

The Drummer of the Eleventh North Devonshire Fusiliers

COLIN MAILLARD

Down the slope of the knoll by the river six boys herded a seventh. Their school, partly brick turrets, partly modern slabs of rectilinear glass, was far behind them, inserted into a line of cedars across the horizon. There were puffs of white clouds in the bright blue sky. Down on the river a farmer was burning off a field. Further up the slope a woman in long skirts was collecting butterflies in a net. Her straw gardening hat was kept in place by a red scarf tied under her chin.

Every attempt of the seventh, smaller boy to break and run for it was thwarted by blocking shoulders and quick footwork.

Up from the meadow where six Holsteins grazed stood a post that had once held a salt lick, or been part of a gate, or of some structure the rest of which had long since been carried away. Wind and rain had made it smooth and gray.

Aage, Bo, Martin, and Peder wore white kneepants and blue sweatshirts, Ib was in American jeans, and Bent wore short pants, like the little boy Tristan.

—Stand, Aage said to Tristan, still and easy. I'll do the rest.

—Martin and Peder, Bo said, are going to fight. —Not till after, Martin said.

—And not here, Peder said. Back of the hill, and in our underpants, so's not to get blood on our clothes. —Crazy, Ib said.

Tristan stood, worried and submissive, while Aage unbuttoned his blouse and took it off with a flourish.

—Hang it on the post, he instructed Martin.

Aage worked Tristan's undershirt up. His voice was calm and menacing. A few more unfastenings and pulls, and Tristan stood mother-naked, cheeks and ears the color of a radish.

—Here in the sack, Peder said.

He shook out a dress, blue with white dots, a frilled hem, and a pink ribbon through the lace at the collar.

—Sexy, Bent said.

—Looks more like a nightgown, said Bo.

—You're going to make me wear a dress? Tristan asked.

—We told you not to talk, Aage said. Stick your arms through the sleeves.

—It's only a game, Martin said. Isn't it, Ib? Ib doesn't tell lies.

—Not only a game, Ib said, but a game with the rules backward. You're It, we decided last night, and instead of you having the blindfold, we are the blindfoldeds.

—Except for the haircut, he looks like a girl.

—What for? Tristan asked.

—The more you talk, Aage said, the worse it's going to be for you, squirt.

—Pigeon to the Master, Bo said, and you'll wish you were dead.

—This is the drill. Bent said. We're blindfolded, you're not. If you were to get clean away, slim chance, you can't go back, not in a dress.

—What happens when you catch me ?

—We told you not to talk.

Aage looked at Bo, merry with a secret, and Bo flipped his fingers against his blue sweatshirt. Bent zipped down the fly of his short pants and crossed his eyes. Ib guffawed. Martin glared at Peder, Peder at Martin.

A skipper on flixweed opened its wings twice before darting off, with a dip, zigzag and fluttery.

— *Sylvestris Poda*, Tristan said. I don't care. Give me the sniffles, this dress.

Aage bound Bo's eyes with a scout kerchief, Bent Ib, and on around until they were all blindfolded, except Tristan, who stood miserable and confused in his dress. Bo's white quiff stuck up like a grebe's tail from the scarf belting his eyes, and they all moved like windup toys.

In every direction there were green and brown fields, and a silver sliver of sea to the west.

—You're there, somewhere, Aage said. If you talk, or holler, we'll know where you are, and get you.

They began to mill, with stiff arms and open hands.

—It's me, you've got, smuggler, Bo said. Feel for a dress.

—There was an owl, a Great Gray, *Strix nebulosa*, on a limb. Bent said, on the fir.

Tristan ducked Ib's flailing grope.

—Outside my window.

—We could all be frigging each other, Peder said, in brotherly bliss.

Nipped under Aage's reach, changing course like a rabbit.

—Not Peder and Martin: they're going to fight.

—Same thing. Bo said.

It was not bright to think of green graph paper and algebra when who knew what was about to happen to him, but Tristan did.

—Everybody stand still. Blind people can feel what's around them.

Or of the yellow willow by the river and the heron that stood on one leg downstream from it.

—Wind.

—Arms out.

—Turn slow, all of us in close.

—We could hold hands, in a circle, and move in.

