Opening extract from

William the Fourth

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FOREWORD

This is a true story. One day, a long time ago, a little boy was staring glumly out of the window of a council flat. It was raining outside and nothing was happening. From the window he could just about see the docks, where there were ships at anchor that had come from all over the world – Africa, India, America, Australia. But this boy had hardly been anywhere. This really was a long time ago, by the way, before the Second World War. The boy had never heard of computers, or jet engines, or even television (no wonder he was bored). Then there was a knock at the door and suddenly it was all excitement – jokes and tea and tears and hugs – because the person at the door was his big brother, a sailor, who had just come back from his first voyage. Imagine him striding into that dark little flat in his crisp white uniform, with a big grin on his face and a massive kitbag over his shoulder. He's kissing his mum and he's telling a few stories. Then he reaches into that massive kitbag and pulls out a present for the little boy. The present is a copy of the book that

you've got in your hand. It's even got the same pictures.

The little boy is my dad, by the way. That's how I know.

His mum (my gran) sees the picture of the disreputable-looking William on the cover and says, 'What's this about?'

'It's about a boy,' says my uncle, winking at my dad, 'a boy who commits depredations.' 'Depredations' is one of those fancy words that they used to use in school reports back then. It comes from the Latin for 'to plunder' – it's the kind of word that William would have loved. I think my uncle said it in a deep voice. He was teasing my gran.

But my dad wasn't listening. He was curled up on the couch by then, half listening to the rain and the merrymaking, but mostly he was laughing at William – at William accidentally having next door's cat put down, at William pretending to be a fortuneteller, and reading Ethel's palm ('You've got a brother, he won't live long').

He was probably puzzled by some parts too (what is going on with all that 'Higher Thinking' malarkey?), but my dad had already learned that you didn't have to understand everything to enjoy something, so he just kept on reading and laughing.

And when he'd finished, he had to have more. So he went to the library and got out some more William. And

that was the start of something. Because from that day on my dad used to read books for pleasure. And that made him clever. And he became a teacher and he passed on that love of reading to me, and I became a writer and, when you think about it, all that began with my Uncle Jim reaching into his kitbag and pulling out that book. So thank you, William. I always thought you had a good heart underneath it all.

Only a year or so after this happened, aeroplanes were dropping bombs on those ships that my dad could see from his window. Houses and shops and churches were burning and exploding. The children were all sent away to the countryside. The big passenger ship that my uncle sailed on was turned into a troop carrier. The war had begun and the whole world changed and kept changing. Whole countries appeared and disappeared. Empires rose and fell. The little boy on the couch became a dad, then a grandad and even a great-grandad. But William carried on being eleven years old. And he carried on being funny. Because although the world has changed, the jokes haven't. They're just as funny now as they were then. Because a good joke is stronger than bricks and mortar and empires, and not just stronger but more valuable too.

Frank Cottrell Boyce

CHAPTER 1

THE WEAK SPOT

'You see,' said Jameson Jameson, 'we're all human beings. That's a very important point. You must admit that we're all human beings?'

Jameson Jameson, aged nineteen and three-quarters, was very eloquent. He paused more for rhetorical effect than because he really needed confirmation on the point. His audience, all under nineteen, agreed hoarsely and unanimously.

They were all human beings. They admitted it.

'Well, then,' Jameson continued, warming to his subject, 'as human beings we're equal. As being equal we've got equal rights, I suppose. Anyone deny that?'

Robert Brown, aged seventeen, in whose room the meeting took place, leaned forward eagerly. He was thoroughly enjoying the meeting. The only drawback was the presence of his younger brother, William, aged eleven. By some mistake someone had admitted William, and by some still greater mistake no one had ejected him; and now it was too late. He gave no excuse for ejection. He

was sitting motionless, his hands on his knees, his eyes, under their untidy shock of hair, glued on the speaker, his mouth wide open. There was no doubt at all that he was impressed. But Robert wished he wasn't there. He felt that the presence of a kid was an insult to the mature intelligences round him, most of whom were in their first year at college.

