duty, the thought of which made Moon groan again. This was going to be bad, he just knew it. Still, there was no point in him trying to think of an evasion tactic. All that would happen would be the addition of interest, making the punishment even more brutal.

"Get into your PE kit, boy. You have precisely three minutes or you'll be doing it this evening as well," boomed his Draculian housemaster, Mr Catford.

"Yes, sir," Moon shuddered, he hated sports. Without waiting for further comment, he sped off in the direction of the changing rooms. At least there wouldn't be any other boys there to throw him in the showers or tip Wellington boots of term-old urine over his clothes.

"You're late, boy," Catford groused on Moon's return a fraction over 180 seconds later. "This is my break you're taking up, do you realise that, boy?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir," Mornington stuttered.

"You are to do the junior's cross-country run," Catford said with obvious relish. "And, just in case you're thinking of taking any short cuts, be warned that I'll be checking up on you even though you won't be able to see me." He bent down to stare direct into Moon's eyes. "Do you hear me, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had the pleasure to teach your father and I'm disappointed to say what a disgrace you are to your family name," he paused as if searching for an even more damning epithet. "Off you go, I can't stand looking at you any longer."

Moon started off at a steady trot. His asthma meant that to go any faster would be to court a nasty attack of coughing. Mind, he had made the mistake of using that once as an excuse for coming in late and then had been given another detention for his trouble.