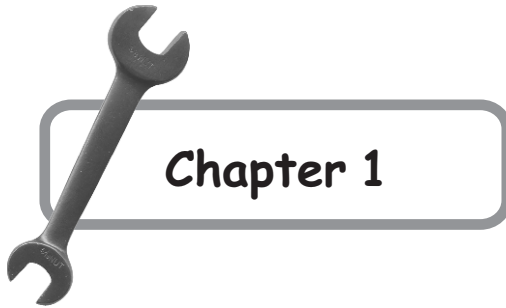


The Riddle of the Fergie and the Fish



“Petard! How was I supposed to know a petard's a bomb?” Ronnie complained. “Why couldn't that Shakespeare bloke speak plain English?”

I laughed. “He did. Four hundred years ago. Things have changed a bit since then.”

“Wow! Four hundred,” he said in an awed voice. “That was a hundred years before the first steam engine.”

“Is that so?” I asked, amused by his view of history. As far as he was concerned nothing of any importance happened in the world before the invention of the steam engine and the Industrial Revolution that followed. “Anyway,” I continued, “you would've known what a petard was if you'd been listening instead of staring out the window.”

“Aah, school's such a waste of time,” he said, kicking away a stone on the path. “The sooner I turn sixteen the better. I'll be outa this joint like a bullet.”

“Yair, well that's still a couple of years away yet,” I said. “So you might as well ...”

“One year and five months,” he interrupted. Attending school was like torture to Ronnie. All he wanted to do was work with machinery. He was planning on becoming an apprentice diesel fitter as soon as he was old enough.

We were passing the car park on our way to the bike

racks. I glanced over and saw that one of the teachers had a problem. The bonnet of his car was up and he was leaning over the engine.

Ronnie also noticed the teacher's predicament. He gave a chuckle and said, "Shakespeare won't be much use to you there, mate."

I saw that it was Mister Fowler whose car was misbehaving. Everyone called him Chook but not to his face, of course. It was he who'd blasted Ronnie earlier in the day for not listening when he'd been explaining the line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* about someone being 'hoist with his own petard.' It was a saying I'd heard adults use and often wondered what it meant. According to Chook it meant that the person was blown up by his own bomb.

"Want to give him a hand?" I asked Ronnie.

"What? Help that loser? You've gotta be kidding. You heard what he called me — a no-hoper."

"I don't think he appreciated you calling Shakespeare a dag, mate," I said. "Come on, you'll probably be able to fix whatever it is. I think we need to make peace here. Ever hear that bit about 'Turn the other cheek'?"

"Is that from *Hamlet* too?" he asked, following as I changed direction. He couldn't resist having a look at an engine, even one in a little Japanese car like Chook's.

Chook was new to Toomaroo High. He'd come as a replacement for our English teacher, Mrs Hopper, who was away having a baby. She'd been popular but he wasn't. He was one of those teachers who just didn't click with his students. His name didn't help him, of course. Some of the ratbags made "bok, bok, bok" hen sounds when he was writing on the blackboard. I felt sorry for him; I could see that he really wanted to pass on his enthusiasm for language and literature to us but he just wasn't getting anywhere. There

had been quite a flare-up in the classroom today.

“Having a bit of trouble, Sir?” I asked when we reached the car.

Chook turned towards us. As soon as he saw who it was an expression of dislike came over his face. I guess he thought we'd come to have a laugh at his misfortune. “Go away,” he said, and turned back to the engine.

Ronnie walked around to the other side of the car, peered into the engine bay, then said, “Double overhead cam; fuel injected. She should go pretty well. What's the hassle?”

“I told you to ...” Chook began angrily.

I cut him off. “Ronnie knows his stuff when it comes to motors, Sir. He lives at the Museum.”

“Museum?” Chook asked. “What museum?”

“The local history museum,” I said. “It's on the north side of town. Ronnie's dad's the manager. They're always fixing up old machines.” As I was saying this I saw Ronnie lean across the mudguard and look into the mass of pipes and wires at the back of the engine. The car was a few years old and in a fairly shabby condition. The engine hadn't been cleaned for a long time. It all indicated that Chook was no lover of machinery.

Chook turned back to Ronnie. “It won't start,” he said. “Nothing happens when I turn the key. Must be a flat battery.”

Ronnie shook his head and reached down behind the engine. He fiddled around with something for a while then withdrew his hand, which was now smeared with black muck. “Give it a go now,” he said.

