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Opening extract from

# The War of Jenkins' Ear

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# CHAPTER 1

*'BENEDICAT NOBIS OMNIPOTENS DEUS . . .'* THE FIRST grace of a new term. Henry Stagg, Headmaster and lord of all he surveyed, intoned with fresh vigour, his fingers flexing ominously as he gripped the back of his chair at High Table. Standing behind his bench at the window Toby Jenkins dared to lift his eyes. Mr Stagg looked thinner than he remembered, his neck longer somehow, more scraggy. But the voice was the same, sonorous and terrifying – 'Rudolph' they called him, when they were quite sure he couldn't hear them. Beside Rudolph, stiff in her grey-green suit with a butterfly brooch, stood Mrs Stagg, a head taller with straight dark hair and blood-red lips. Prunella he called her – 'Cruella' to the boys. Toby caught her eye and looked away quickly. The dying daddy-longlegs were still sidling clumsily along the

window-ledge, clambering over each other in a vain effort to find a way out. There's no escape, thought Toby, not for you, not for me. Thirteen weeks and five days – ninety-six days until the Christmas holidays. There was half term, four days beginning November the sixth, but that was seven long weeks away.

Toby closed his eyes and swallowed back the dread that rose in the back of his throat, the dread he'd been living with since first he woke that morning. It had been with him during the silent ride with his mother on the Underground, and as they walked up the steps and into Victoria Station. He recalled how his stomach had heaved at the first sight of a green, red and white cap. His last hope of reprieve was shattered. There could be no doubt about it now. This *was* the day term began. They hadn't come too early. There had been no mistake. He was not Toby any more. He was Jenkins now, or 'Jinks'. Someone said what they always said. 'Hello, Jinks. Had a good hols?' Toby nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. His mother went with him as far as the door of the carriage. She knew he hated her to wait. 'I'll be off then, Toby. God bless.' And she hugged him quickly and went away without looking back, leaving him with just the smell of her.

He knew by now there was no point in trying to stop the tears. They would come anyway in spite of himself. If he tried very hard though he could hold them in his eyes, just so long as he didn't blink.

He sat in the corner seat, his face against the windowpane as the carriage filled with the jovial banter of Redlands boys all bursting with news of their holidays. There were all the new jokes and all the old jokes. 'Have you heard this one? "Why did the submarine blush? Because it saw Queen Mary's bottom." ' In the joy of their reunion they hardly noticed Toby and that was a relief for him. Sooner or later of course they would, but by then he'd be ready for them. Simpson was the one to watch. He knew how to niggle better than most. When the train pulled out at last Toby went to the toilet where he locked himself in so that the tears could flow freely, so that he could steel himself, put away the last of Toby and become Jenkins.

The carriage was unnaturally quiet when he got back. 'And this,' said Simpson, 'is Jinks. He's been blubbing. He always blubs at the beginning of term. Say hello, Jinks.'

Until then Toby hadn't noticed him. There was a boy sitting in his seat by the window, a boy he had never seen before. His hair was longer than you were allowed at Redlands. 'He's a new bug,' said Simpson. The new boy moved up a bit so that Toby could sit down beside him. 'He's called Christopher,' Simpson went on.

'Christopher what?' Toby asked.

'Simon Christopher,' said the new boy quietly and he turned away to look out of the window.

* * *

'*Per Jesum Christum dominum nostrum. Amen.*' Shepherd's pie, cabbage, and after that it would be rice-pudding. Toby liked rice-pudding, especially the skin. The first supper was always the same. Toby sat in the babble of the dining-hall and looked down at his shepherd's pie. The others were eating already. He could not. The daddy-longlegs were trying to dance their way up to the top of the window. There were lots of them this year. 'Always the same in a dry summer,' his mother had told him. She'd be home from the station by now. They'd all be home, except him. Little Charley (no one called her Charlotte) would be shuffling around on her bottom, finger up her nose. His father would be back from the office (Toby never really knew what he did at the office). He'd be clipping the lawn edges, therapeutic he said; and Gran, trembling with Parkinson's disease in her wheel-chair, would still be doing the *Telegraph* crossword.

