

A SPOT OF TROUBLE

By Tamaso Lonsdale

The phone tinkled on Marion's desk. She took a moment to save her last data entry before she answered it. 'Accounts receivable,' she said automatically.

'Mrs Turner?'

'Yes.'

'Good morning. It's John McDonald here, Headmaster of West Street High School.'

Marion's thoughts raced to Danny. Something must be wrong with him for the Headmaster to be ringing.

'What is it, Mr McDonald? Is Danny hurt?'

'No, Mrs Turner. Danny's safe. But I'm afraid he's in a spot of trouble.'

Marion's heart lurched. Trouble she did not need. 'What's he done? Mr McDonald?'

'It seems that on the way to school yesterday he had a fight with one of the Seventh Form lads who've just started here. The boy's mother has just been to see me and she's very upset. The boy was not hurt apparently but his new school trousers got ripped in the scuffle and she's demanding that you buy a new pair.'

Marion sighed. Keeping Danny in clothes was more than enough without buying pants for some other kid. There was no time for lengthy discussion now. She was not supposed to have private calls except for emergencies.

'Could you give me the woman's name and address, please, Mr McDonald? I'll go around and see her this evening.'

The Headmaster gave the details and continued on about how unfortunate it was that older boys like Danny should pick on the young ones just coming into High School. Marion cut him short as politely as possible and resumed her work thinking of what she would say to Danny tonight.

Danny was indignant when she accused him of fighting and bullying a younger boy.

‘Hell, Mum! We weren’t fighting! You should see this kid! He’s twice my size! There’s no way I’d pick a fight with him. There was just a crowd of us walking home and these kids were in front of us and wouldn’t get out of the way. We sort of just barged through them and this kid somehow got tripped over. It wasn’t a fight. Old McDonald gave me six for it and now you’re getting on my back about it.’

Marion was inclined to believe him. Danny was small for his age and had always avoided fights. She didn’t agree with corporal punishment and the thought of him being caned upset her. But, still, there was the matter of paying for the pants.

Danny offered to help with the money he earned from his Sunday morning paper run but Marion knew it would take his entire earnings for the next three months.

‘I’ll go and see the woman. If the pants aren’t too bad maybe I can mend them. And you can come with me and apologise.’

‘Aw, Mum! Not tonight! I’ve got to be down at soccer training at seven. It’s nearly that now! I’ve got to get going!’

Marion sighed. It had been a hard day at work and there were endless household jobs waiting to be done. Single parenthood was a lonely battle.

She decided to go immediately to the address the Headmaster had given her. Luckily it was only a few streets away. Easy walking distance.

On the way she rehearsed her little speech of apology for her boy's bad behaviour and felt confident that she would be able to come to a friendly arrangement with the other boy's mother. She knocked on the front door and wondered if anyone would hear it above the blare of the television. She waited and then knocked again, louder.

A voice inside yelled: 'Okay! Hold your horses! I'm coming! Don't knock the door down!'

The door was suddenly opened by a very large woman with beery breath and bloodshot eyes.

'Who are you?' she snapped.

Marion tried to smile. 'I'm Marion Turner. Are you Mrs Riley?'

'That's me! Turner? Are you the mother of that bully what knocked my boy down and wrecked 'is new school pants?'

Marion nodded and started to speak but was not allowed.

'Downright shame, I call it! Bloody Ninth Formers think they own the school and can do what they like with the young uns comin' up. How am I s'posed to buy 'im another pair of pants? Tell me that!'

Marion tried again. 'Could I see the pants, Mrs Riley? Perhaps I could mend them.'

'Mend them! If you think my boy's goin' to school in patched pants, you've got another think comin', my lady! Your kid ripped the pants and it's up to you to replace them. Bloody bully! How old is 'e?'

'Nearly sixteen,' said Marion defensively.

'Sixteen! An'my Tom's only thirteen! Ya must be bloody proud of 'im, I bet! 'Im and 'is gang! Beatin' up the new kids! I told that 'eadmaster a thing or two, I can tell ya! I just hope 'e walloped yer kid.'

Here Marion interrupted. 'I would still like to see the pants, Mrs Riley. Could you get them, please?'

'Sure! I'll show ya!'

She waddled inside leaving Marion standing at the door listening to gunshots and police sirens on the television and wondering how she was going to escape this situation.

'Ere ya are!' Mrs Riley was back, trousers in hand. She thrust them at Marion. 'Look at that! Brand new pants! Wrecked, they are! I can't be buyin' 'im new pants every week just cause people like you can't bloody teach yer kids 'ow to be'ave.'