“That's not where the battery is,” Chook protested. “Even I know that.”

Ronnie had pulled out his handkerchief and was wiping his hand. “Can you just try the key again ... Sir.” It was said in the tolerant way that adults normally use when trying

to reason with a child.

I could see that Chook was unsure how to handle this. A kid he'd been bawling out in the classroom earlier in the day was now telling him what to do.

I stepped over to the driver's door and looked inside. The key was in the ignition switch. I looked enquiringly at Chook. He finally decided that getting home was the priority. He got in and turned the key. The engine started immediately.

I grinned and gave Ronnie the thumbs-up. He'd done it again. Chook was staring at the ignition switch with a stunned look on his face.

Ronnie shoved the dirty hankie back into his pocket and shouldered his bag of books. I joined him and we continued on our way to collect our bikes. "Not bad," I said as we walked side by side. "I don't think he'll be calling you a no-hoper again. What was it?"

"Oh, just a loose connector on the solenoid. One of those junky press-on things. You could see straight away that it'd come off. I just pushed it back into place."

"Wait!" We both turned and saw it was Chook who'd called out. He was hurrying after us. When he reached us he held out his hand to Ronnie and said, "Please. I want to thank you for what you did ... whatever it was."

Ronnie reluctantly took the hand and gave it a brief shake. After freeing his fingers he said, "Even us no-hopers have our uses sometimes."

Chook looked embarrassed. "I should never have said that. I'm ashamed of myself. I apologize. I ... er, things have been difficult lately. But that's no excuse for insulting a student. It's something I deplore in other teachers."

All of a sudden Chook seemed defenceless. I felt awkward witnessing a grown man apologizing to a kid. It was

usually the other way around. Ronnie looked awkward too. He muttered, "Sorry about Shakespeare, Sir. He can't really have been a dag, I guess. Why don't they write his plays in ordinary English, anyway?"

"Oh, that's been done," Chook said. "But it sounds awful. Look, I'm absolutely amazed by how you fixed my car. I've never seen anything like that — even with adult mechanics. You knew where to look and saw the problem immediately."

Ronnie shrugged, "I was just lucky."

Chook looked at me. "You're Simpson, aren't you? The one they call Tip." I nodded, and he said, "You seemed confident he could fix my car. Have you seen him do something like that before?"

"Yes," I said. "And it wasn't luck. He thinks like a machine. Even the old blokes at the Museum reckon he's a wizard at diagnosing problems."

Chook turned back to Ronnie and stared at him. Finally he said, "No wonder Shakespeare bores you." He then addressed me: "And you, Mister Simpson — you and the blonde girl, Dyson — I assume you're loyal friends of his, judging by the way you both stood up for him in the classroom."

I nodded, recalling how Barbie had torn a strip off this teacher for his abuse of Ronnie. The rest of the class had thought it good entertainment but not me. "Her name's Barbara," I said. "She, ah ... gets a bit stirred up sometimes."

He grinned. "You can say that again. Are all three of you involved with the Museum?"

"We're all members," I said. "It's a great place. Not just old machines, there's lots of other stuff as well. There's a good collection of books and old documents. You should check it out sometime."

“I might just do that,” he said.

“If you come,” Ronnie said, “I’ll tighten that connector on your starter. “It just needs a squeeze with the pliers.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Chook said. “Well, I’ll see you both in class tomorrow.” He gave us a wave and went back to the car. Ronnie and I continued on our way to the bikes.

“You’re good at that sort of stuff, aren’t you, Tip,” Ronnie said.

“What stuff?” I asked.

“Oh, you know? Making peace. Chook reckoned we were his enemies earlier on. Now you’ve got him on side.”

“I guess I felt he deserved a break,” I said. “Everyone’s been giving him a hard time, with the chook noises and that. He’s not a bad teacher really.”

“Pity he’s so rapt in Shakespeare,” Ronnie said. “Maybe we can get him interested in tractors or something when he comes to the Museum. Teach him a bit about the real world.”

I laughed. “Like you did with me, huh?” Chook couldn’t have known it, of course, but the fact was that since coming to Toomaroo I’d learnt more practical skills from Ronnie and the other members of the Museum than I’d learnt in all my life before then.

As it turned out, our lives were going to depend on some of those practical skills in the coming weeks.