—If he's inside.

—He's inside. Aren't you, Tristan?

Silence.

He could see. They couldn't. No reason why they should ever catch him.

—The owl was looking in at our window.

—Which blinded him.

Thing was, to make no noise and to account for every direction at once. Stay on your toes, stay down, keep turning.

—Who groped my crotch? Martin asked.

—Peder, probably. Bo said.

Bent, squirming away from Ib, made a wide opening in the circle, through which Tristan nipped, and walked backward, on his toes. Then he turned and ran as fast as he could. From the dip on the other side of the knoll he could see the woman with her butterfly net, the farmer burning off his field. The shine had gone off the sea. He minded being barefoot more than the dress. The dress was like a dream, and no fault of his, but to have let his shoes be taken away from him was lack of charaaer.

—Bullies, he said out loud. And unfair.

But he'd fooled them, there was that. And he would never know what they would have done to him if they'd caught him.

—Don't think like that! he said, stomping his foot.

If he made a big circle, he could get back to the school without being caught, provided it was a good while before they realized he'd given them the slip.

If he were in Iceland, or on Fyn, there would be ponies he could commandeered and ride. If he were on the other side of the school, there would be a road, with cars. It would be grand if a helicopter choppered down, with police or soldiers, to rescue him, deliver him in glory to the school, having kindly given him a flight jacket to wear over this miserable dress. And the woman netting butterflies was too far inside the long way around he had to circle. If his luck held, he could be a long way ahead of them before the pack was on his heels.

He kept to the sides of knolls. His breathing was wet and sharp, as when you're taking a cold.

Heather and bracken and gorse and knotgrass, and all as fast in rubble as a cat's tail in a cat. All people with socks and sneakers were rich, didn't they know? And pants. And did his balls feel good because he was free? If he was: they might be tearing after him, with longer legs, and with shoes, and here he was crying, like a baby.

Where you are is how you feel. Back there, dipping under their trawling arms, pivoting on his heel, ducking and dashing, there was no time: everything happened at once. And then time turned on again.

He didn't dare look back. For one thing, every direction now looked the same. For another, he didn't want to know if they were behind him in a pack, or worse, fanning out, to come at him on all sides.

A stitch in your ribs goes away, he knew, if you keep running, and there was second wind, good old second wind. And luck, there was luck.

Had the sky ever been emptier or everywhere so far away?

Luck, he felt in his bones, had a warrant for his safe passage over these scrub meadows. The wood's edge would be just beyond the next rise, or the next. Then he could go along the wood, even disappear into it, if need be. There was a longish stretch of open fields after that, before the next wood, but that one had paths in it, and through it he could get back to the school.

But he had to go around hills, not over them, where they could see him.

What was all this about, anyway? Playing Colin Maillard with the rules reversed, and him in a dress? Aage he'd suspect anything of, always ready for a jape as he was, especially if it was a way of sucking up to Bo. Bent was a mean little rat to be in on this. How did Ib get mixed up in it?

His nose stung inside, and the back of his mouth.

He'd cut the underside of two toes, the little one on his left foot, the long one beside the big toe on his right. His knees hurt. His shins hurt.

He stumbled and fell sprawling.

I will not cry, he heard himself saying. I will fucking not fucking cry.

When he got up, he couldn't believe that the use of his left ankle was not his anymore. The pain would go away. Luck wouldn't do something like this to him. It absolutely wouldn't. He needed all the luck he could get.

Worse, he heard voices.

The voices made him angry. It was wonderfully easy now not to blubber, not to even think of defeat. He was going to get away. A whonky ankle wasn't going to stop him.

The voices were to his left. They weren't a hue and cry. They were mingled in with each other. Ib's he recognized, and Aage's. He heard *all this crap about a fair fight and we won't stop you.*

He forgot that his ankle wouldn't work, and fell again. Where were they?

On the other side of the knoll to his left. He remembered: Martin and Peder were to fight. He hated fights. They were more senseless, even, than making him wear a dress to play *blindebuk* backward.

The whole stupid world was crazy. Plus it didn't seem to notice.

He gave up hopping, and crawled toward the top of the knoll. There was a big rock he could lie flat behind, and look. Their minds, at least, weren't on him anymore. There was sweet relief in that. And they wouldn't pick on him when he had a hurt ankle.