But no one seemed to mind, so he contented himself with sitting so that he could not see William.

'Well,' continued Jameson Jameson, 'then why aren't we equal? Why are some rich and some poor? Why do some work and others not? Tell me that.'

There was no answer – only a gasp of wonder and admiration.

Jameson Jameson (whose parents had perpetrated on him the supreme practical joke of giving him his surname for a Christian name, so that people who addressed him by his full name always seemed to be indulging in some witticism) brought down his fist upon the table with a bang.

'Then it's somebody's duty to make us equal. It's only common justice, isn't it? You admit that? Those who haven't any money must be given money, and those who have too much must have some taken off them. We want Equality. And no more Tyranny. The working-class must have Freedom. And who's going to do it?'

He thrust his hand into his coat front in a manner reminiscent of the late Mr Gladstone and glared at his audience from under scowling brows.

'Ah, who?' gasped the audience.

'It's here that the Bolshevists come in!'

'Bolshevists?' said Robert, aghast.

'The Bolshevists are very much misjudged and – er – maligned,' retorted Jameson Jameson, with emotion. 'Shamefully misjudged and—' he wasn't sure whether he'd pronounced it right, so he ended feebly, 'what I said before. I'm not,' he admitted frankly, 'in direct communication with Lenin, but I've read about it in a magazine, and I know a bit about it from that. The Bolshevists want to share things out so as we're equal, and that's only right, isn't it? 'Cause we're all human beings, and as such are equal, and as such have equal rights. Well, that's clear, isn't it? Does anyone,' he glared round fiercely, 'wish to contradict me?'

No one did. William, who was sitting in a draught, sneezed and was annihilated by a glance from Robert.

'Well,' he continued, 'I propose to form a Bolshevist Society, first of all, just to start with. You see, the Bolshevists have gone to extremes, but we'll join the Bolshevist party and – and purge it of all where it's wrong now. Now, who'll join the Society?'

As human beings with equal rights they were all anxious to join. They were all fired to the soul by Jameson Jameson's eloquence. Even William pressed onward to give in his name, but was sternly ordered away by Robert.

'But I believe all you do,' he pleaded wistfully, ''bout want'n other people's money an' thinking we oughtn't to work.'

'You've misunderstood me, my young friend,' said Jameson Jameson, with a sigh, 'but we want numbers. There's no reason why—'

'If that kid belongs, I'm not going to,' said Robert firmly.

'We might have a Junior Branch—' suggested one of them.

So thus it was finally settled. William became the Junior Branch of the Society of Reformed Bolshevists. Alone he was President and Secretary and Committee and Members. He resented any suggestion of enlarging the Junior Branch. He preferred to form the Branch himself. He held meetings of his Branch under the laurel bushes in the garden, and made eloquent speeches to an audience consisting of a few depressed daffodil roots, and sometimes the cat from next door.

'All gotter be equal,' he pronounced fiercely, 'all gotter

WILLIAM MADE ELOQUENT SPEECHES TO AN AUDIENCE
CONSISTING OF DAFFODIL ROOTS AND THE CAT
FROM NEXT DOOR.

have lots of money. All 'uman beings. That's *sense*, isn't it? Is it *sense* or isn't it?'

The cat from next door scratched its ear and slowly winked.

'Well, *then*,' said William, 'someone ought to *do* somethin'.'

The Society of Advanced Bolshevists met next month in Robert's room. William had left nothing to chance. He had heard Robert saying that he'd see no kids got in on this one, so he installed himself under Robert's bed, before anyone arrived. Robert looked round the room with a keen and threatening gaze before he ushered Jameson Jameson into the chair, or, to be more accurate, on to the bed. The meeting began.

'Comrades,' began Jameson Jameson, 'we have, I hope, all spent this time in thinking things out and making ourselves more devoted to the cause. But now is the time for action. We've got to *do* something. If we had any money 'cept the mean bit that our fathers allow us we could make people jolly well sit up – we could—'

Here William, who had just inhaled a large mouthful of dust, sneezed loudly, and Robert made a dive beneath the bed. In the scuffle that ensued William embedded his teeth deeply into Jameson Jameson's ankle, and vengeance was vowed on either side.