Toby ate the first mouthful of the first course of the first meal and swallowed without tasting. He'd had no breakfast, picked at his lunch, but he still had to force it down. You couldn't leave anything at Redlands, only as much as you could hide under your knife. Mr Birley called out from the end of his table.

'Jenkins,' he said, holding up the water jug.

'Sir?'

'It's empty.'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr Birley liked him. Mr Birley had always liked him because he sang in the choir and Mr Birley liked everyone who sang in the choir. There was a care-worn, hang-dog look about him but at least he was kind, and there weren't many like that. 'You do remember where it is?' He smiled as he handed him the jug and then the bread-basket. 'And you might as well get some more bread while you're at it.'

The dining-hall door closed behind him and he dawdled his way down the tiled passage towards the kitchen. He was alone again for the first time since the toilet on the train and he wanted to make it last as long as he could. He spent some time waiting outside the kitchen door picking the crumbs out of the bread-basket. Then he put his back against the swing-doors and pushed.

Mrs Woolland was at the sink, and there was a girl with her back to him slicing the bread. Mrs Woolland shook the suds off her arms and reached for a towel.

'Hello, Toby, back again then,' she said. At school hardly anyone else ever called him Toby. 'I'll take that.' She took the jug and ran the tap. 'You can help yourself to the bread.'

The bread was always kept in a deep wicker hamper in the corner of the kitchen, great towers of cut loaves, and the tallest towers were always the freshest. The girl was watching him now. He could feel it in the back of his neck.

'You remember Wanda, don't you?' said Mrs

Woolland. Toby didn't. 'She used to come up here a lot when she was a little girl, before your time I expect. Fourteen she is now, just left school. She's giving me a hand from time to time, aren't you pet?'

'Yes, Mum,' said Wanda. She blew her hair out of her eyes and threw her head back as she sawed at the bread. She came towards Toby holding a cut loaf like a concertina between her hands. She laid it in his basket and smiled at him.

'I've told you, I'm Mrs Woolland when I'm up at the big house, remember?'

'Yes, Mrs Woolland,' Wanda sighed confidentially at Toby and helped him squeeze the last slice of bread into the basket. Her eyes held his for a moment, and Toby found he could not look away.

'Don't forget the water,' said Mrs Woolland, bringing the jug over to him. The rice-puddings were laid out on the kitchen range waiting, the skins shiny-brown like rolling fields of toffee. 'Go on then, off with you,' she said. 'And don't drop it.'

Toby didn't drop it and he only slopped the water once as he turned the corner outside the music-room. He inched his way along the corridor, the din from the dining-hall louder all the time, but now he wasn't thinking about home or about how miserable he was. He was thinking about Wanda's eyes and wondered if they really could be green.

The rice-pudding was as good as it looked – it always was. Toby searched for a morsel of skin in his helping, his favourite bit, but found none.

'You like skin?' said a voice from across the table. It was the new boy, Christopher. How he knew that Toby liked the skin Toby could not make out. 'You can have mine then,' said Christopher. 'I can't stand skin.' He stood up, leaned across the table and scooped the skin on to Toby's plate – not at all the sort of thing you were supposed to do at Redlands. Toby looked down the table. It was all right. Mr Birley hadn't noticed. Toby was savouring his first mouthful of rice-pudding skin when the gong sounded behind him from the High Table. The dining-hall fell silent at once. Rudolph rose to his feet slowly, pushing himself up on his knuckles.

'That new boy on the window table,' he said, his eyes narrowing. 'Christopher, isn't it? Stand up will you. On the bench. And Jenkins, you too.'

Toby knew at once what it would be about, but he could see that Christopher was completely bewildered. Toby could feel his heart pounding in his ears as he stepped on to the bench and faced Mr Stagg. He'd only been back at school an hour or two and he was already in the middle of a nightmare.

'I don't know,' Rudolph began, his voice full of acid menace. 'I don't know what sort of a home you have come from, what sort of a school you have come from;

but here at Redlands we do not lean across the table, we eat what is put in front of us and we do not turn our noses up at Mrs Woolland's excellent rice-pudding. "Manners maketh man" is the motto of one of our great schools, and at Redlands we set great store by our manners, Christopher. Now, as this is your first meal with us I am prepared to turn a blind eye, but just this once. If ever I see you . . .'

