



French Dictation

I didn't like Peregrine Palis from the start. It's a strange thing about French teachers. From my experience they all have either dandruff, bad breath or silly names. Well, Mr Palis had all three, and when you add to that the fact that he was on the short side, with a pot-belly, a hearing-aid and hair on his neck, you'll agree that he'd never win a Mr Universe contest ... or a *Combat Monsieur Univers* as he might say.

He'd only been teaching at the school for three months – if you can call his own brand of bullying and sarcasm teaching. Personally I've learnt more from a stick of French bread. I remember the first day he strutted into the classroom. He never walked. He

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moved his legs like he'd forgotten they were attached to his waist. His feet came first with the rest of his body trying to catch up. Anyway, he wrote his name on the blackboard – just the last bit.

“My name is Palis,” he said. “Pronounced pallee. P-A-L-I-S.”

We all knew at once that we'd got a bad one. He hadn't been in the place thirty seconds and already he'd written his name, pronounced it and spelt it out. The next thing he'd be having it embroidered on our uniforms. From that moment on, things got steadily worse. He'd treat the smallest mistake like a personal insult. If you spelt something wrong, he'd make you write it out fifty times. If you mispronounced a word, he'd say you were torturing the language. Then he'd torture you. Twisted ears were his speciality. What can I say? French genders were a nightmare. French tenses have never been more tense. After a few months of Mr Palis, I couldn't even look at a French window without breaking into tears.

Things came to a head as far as I was concerned

one Tuesday afternoon in the summer term. We were being given dictation and I leant over and whispered something to a friend. It wasn't anything very witty. I just wanted to know if to give a French dictation you really had to be a French dictator. The trouble was, the friend laughed. Worse still, Mr Palis heard him. His head snapped round so fast that his hearing-aid nearly fell off. And somehow his eyes fell on me.

"Yes, Simple?" he said.

"I'm sorry, sir?" I asked with an innocent smile.

"Is there something I should know about? Something to give us all a good laugh?" By now he had strutted forward and my left ear was firmly wedged between his thumb and finger. "And what is the French for 'to laugh'?"

"I don't know, sir." I winced.

"It is *rire*. An irregular verb. *Je ris, tu ris, il rit...* I think you had better stay behind after school, Simple. And since you seem to like to laugh so much, you can write out for me the infinitive, participles, present indicative, past historic, future and present

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subjunctive tenses of *rire*. Is that understood?"

"But sir..."

"Are you arguing?"

"No, sir."

Nobody argued with Mr Palis. Not unless you wanted to spend the rest of the day writing out the infinitive, participles and all the restiples of the French verb *argumenter*.

So that was how I found myself on a sunny afternoon sitting in an empty classroom in an empty school struggling with the complexities of the last verb I felt like using. There was a clock ticking above the door. By four-fifteen I'd only got as far as the future. It looked as if my own future wasn't going to be that great. Then the door opened and Boyle and Snape walked in.

They were the last two people I'd expected to see. They were the last two people I *wanted* to see: Chief Inspector Snape of Scotland Yard and his very unlovely assistant Boyle. Snape was a great lump of a man who always looked as if he was going to burst out of his clothes, like the Incredible Hulk. He had pink skin and



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narrow eyes. Put a pig in a suit and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference until one of them went oink. Boyle was just like I remembered him: black hair – permed on his head, growing wild on his chest. Built like a boxer and I'm not sure if I mean the fighter or the dog. Boyle loved violence. And he hated me. I was only thirteen years old and he seemed to have made it his ambition to make sure that I wouldn't reach fourteen.

“Well, well, well,” Snape muttered. “It seems we meet again.”

“Pinch me,” I said. “I must be dreaming.”

Boyle's eyes lit up. “I'll pinch you!” He started towards me.

“NOT NOW, BOYLE!” Snape snapped.

“But he said...”

“It was a figure of speech.”

Boyle scratched his head as he tried to figure it out. Snape sat on a desk and picked up an exercise book. “What's this?” he asked.

“It's French,” I said.

“Yeah? Well it's all Greek to me.” He threw it aside

and lit a cigarette. "So how are you keeping?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?" I replied. I had a feeling that they hadn't come to enquire about my health. The only enquiries those two ever made were the sort that people were helping them with.

"We came to see you," Snape said.

"OK. Well, you've seen me now. So if you don't mind..." I reached for my backpack.

"Not so fast, laddy. Not so fast." Snape flicked ash into an inkwell. "The fact is, Boyle and me, we were wondering ... we need your help."

"My help?"

Snape bit his lip. I could see he didn't like asking me. And I could understand it. I was just a kid and he was a big shot in Scotland Yard. It hurt his professional pride. Boyle leaned against the wall and scowled. He would rather be hurting me.