Marion took the pants and searched for the damage. At last she found a tiny three-cornered tear on one knee. She couldn't believe that this was what all the fuss was about but she could not find anything else.

'Is this all?' she asked in amazement.

'All!' shrieked Mrs Riley. 'What d'ya mean, all? D'ya want 'em all covered in blood and guts?' She towered above Marion and shook her fist in her face. 'Let me tell you, m'lady. If it'd been any worse I'd've gone to th' cops.'

Marion backed away. 'Mrs Riley, I'm sure I'll be able to darn this little tear so that nobody will ever notice it. I'll take them home and bring them back tomorrow night. If you're not satisfied, then we can talk about buying new ones.'

'An'what's 'e s'posed to wear to school tommorer? 'E 'ad to wear these torn things today.'

'Maybe he could wear jeans for one day. I'm sure the Headmaster would understand.'

'Jeans! 'E can't wear 'is jeans to school! Can't ya fix 'em and bring 'em back tonight?'

Marion shrugged. 'I can try. What time do you go to bed?'

‘About ten. Bring ’em back by ten. They’d better be good, but! Else ya’ll ’avter buy ’im a new pair.’

Marion hurried home. Very carefully she unravelled some strands of thread from the inner seam of the trousers and began the repair. Her hobby was embroidery and her stitches were very neat and almost invisible.

Danny came home and she told him the story of her encounter with Mrs Riley. ‘Wow, Mum! I’m sorry! I’ll come with you and apologise. Maybe that will calm her down.’

‘I doubt it! She’s out for revenge!’

When she had finished the stitching Marion steam pressed the pants.

‘There!’ she said holding them up for Danny’s inspection. ‘Good as new! You can hardly see where the mend is. When he’s wearing them no-one will notice.’

Marion and Danny walked around to the Riley’s house. They could hear the television from the front gate so Marion knocked loudly. The door was opened almost immediately by Mrs Riley smelling even more beery. She took the pants and Marion introduced Danny.

Mrs Riley sniffed. ‘Proud of yerself, I s’pose? Pushin’ other kids around.’

‘I didn’t mean to push him over, Mrs Riley,’ said Danny. ‘And I’ve come to say I’m sorry.’

‘Bit late fer that!’ She was examining the pants and held them up close to the outside light. ‘Not bad! They’ll do till ya can get new ones. ‘Ow soon will that be?’

Marion gasped. ‘I can’t buy new ones! I’ve mended them perfectly. No-one will ever see it.’

At that moment there was a yell from inside the house. ‘What’s goin’ on out there?’

‘Nuthin!’ yelled Mrs Riley. ‘It’s just the woman with the pants. An’ the kid’s with ’er.’

‘This I’ve gotta see!’ said the man. ‘You better come too, young Tom.’ He appeared in the hallway, a huge man with black curly hair and bushy beard, followed by a very large boy, certainly much larger than Danny. Marion and Danny felt dwarfed by the huge trio in front of them. The father took one look at Danny and began laughing. He turned to his son. ‘Ya mean to tell me that yer let this little squirt knock yer down? And y’ve bin whingin’ an’ cryin’ about an ’ole in yer pants? Yer don’t deserve to ’ave pants if yer can’t look after yerself better’n that. Yer can wear ’em the rest o’ the year with a hole in ’em. Might teach yer to stick up fer yerself.’ Marion spoke up. ‘Mr Riley, I’ve mended the pants but your wife seems to think it’s not good enough and wants me to buy new ones.’

‘What?’ roared Mr Riley. ‘Give us a look!’

He searched unsuccessfully in the half-light for the repair until his wife pointed it out.

‘Can’t see where they’ve bin mended! Yer’ve done a great job, little lady. Come in and ’av a beer.’

He looked at Danny. ‘Yer must be able ter ’andle yerself orright, lad. Our Tom’s twice yer size.

‘Ow about yer give ’im a few tips? Come on in an’ ’ave a beer.’

Marion made their excuses and they headed for home. Danny put his arm around her.

‘When I see families like that it makes me glad there’s just you and me, Mum.’

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children’s section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations’ children’s programs.

She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book Skye's the Limit, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest.

She has recently completed the third novel in trilogy form. The first book, Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt! was published in 2002. The second book The Missus was published in 2010 and the third Beyond Darkness in 2012.

Also in 2012, a book of short stories Out of My Mind was published.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine Beyond the Rainbow.

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