Aage and Bo were with Martin, who was stripped down to his undershorts. Peder was undressing, throwing his clothes to Ib and Bent. He had smaller undershorts than Martin, blue with a white waistband. They'd left on their socks and sneakers, as the ground in the hollow where they were was as rocky and scrubby as the fields he'd run so fast over.

The late afternoon was filling the hollow with shadow. Aage was whispering in Martin's ear. Bo sat, Martin's clothes in his lap.

Peder walked over and stood nose to nose with Martin, talking very low between clenched teeth. His hands tightened into fists. Martin was breathing fast, his chest jumping as if he'd run farther and harder than Tristan.

But they hadn't run at all. He saw that he'd apparently been making a steady turn to the left, when all the while he thought he was running in a straight line. The post where they'd played Colin Maillard was the next knoll over. Talk about unlucky.

He was scared. He hated what he was seeing, and didn't want to see. Martin and Peder almost touching, breathing into each other's mouths, looking into each other's eyes as if trying to look into each other's heads. Aage stood eerily still, waiting, with a strange expression on his face. Bo's knees were quivering. Ib had his hands on his hips, legs wide apart. Bent was licking his lips.

Peder hit first, a jab into Martin's midriff that sounded like a melon splitting and doubled Martin over. Before he could straighten up, Peder kicked him in the chest, a fierce football punt of a kick that made him fall backward.

Tristan closed his eyes and pushed his face against the ground. He heard grunts, ugly words, scuffling.

Aage, Bo, Ib, and Bent were saying nothing at all.

When he dared a look, Peder was on top of Martin, pummeling his face with both fists, which were bloody. Martin's legs were flailing against the ground.

Tristan was halfway down the slope, running with a dipping limp, before he realized that he had moved at all.

—Make him quit! he was shouting.

Bo looked up at him in surprise. Aage grinned.

—Keep back, he said. A fight's a fight.

With a porpoise heave and flop, Martin twisted from under Peder, jabbed his knee into his crotch, and pulled free. Peder's face was white with pain, his mouth making the shape of a scream. Martin was bleeding from the nose in spurts, and he was sobbing in convulsions, his shoulders jolting. He wiped the blood from his mouth, and fell on Peder with both fists hammering on his terrified face.

Tristan locked his arms around Martin's waist and pulled.

—Help me get him off, you assholes! he shouted. You fucking stupid shits!

—Stay out of this, Aage shouted. It's none of your fucking business.

—Where'd he come from, anyway? Ib asked.

By tightening his armlock and pushing as hard as he could, Tristan rolled Martin off Peder, who got up with a paralytic jerk, gagging. Backing away on knees and elbows, he retched and puked.

Bo said quietly:

—I think they've fought enough.

—Me too. Bent said.

—Oh shit, Aage said. They haven't even begun. Shove Tristan baby there toward the school with a foot against his ass, so's we'll have boys only again, and let's get on with it.

—I think they've fought enough, Aage, Bo repeated. Something's wrong with Martin. There's too much blood.

—How can we get them to the infirmary. Bent asked with a scared voice, without all of us getting it in the neck?

—Gripes! Ib said. Peder's conked out.

—Fainted.

—Knocked out.

—Shake him.

—Get the puke out of his mouth.

—Let the bastard die, Martin said, spitting blood. Turn me loose, Tristan.

Bo and Ib lifted Peder by the shoulders, trying to get him to sit up.

—Don't like the way his head lolls, Bo said.

—He's coming around. Look at his eyes.

—They'll never get cleaned up and get back to school looking as if they haven't had a fight. It's a fucking war, here.

—Who says the fight's over? Aage asked.

—Oh shut up, you stinking sadist, Tristan said. You're mental, you know that?

Aage, pretending speechlessness, covered his mouth with both hands. —Peder! Bo hollered. Are you all right?

—Look, Ib said, we've got Peder unconscious and maybe bleeding to death, huh, and we're acting like morons. Let's do something.

—Do what?

—Carry him to the infirmary, for starters.

—Let him die, Martin said.

—Wipe some of the blood off with Tristan's dress, Bo said. Take it off. Go get your clothes, on the post next hill over.