'I don't eat the skin, sir.' Christopher spoke quietly. It was very matter of fact. There was no defiance in his tone.

'I beg your pardon,' said Rudolph, his brow twitching with irritation.

'I like the rest of it, sir,' Christopher explained coolly, 'but I don't eat the skin. I never do.'

'Do you not?' Rudolph said smiling thinly. 'Well, I'm afraid, Christopher, we will have to teach you an early lesson and it is this. Here you will do what you are told to do, not what you feel like doing. Food at Redlands is always eaten whether you like it or not and without complaint. We do not waste our food at Redlands, do you hear me?'

'Yes, sir, I know, sir. It was the same at my last school. That's why I gave it to him, sir, so it wouldn't be wasted.'

No one in the dining-hall could believe what they were witnessing. It was quite unthinkable for a boy to argue the toss with Rudolph. With Rudolph there was

safety only in silent, abject acceptance. Rudolph roused was a very dangerous animal and every boy in the school knew it. The staff at the ends of their tables sat amazed but secretly delighted at this unexpected challenge. Not one of them would have dared face down Rudolph in public, nor in private, come to that. It was more than their jobs were worth. They waited with darting eyes for the massacre of the innocent. It didn't come.

'You will both sit down again,' Rudolph cleared his throat. 'Jenkins, you will return the rice-pudding skin to Christopher's bowl, and Christopher you will finish the entire contents of your bowl, skin and all. Mr Birley, you will please ensure that Christopher's bowl is clean. The window table will not leave the dining-hall until Christopher has eaten every bit of his rice-pudding skin. Is that quite clear?'

Toby sat down and passed his bowl over to Christopher. Christopher's face wore no expression as he spooned up the rice-pudding skin and laid it on top of his pudding. 'You may talk now,' said Rudolph as he sat down, and the dining-hall buzzed with muted astonishment. Spoons clinked on dishes again and the teachers rolled up their napkins and coughed away their embarrassment. On the High Table Rudolph sat brooding darkly, his fingers drumming on the arm of his chair. Toby finished what was left of his rice-pudding and scraped his bowl clean. Christopher too was eating his

way through his pudding, but as everyone could see – and almost everyone was looking – he was eating his way around the skin and under it. By the time the gong sounded for grace the rice-pudding skin was still there, stiff and cold at the bottom of his bowl. When everyone else had left the room the window table stayed behind and sat in silence.

Mr Birley sneezed and blew his nose noisily. 'Well, Christopher,' he said sniffing. 'I think you'd better eat it otherwise we're going to be here all night. I have work to do and these boys would like to unpack. Matron – maybe you haven't met Matron yet – Matron will get very ratty indeed if they're not upstairs soon, and then I'll get it in the neck. No one likes it in the neck from Matron.' The boys laughed. 'Come along now, there's a good fellow, eat up.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Christopher, 'but I don't eat skin. I never have. I can't. It makes me sick.'

Mr Birley sighed and put his hand to his forehead. 'Now look here, Christopher,' he said, 'this has gone quite far enough already. This really isn't the way to get on here at Redlands, you know. All you have to do is close your eyes and swallow it, and then we can all forget about it.'

Christopher looked around the table and then down at the skin in his bowl. He shook his head. 'No, I can't,' he said. 'I just can't.'

Toby knew then, they all knew, that Christopher meant what he said, that he was not going to eat the rice-pudding skin. They could be sitting there till the morning – he would not eat it. Even Simpson knew it and Simpson was not very bright – he just talked a lot.

'Why don't I eat it, sir?' said Simpson. 'No one'll know.'

'I will,' said Mr Birley. 'He has to eat it. That's all there is to it. There are some things in life we don't like to do that we have to do, like teaching small boys. We shall just have to sit here in silence until Christopher decides to eat his rice-pudding skin. I'm sorry, but Mr Stagg made himself quite clear.' He blew his nose again and examined the contents of his handkerchief.

It was some minutes later when Mrs Woolland put her head round the dining-hall door. 'Can I clear, Mr Birley?' she said. 'Some of us have got to get home tonight.'

