

## A Golden Nugget

My secondary school days coincided exactly with the years of the Second World War. Part of the school was evacuated to Devon, and the small remainder left in London, where I was, ran only two streams. In my School Certificate year 1941, those who were expected to proceed to the Sixth Form were in form A, while the remainder – the hopefuls and the hopeless – were in A-dash.

Sociologically, A-dash was distinctly more interesting than form A. It contained two boys with undoubted criminal tendencies. One was a Belgian who somehow managed to import French language pornographic material from occupied Belgium: when this was seized, the French master had to translate it for the headmaster! The other dubious character was, on one occasion, given a mild punishment by a prefect who happened to be in charge of the school library. Since he thought the punishment unjust, he scaled the outside of the four-storey school building the following weekend, broke into the library on the top floor, and set the place on fire.

There was one redeeming feature of A-dash: it contained one of the geniuses of the twentieth century, Gerard Hoffnung. I do not know how he performed in School Certificate, but it does not matter; nothing orthodox applied to him, and he was known and loved by everyone. For Geography, A and A-dash forms were combined, taught by a genial retired industrial chemist, Dr Martin, who was a great believer in free-style education. The lessons were given in a tiered lecture room, and at the rear, there was a trapdoor in the floor leading to the empty space beneath the floorboards. After the first few minutes of each Geography lesson, half of A-dash had disappeared down through the trapdoor, and soon after this, the gentle strains of Hoffnung's violin could be heard beneath those remaining in the class, and cigarette smoke wafted upwards between the floorboards.

That year, Hoffnung was always easily top in Geography. Dr Martin gave us weekly topics to present to him, and Hoffnung always provided a very imaginative but unintellectual cartoon, which got top marks. I remember one occasion on which Dr Martin had awarded only nine marks to Hoffnung, and had to explain to him how the cartoon could be slightly improved. At the end of term Hoffnung would have something like 118 marks out of 120.

Hoffnung was well-known for his cartooning, and masters were delighted to be parodied in this way, because it was all gentle fun; there was no malice in Gerard Hoffnung. He developed an almost unconscious habit of producing 'Foleys', which were apt to turn up anywhere in the school. Foley was a quiet boy who had a remarkably small chin and wore remarkably large spectacles. It would be interesting to know whether anyone made a collection of Foleys. I am sure that descendants of some of our masters will have valuable cartoons of their parent or grandparent.

I talked from time to time with Gerard, and came to think that I was a special friend of his, since his kindly face always showed great interest in our conversation. Later in life, I came to realise this was not to do with me, but with the remarkable quality of Hoffnung's personality, in the sense that he always gave his complete and cheerful attention to anyone he was speaking to: everyone was a special friend. I have never met another person with this deep human quality; it was this profound humanity, as much as his high artistic talent and sense of fun, that made him the genius that he was. It was a tragedy that he died at the age of thirty-four.

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