

So You Want To Be A Hero?

“But are you *sure* you can manage?” Mum looked worried. “I mean - all that games kit, and the cello as well?”

Alan looked across the kitchen to the pile of luggage beside the back door. He wanted to be able to laugh, to say ‘*Of course...*’ He wanted to be able to heft it all over his shoulder like Arnold Schwarzenegger and saunter off down the path whistling. But Mum was right; how was he going to get his football kit and the cello and his normal school bag with his homework and his lunch box onto the bus and all the way to school?

In his excitement to sign up for cello lessons two weeks before, Alan had forgotten that Wednesday was also football night, the night when the school Under-13s played. Not that Alan had ever actually played for the team, but he was the regular third reserve.

Mum turned to Dad. “What do you think, Trevor? Trevor? *Trevor!*”

Dad put down his morning paper with a weary sigh. “You fuss too much,” he replied. “It’s up to him to organize his life. He has to learn for himself that he can’t do everything.” He disappeared behind the paper again.

“Couldn’t you at least give him a lift?” persisted Mum. “I mean - just look at all the stuff he’s got to take.”

Dad reluctantly lowered his paper again, and for the first time that morning looked straight at Alan. “He hasn’t *got* to take any of it,” he said coolly. “I wouldn’t mind if he was a good footballer or a good musician. But he isn’t. He’s just wasting his time and everybody else’s. If he concentrated more on his school work and less on all the other things...”

Dad let his sentence die in mid-air, like Alan’s hopes that one day he would do something that would impress his father.

“Go and clean your teeth, Alan,” Mum said.

Alan left the kitchen, closing the door behind him so that he wouldn't hear his mother's whispered pleading and his father's cold rationality.

“That's the trouble with you,” said Dad, turning round in the driver's seat to watch as Alan shoved the last bag onto the back seat of the car. “You don't think before you take on all these things.”

Alan got in and fastened his seat belt as Dad backed the car smoothly out of the driveway and accelerated out of the village.

“It's not as if you're *good* at any of it,” said Dad as they sped past the endless flat fields of sugar beet. He sounded genuinely puzzled. “For instance, why do you bother with football? You haven't been picked for the team all season - so what's the point?”

Alan sat silent as always. It was impossible to explain to Dad. Dad had been captain of his school and college football teams, a county gymnast and a member of the county colts cricket team. Mr Gates, the games teacher, and Miss Pine, the music teacher, both said it was taking part that mattered; trying your best. Dad believed that the only point in doing anything was winning.

“You're just wasting your time and energy,” Dad continued. “You can't spend your whole life messing about. You have to concentrate on what you're good at. Though in your case that doesn't amount to much....”

Alan's thoughts drifted away as Dad warmed to his theme. ‘*Maybe today,*’ he thought, ‘*I'll play the cello brilliantly. Maybe today I'll be picked for the team and show everyone. Maybe today I'll do something to make Dad say: “Well done, son - I'm proud of you!”*’

ii.

“Who’s making that dreadful noise?” asked Miss Pine.

Alan felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“Alan - play D,” said Miss Pine.

Alan drew his bow across the strings. A horrible cacophany came out. All the other children in the room sniggered.

“No, no , *no!*” groaned Miss Pine. “Like this...” She drew her bow across the string. It made a warm, low note like hot chocolate. “Now you try, Alan.”

Alan drew his bow across the strings again. It made a harsh sound like a porcupine scratching its quills.

“Have you practised this week?” asked Miss Pine suspiciously.

“A bit,” admitted Alan. He could hear again Dad yelling up the stairs: *‘For heaven’s sake, stop that dreadful noise! It sounds as if you’re murdering a cat up there!’*

Miss Pine sighed. “I told you all last week. You *must* practice. You can’t learn to play by magic! And if *you* don’t want to practice, Alan, there are plenty of others who do.”

She paused to let the message sink in.

“Now, all of you - once more: D...”

iii.

“Right, Alan - you’re playing!”

Alan’s heart gave a lurch.

“Sir?”

“I said: you’re playing,” Mr Gates the games teacher repeated. “Paul Stoddart’s away, you’re the reserve, so you’re playing - on the wing. Here’s your shirt -”

He flung the blue and white shirt across the changing room. Alan made a grab for it and dropped it on the floor.

“Oh, no! Sir, you can’t! You can’t play him - he’s useless!”

Alan looked up. Lee Spalding, striker of the Under-13s came rushing across the changing room. His normally high-pitched voice was raised even higher in a familiar whine of protest.