"Have you heard of Johnny Powers?" Snape asked.

I shook my head. "Should I have?"

"He was in the papers last April. The front page. He'd just been sent down. He got fifteen years."

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"That's too bad."

"Sure, especially as he was only fifteen years old."

Snape blew out smoke. "The press called him Public Enemy Number One – and for once they were right. Johnny Powers started young..."

"How young?"

"He burnt down his kindergarten. He committed his first armed robbery when he was eight years old. Got away with four crates of Mars bars and a barrel of Lucozade. By the time he was thirteen he was the leader of one of the most dangerous gangs in London. They were called the Catapult Kids ... which was quite a joke as they were using sawn-off shotguns. Johnny Powers was so crooked he even stole the saw."

There was a long silence.

"What's this got to do with me?" I asked.

"We got Powers last year," Snape went on. "Caught him red-handed trying to steal a million pounds worth of designer clothes. When Johnny went shoplifting, you were lucky if you were left with the shop."

"So you've got him," I said. "What else do you want?"

"We want the man he was going to sell the clothes to." Snape plunged his cigarette into the inkwell. There was a dull hiss ... but that might have been Boyle. "The Fence," he went on. "The man who buys and distributes all the stolen property in England ... and in most of Europe too.

"You see, Nick, crime is big business. Robberies, burglaries, hijacks, heists ... every year a mountain of stuff goes missing. Silver candlesticks. Scotch whisky. Computers. You name it, somebody's stolen it. And recently we've become aware that one man has set up an operation, a fantastic network to handle it - buying and selling."

"You mean ... like a shopkeeper?"

"That's just it. He could be a shopkeeper. He could be a banker. He could be anyone. He doesn't get his hands dirty himself, but he's got links with every gang this side of the Atlantic. If we could get our hands on him, it would be a disaster for the underworld. And think of what he could tell us! But he's an invisible man. We don't know what he looks like. We don't know where

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he lives. To us he's just the Fence. And we want him."

"We want him," Boyle repeated.

"I think I get the general idea, Boyle," I said. I turned back to Snape. "So why don't you ask this Johnny Powers?" I asked.

Snape lit another cigarette. "We have asked him," he replied. "We offered to halve his sentence in return for a name. But Powers is crazy. He refused."

"Honour amongst thieves," I muttered.

"Forget that," Snape said. "Powers would sell his own grandmother if it suited him. In fact he did sell her. She's now working in an Arabian salt-mine. But he wouldn't sell her to a policeman. He hates policemen. He wouldn't tell us anything. On the other hand, he might just slip the name to someone he knew. Someone he was friendly with..."

"What are you getting at?" I asked. I was beginning to feel uneasy.

"Johnny Powers is fifteen," Snape went on. "Too young for prison – but too dangerous for Borstal. So he was sent to a special maximum-security centre

just outside London – Strangeday Hall. It's for young offenders. No one there is over eighteen. But they're all hardened criminals. We want you to go there."

"Wait a minute...!" I swallowed. "I'm not a criminal. I'm not even hardened. I'm a softy. I like cuddly toys and the *Beano*. I'm..."

"We'll give you a new name," Snape cut in. "A new identity. You'll share a cell with Powers. And as soon as you've found out what we want to know, we'll have you out of there. You'll be back at school before you even know it."

Out of one prison into another, I thought. But even if I could have skipped the whole term, I wouldn't have considered the offer. Snape might call Powers crazy, but that was the craziest thing I'd ever heard.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You want to lock me up with some under-aged Al Capone in a maximum-security jail somewhere outside London. I'm to get friendly with him, preferably before I get my throat cut. And I'm to find out who this Fence is so you can arrest him too."

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"That's right." Snape smiled. "So what do you say?"

"FORGET IT! ABSOLUTELY NOT! YOU MUST BE OUT OF YOUR MIND, SNAPE! NOT FOR A MILLION POUNDS!"

"Can I take that as a 'no'?" Snape asked.

I grabbed my bag and stood up. Mr Palis and his irregular verbs could wait. I just wanted to get out of there. But at the same time, Boyle lurched forward, blocking the way to the door. The look on his face could have blocked a drain.

"Let me persuade him, chief," he said.

"No, Boyle..."

"But..."

"He's decided."

Snape swung himself off the desk. Boyle looked like he was going to explode, but he didn't try to stop me as I reached for the door handle.

"Give me a call if you change your mind," Snape muttered.

"Don't wait up for it," I said.

I left the two of them there and walked home.

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I didn't think I'd hear from them again. I mean, I'd told them what I thought of their crazy idea – and they could always find some other kid. The way I figured it was, they'd just forget about me and go and look for somebody else.

Which just shows you how much I knew.