—Can't, Tristan said. Turned my ankle running from you pigs, and can't go that far.

—I'll get them. Bent said.

—So off with the dress. Let's rip it in two, half for Martin, half for Peder.

—Peder's opening his eyes.

—The whole point of the fight, Aage said, was for somebody to win it. You can't have a fight without a winner and a loser.

—Stuff it, Ib said.

—And fuck it, Martin said. I've had it. If Peder has too. He, by God, looks it.

—No way, Ib said, we can keep this from Master. Looks like a train hit both of you.

Tristan stood naked as an eft, on one leg. Ib kept spitting on the wad he'd made of the halved dress, wiping blood off Martin.

Peder waved Bo away, who was trying to do the same for him.

—Stand him up. Bent said. See if he can.

Peder gave him the finger, scrambled up, and pitched forward, to vomit again.

—What, Tristan asked, was the fight about, anyway?

—You don't want to know, Ib said. Can you walk on that leg?

—Sure, Tristan said, I think so.

—All we need right now, Bent said, is for somebody to come along to see two of us looking like a slaughterhouse and one naked cripple. Master would eat pills for the next two days.

—Turn anybody's stomach, Tristan said. Turns mine. Fighting's stupid, you know?

—If anybody asked your opinion, Aage said.

—Why did you make me play blindman's bluff in a dress? Look, I'm not afraid of any of you, huh? And I'm not taking any more bullying, OK? —Would you fucking listen? Aage said.

Bo mopped Martin. Ib and Bent helped Peder up, whose knees were trembling.

—I'm all right, Peder said, his voice thick. Just let me alone a bit.

He pulled off his briefs to wipe his face. He felt his testicles with cautious fingers.

—Still there.

—Bo, Peder said, feel my balls and see if you think anything's wrong. One word out of anybody, and you get it in the mouth, I fucking promise.

—The rules were no rules, Aage said, so you can't bitch about kneed balls.

—Since when were you God? Tristan asked.

—Nobody's whining, Aage, Peder said. You get a knee in your balls and see if you don't puke.

—Let Martin feel. Bo said. He did it, and that's where it started, and you've got to make up. That's what a fight's for, yes?

—Up on the hill. Bent said, when I fetched Tristan's clothes, which you might put on after I went to the trouble, good deed and all, you know, the woman murdering butterflies seemed to be drifting this way. She's the one who glares at us on the way to the candy store.

—How did whichwhat start with Peder's balls? Tristan asked. All my togs are inside out.

—Do we let Tristan in ? Bo asked. We've made him bust his ankle, and he did give us the slip.

—Ib and Bo and me, we vote yes, Bent said. Martin? Peder?

—He's too little, Martin said. Or is he?

—Feel my balls, Martin, Peder said. See if they're OK. I'm not mad anymore.

—Let me, Aage said. I'll give you a straight answer.

—No, Peder said. Martin. And there's a damned tooth loose.

—It was you that wanted to fight, Martin said.

—So let's have your opinion as to whether I'm ever going to be a father.

—What's in? Tristan asked. I have two toes about to come off, if anybody's interested, to go with my bum ankle.

—There's a poor imitation of a creek on the far side of the wood, you know, Ib said. We can get the blood off Martin and Peder.

—But not the bruises, fat lips, and shiners.

—My balls are going to look like a black grapefruit. What do you think, Martin?

—If you come OK, next time you jack off, then they aren't busted, right? Let's see the tooth.

—What am I in ? Tristan asked.

—What's your vote, Aage?

Aage shrugged and quiddled his fingers.

—I'm already outvoted. I steal the dress, I solve Peder and Martin's problem, I invent inside-out Colin Maillard, and all at once I'm a clown. —Life's like that, Peder said.

—Look, Bo said, it's getting cold out here. Let's head out, the shortest way back, and to every question we answer absofuckinglutely nothing. Stare right over the top of the head of anybody asking any question. OK ?

All nodded, including Tristan.

They cast long, rippling shadows on the brown meadows. Bo carrying Tristan piggyback, Aage with his hands in his pockets, Martin and Peder each with an arm around the other's shoulders, Ib and Bent skipping along behind.