Mr Gates closed his eyes. “Give me patience,” he muttered. Being competitive was important, but Lee took it too far. For Lee every match was a matter of life and death. And this was how Lee behaved on the field every time a decision went against the team. Mr Gates had been proud of his record; he’d never had a player sent off from any team he’d managed - until Lee. And Lee had been given two red cards this season for arguing with the referee. *‘If only’*, thought Mr Gates, *‘he wasn’t so talented.’* If only Lee hadn’t scored 46 goals this season. Mr Gates knew that without Lee the Under-13s would be bottom of the County Schools’ League. It was a shame that Lee knew it as well.

“Look, Lee,” said Mr Gates patiently, “it’s the last game of the season and we’re playing Sefton Mallett.” He paused hoping the message would get through to Lee. It was a long-established tradition that every season

Sefton Mallett turned up and were ritually slaughtered by what looked like a cricket score.

“Alan’s turned up to every practice session this season,” Mr Gates continued. “He deserves a game for that reason alone.”

“But, sir - you can’t!” Lee interrupted. “He’s hopeless - you *can’t* play him!” Lee’s sharp features looked more weasel-like than ever. He looked and sounded as if he as about to burst into tears.

“Lee- that’s enough!” Mr Gates raised his voice. “I run this team, not you! If I say he’s playing, then he’s playing - understood?”

“But, sir -”

“I said that’s enough, Lee. “ Mr Gates turned away and addressed the ten other boys. “Get changed all of you. You’ve only got five minutes before kick-off.” He turned and walked into the tiny private changing room-come office and shut the door firmly behind him.

Lee threw one of his boots across the changing room.

The door to Mr Gates’s room was flung open. “Any more of that Lee,” bellowed Mr Gates, “and *you* won’t be playing! We’ll go out there with 10 men.”

Lee didn’t answer. His face was contorted with rage and frustration.

Mr Gates slammed the door to his inner sanctum.

Lee turned on Alan. “You stay out on the wing, and out of my way - d’yer hear? If you do one thing wrong - just one - I’ll have you. Understood?”

Lee's voice was spiteful and threatening. He glared down at Alan. As he turned to go back to his place on the far side of the changing room, Lee collided with the cello, which was propped against the wooden bench next to Alan. The instrument in its black wooden case overbalanced and fell to the floor with a crash.

"Hey!" protested Alan as he lifted up the cello and propped it against the bench once again.

"Just stay out of my way!" spat Lee.

Alan pulled on his right boot and began to lace it up. He felt excited and worried at the same time. This was what he'd wanted all season, a game at last. But Lee had been right; he wasn't any good. That was what Dad said as well.

'Maybe,' thought Alan, *'it'll all be different this time.'* Maybe the excitement of actually playing in a match would give strength to his spindly legs? Alan imagined himself running down the wing and firing over a curling cross that twisted out of the goalkeeper's reach. He imagined Lee apologizing to him after the game: "Cor, I never realized you could play like that!"

iv.

"What did I tell you?" screamed Lee. "It's all your fault!"

"I...I...I..." Alan stammered.

Beeep!

The whistle blew again. "Stop bickering, you two!" shouted the referee. "Free kick to Sefton Mallett!"

"It's not fair," thought Alan. He hadn't *meant* to handle the ball. It had come flying towards his face and he'd instinctively put up his hand to protect himself. It hadn't been a deliberate foul, it was *accidental* handball. Accidental handball was allowed in all the games on the playground, so why were the rules different here? Anyway, it hadn't been an opposition shot that Alan had handled, it had been a pass from Lee to a player behind Alan that Alan had happened to wander into.

Alan walked back to where Lee was organizing the other players into a defensive wall in front of the goal.

Lee turned round. "I thought I told you," he snarled. "Stay out of the way - you've done enough!"

Alan positioned himself a few yards to the left of the wall. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It would all be OK. The Sefton Mallett players were no better than he was; they'd be lucky to find a player on their side who could kick the ball as far as the wall, let alone score.

Beeep!

As Alan expected, the Sefton Mallett forward miscued the ball. It slewed to the right and trickled reluctantly to Alan's feet.

"Now!" yelled Lee, as the wall broke. "Fast break!" He began scampering upfield .

Alan stood where he was with the ball at his feet.

"Pass!" screamed Lee. "To me!"

Alan kicked the ball as hard as he could. It landed in front of the Sefton Mallett forward, who seemed as confused as Alan as to what was going on.

Alan and the Sefton Mallett forward just looked at each other.

“Get him!” yelled Ricky, the goalkeeper.