Toby hoped Wanda would come in and help Mrs Woolland, but she didn't. Mrs Woolland did it all on her own, put away the sauces and salts and peppers, wiped the tables and piled up the trolley. On her way out she spoke her mind: 'There's nothing wrong with my rice-pudding and the skin's the best bit.' And then she went out wheeling away the squeaky trolley, the plates and mugs clattering down the corridor. Toby watched the pair of daddy-longlegs struggling feebly in a cobweb at the

bottom of the window and felt sorry for them all over again.

An hour or more later, and the daddy-longlegs had long since given up the fight. The spider was moving in for the kill when Custer padded into the dining-hall. Custer was Matron's golden retriever. He browsed in amongst the tables hoovering, nose to the ground, tail flourishing. Wherever Custer was, Matron was never far behind.

'Mr Birley,' she called. 'Are you in there, Mr Birley?' And then she was striding in through the dining-hall door. 'Well really, Mr Birley,' she said, shaking her head. 'What do you think you're doing?' Mr Birley knew better than to interrupt. 'I mean, really. It's all too silly. The whole school's talking about nothing else except rice-pudding. All this fuss over a bit of skin.' She turned her gaze on Christopher. 'So you're the troublesome new boy, are you? Bit old to be new, aren't you?'

'I'm thirteen,' said Christopher.

'And you don't like rice-pudding skin?'

'No.'

'And you won't eat it?'

'No.'

'Well that's clear enough anyway. Mr Birley, these boys have trunks to unpack and I'm not going to do it for them. Somehow, some way, that bit of skin has to be got rid of. Do we agree on that?' Mr Birley raised his

eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. 'You will all of you close your eyes. You too Mr Birley.' Toby waited until everyone had closed their eyes and then closed his. He heard Matron's starched uniform rustling behind him. Her hand was on his shoulder and she was leaning over him. 'Not a peep now, Jenkins,' she said. 'What the eye doesn't see, the heart won't grieve over.' Quite where she went to after that Toby could not tell. He could hear Custer skidding across the polished floor and his tail thumping against a chair leg, somewhere up near the High Table he thought. Then Matron was clapping her hands. 'All right,' she said. They opened their eyes. She was standing by the High Table, Custer sitting at her feet licking his lips. Mr Birley was looking at Christopher's bowl. 'It's gone,' he said.

'Magic,' said Matron, wiping her hands. 'You see? It wasn't as bad as all that was it Christopher? And in future don't be so childish.' Christopher smiled.

Heavy footsteps outside the door heralded Rudolph. 'Well?' he said.

'All gone, Headmaster,' said Matron. Everyone knew they didn't get on. Nothing was ever said of course, but neither disguised it very effectively. Matron went on. 'I'd like these boys for unpacking now, if you don't mind, Headmaster.'

'Of course, Matron,' said Rudolph stiffly; and he went on, his hand clutching his lapel: 'and let this be a lesson

to you, Christopher. Because you are a new-boy, and because it is the first night of a new term I shall take no further action this time. But mark my words, the next time it'll be the cane. Very well, you may go now.' Matron had already gone, Custer at her heels, still hopeful.

'I want those boys upstairs for unpacking in two minutes, Mr Birley,' she called from outside. 'Two minutes!'

Toby didn't see Christopher again until he was brushing his teeth in the bathroom later that evening. They were standing side by side facing the mirror and alone. By now the rice-pudding incident had eclipsed all other beginning-of-term excitements. Toby looked across at him in the mirror as he rinsed his mouth. Christopher did nothing in a hurry. Even when he spat in the basin his movements were measured, almost elegant. If he was enjoying his fame, he showed no signs of it. He stared back at himself for a moment and then dropped his toothbrush into his mug. His face was pale, paler even than his oversized cream pyjamas. He looks more dead than alive, Toby thought, more like a ghost. The ghost spoke.

'I'm sleeping next to you,' Christopher said.

'I know,' said Toby.

'Why do they call you Jinks?'

Toby shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. They

always have. Partly my name I suppose, and maybe I'm not very good luck or something.'

Neither of them spoke for a moment. 'Do you like it here?' Christopher said, turning to him.