Alan realized that this was his chance to make amends. The Sefton Mallett forward made his move. *‘An open goal, and I’m the only one who can stop him!’* thought Alan. *‘I’ll be a hero at last!’*

The Sefton Mallett forward crossed the line into the penalty area as Alan closed in. The forward raised his foot to shoot as Alan lunged at the ball.

Alan heard the crunch a split second before the searing pain shot up his leg from his ankle. The Sefton Mallett forward toppled over and collapsed on top of Alan.

Beeep!

The pain in his ankle bought tears to Alan’s eyes, but even through the pain he knew that he’d stopped a certain goal.

“Penalty!” yelled the referee, pointing to the spot.

The referee ran over to where Alan was lying, gripping his ankle. “And as for you...” he said sternly. Alan looked up, and through his tears saw a yellow card being waggled in front of his nose.

v.

Alan sat in Mr Gates’s chair holding a cold, soggy mess of wet paper towel against his ankle.

The door opened and in came Mr Gates. "How's it feeling now?"

Alan sniffed and shrugged. The pain was duller, less sharp and more of a nagging ache.

"Can you get your shoe on?"

Slowly Alan inched on his trainer, biting his lip as the pain bit into his ankle. When the pain had subsided, Alan gingerly tied up the lace. Funny, his right foot seemed to have grown half a size.

"Hmmm," murmured Mr Gates, thoughtfully. "I don't think anything's broken - but you'd better go to the hospital first thing tomorrow and get it x-rayed just to make sure. And I'd better ring your mum or dad and get them to pick you up. It's six o'clock, will anyone be at home?"

'Ring up Dad? Oh, no!' thought Alan. He'd be annoyed at being disturbed, but worse than that, Alan could just imagine what he'd say when he found out what had happened. No, Alan decided, even if he couldn't do anything else he could show Dad that he could cope.

Even when he was injured. Even if he couldn't be a hero, he could at least show he was brave. Dad had always been a great one for being brave and not crying or complaining when you got hurt.

"That's OK," said Alan, with a weedy smile. "I can manage on the bus."

Mr Gates looked doubtful.

"I'll be fine, thanks, sir," said Alan.

Alan dragged himself, his cello and his bag up the steps and onto the bus. He hauled the cello into the luggage beside the door.

“Strewth!” said the bus driver. “You’ve got a big fiddle there, son - bet it ain’t easy to get that under your chin.” He laughed heartily. A couple of the passengers near to the door smiled.

“Half to Barrington, please,” said Alan, trying to pretend he hadn’t heard the feeble joke. The pain in his ankle was a lot worse from waiting for half an hour for the bus.

‘Sorry, son, we don’t go to Barrington at this time of night,’ said the driver, tapping his watch as though Alan might be unfamiliar with the words *time* and *night*. “You’ll have to get off at Oakshott and walk.”

Alan felt a great weary wave of misery sweep through him. Oakshott! That meant a half-mile walk. A half-mile walk with all his gear and his ankle! He limped to his seat and gazed into the gloom. It looked as if he had no choice; he would have to ring Dad from Oakshott and ask him for a lift.

Alan sat and watched the darkened fields go past. Now he wasn’t standing on it, his ankle felt much better. No, he decided. He wouldn’t ring his father after all. He could manage on his own. He’d show Dad how brave he could be; he’d show Dad how he could be independent and tough - all the things Dad admired.

vii.

“Where *have* you been?” demanded Mum. “We were worried sick. I was just about to ring the police.”

Mum stood to one side as Alan dragged his cello and his bags up the step and through the front door.

Mum noticed Alan's face. It was pale grey and he was sweating.

"Alan, what's the matter? You look ill."

"Can I sit down for a bit? I played, but I got hurt..."

"Where did you get hurt?" asked Mum.

"My ankle," said Alan. "The right one."

Dad was watching the evening news on TV,

"Trevor, Alan's hurt his leg," said Mum.

"Mmmm," grunted Dad, not turning round.

"Take off your shoe," said Mum.

"Owww!" Alan couldn't help it; unlacing his trainers was agonizing.

"How did you get home?" asked Mum as she helped Alan off with his sock.

"I got the bus but it stopped at Oakshott - so I walked the rest of the way."

"Did you hear that, Trevor - he walked all the way from Oakshott with all his stuff. And this ankle's in a terrible state. I wouldn't be surprised if it was broken!"

Alan's Dad turned slowly round to face Alan. Alan waited for the compliments: "Well done, son. You may not be the greatest athlete in the world, but you've got guts..."

Dad simply cast his eyes up to the ceiling and sighed. He looked at Alan and shook his head.

“When will he learn?” Dad asked no one in particular. “When will he ever learn?”