' 's all right, I suppose.'

'That's not what you really think is it? Why don't you say what you really think?' Toby didn't quite know what to say. He wasn't expecting this directness. 'Well, I hate it,' said Christopher, zipping up his sponge bag. 'Do you snore?'

'I don't think so.'

'Good,' said Christopher as he hung his towel on his hook.

Toby asked the question he'd been longing to ask. 'What would you have done, you know, if Matron hadn't come in like she did, if Custer hadn't . . . Would you have eaten it, in the end I mean?'

'No,' said Christopher. 'Course not. He'd have given in. They always do in the end.'

The dormitory was known as 'The Pit'. Five steps down and you were in a huge vaulted room with bare floorboards and high mullioned windows like a church. There were twelve beds on each side, and a wooden locker in between each. No one wanted to be in The Pit. It was the closest to Rudolph's flat and therefore the most dangerous. Any noise after lights-out and he could pounce without warning. It was freezing cold too and the

beds were the old type – metal frames with springs that sagged in the middle. It was like sleeping in a squeaking, spiky hammock. But Toby was happier than he'd ever been on the first night of any term. His mind flitted from Wanda to Christopher and back to Wanda again. All thoughts of home and Mum and Dad and Gran and little Charley were forgotten. Matron had put the lights out some time ago but no one was asleep. No one would be asleep for hours, not on the first night. Suppressed giggling and whispering filled the darkness. The tower bell sounded in the quad outside, eleven o'clock. Toby looked across at Christopher. He lay still under his blankets, hands under his head. 'You awake?' Toby whispered.

'Yes,' said Christopher.

'What school were you at before?'

'A day-school down the end of our road, St Peter's.' He was talking louder than he should.

'You haven't been to a boarding school then, like this?'

'No, and I won't be staying for long either.'

The door opened suddenly. 'Talking! Who was talking?' Rudolph stood silhouetted in the doorway. The lights went on. 'Who was talking then? Come on. I heard you.' Everyone lay doggo and looked at everyone else.

'I was,' said Christopher propping himself up on his elbows. Rudolph hesitated for a moment, clearly surprised.

'You again. We really haven't made a very good start have we? Out of bed. Over here.' Christopher stepped into his slippers and put on his dressing-gown. He took his time. As he walked over to Rudolph everyone in the dormitory knew what would happen, everyone except Christopher, it seemed, for he showed no sign of fear, even in his voice.

'Yes, sir?' he said, looking Rudolph straight in the eye.

'Take off your slipper,' said Rudolph stonily.

'Which one, sir?' Christopher asked.

'Either.'

Christopher bent down and took off his right slipper. Rudolph almost snatched it out of his hand. 'There is no talking after lights-out. It is a rule. Do you understand about rules? I don't suppose they had rules in your Council school?'

'Yes, sir, they did.'

'There's things you are going to have to learn, Christopher, like not answering back for instance. Hold out your hand.' Rudolph gripped the heel of the slipper and struck three times. Christopher stood silent, his hand still held out in front of him. 'You want more?' said Rudolph, breathing hard.

'No, sir.'

'Get back to bed.'

Christopher walked slowly back towards his bed

undoing his dressing-gown cord. He lay down in bed, pulled the sheets up under his chin, and stared up at the ceiling. The lights went out and no one said a word until they could no longer hear Rudolph's footsteps, until the door of his flat shut behind him.

'You all right?' said Toby. But there was no reply.

When Toby woke next morning the bed next to him was empty. There was an excited huddle around Simpson's bed at the other end of the dormitory. Toby went over. Simpson was sitting cross-legged on his pillow and holding court.

'What's happened?' said Toby.

'Your friend,' said Simpson. 'He's run off.'

'You don't know,' Toby said.

'Oh, don't I? I only saw him go, that's all,' Simpson retorted. 'I was coming out of the bog early this morning, and there he was fully dressed. He walks right past me with his suitcase. Never says a word. Never even looks at me. Just walks down the stairs and out of the front door. I saw him from the bathroom window. He stops at the school gates, puts his suitcase down, takes off his shoes, shakes them, puts them on again and that was it. I'm telling you, he's gone, he's done a bunk.'