'Well, why can't I come? I'm a Bolshevist too like wot all you are!'

'Well, you've got a Branch of your own,' said Robert fiercely.

Jameson Jameson was still standing on one leg and holding the other in two hands with an expression of (fortunately) speechless agony on his face.

'Look!' went on Robert, 'you may have maimed him for life for all you know, and he's the life and soul of the Cause, and what can he do with a maimed foot? You'll have to keep him all his life if he is maimed for life, and when the Bolshevists get in power he'll have your blood – and I shan't mind,' he added, darkly.

Jameson Jameson gave a feeble smile.

'It's all right, Comrade,' he said, 'I harbour no thoughts of vengeance. I hope I can bear more than this for the Cause.'

Very ungently William was deposited on the landing outside.

'You can keep your nasty little Branch to yourself, and don't come bothering us,' was Robert's parting shot.

It was then that William realised the power of numbers. He resolved at once to enlarge his Branch.

Rubbing the side on which he had descended on the landing, and frowning fiercely, he went downstairs and

out into the road. Near the gate was Victor Jameson, Jameson Jameson's younger brother, gazing up at Robert's bedroom window, which could be seen through the trees.

'He's up there talkin',' he muttered scornfully. 'Doesn't he *talk*?'

The tone of contempt was oil on the troubled waters of William's feelings.

'I've just bit him hard,' he said modestly.

The two linked arms affectionately and set off down the road. At the corner of the road they fell in with George Bell. William had left Ronald Bell, George's elder brother, leaning against the mantelpiece in Robert's room and examining himself in the glass. He was letting his hair grow long, and he hoped it was beginning to show.

'What do they *do* up at your house?' demanded George with curiosity. 'He won't tell me anything. He says it's secret. He says no one's got to know now, but all the world will know some day. That's what he *says*.'

'*Huh*,' said Victor scornfully. 'They *talk*. That's all they do. They *talk*.'

'Let's find a few more,' said William, 'an' I'll tell you all about it.'

It being Saturday afternoon they soon collected the few more, and the company returned to the summerhouse at the end of William's garden. The company consisted

chiefly of younger brothers of the members of the gathering upstairs.

William rose to address them with one hand inside his coat in an attitude copied faithfully from Jameson Jameson.

'They gotter ole society,' he said, 'an' they've made me a Branch, so I can make all you Branches. So, now you're all Branches. See? Well, they say how we're all 'uman bein's an' equal. Well, they say if we're equal we oughtn't to have less money an' things than other folks, and more work to do, an' all that. That's wot I heard 'em say.'

Here the cat from next door, drawn by the familiar sound of William's voice, peered into the summerhouse, and was promptly dismissed by a well-aimed stick. It looked reproachfully at William as it departed.

'And today they said,' went on William, 'that now is the time for *Action*, an' how we'd only the mean bit of money our fathers gave us; and then they found me an' I bit his leg, and they threw me out, an' I bet I've got a big ole bruise on my side, an' I bet he's got a bigger ole bite on his leg.'

He sat down, amid applause, and George, acting with a generosity born of a sudden feeling of comradeship, took a stick of rock from his pocket and passed it round for a suck each. This somewhat disturbed the harmony of the

meeting, as 'Ginger', William's oldest friend, was accused of biting a piece off, and the explanation, that it 'came off in his mouth', was not accepted by the irate owner, who was already regretting his generosity. The combatants were parted by William, and peace was sealed by the passing round of a bottle of liquorice water belonging to Victor Jameson.

Then William rose for a second speech.

'Well, we're all Branches, so let's do same as them. They're goin' to get equal cause they're 'uman bein's; so let's try and get equal too.'

'Equal with what?' demanded Douglas, whose elder brother had joined Jameson Jameson's society, and had secretly purchased a red tie, which he did not dare to wear in public, but which he donned behind a tree on his way to William's house, and doffed in the same place on his way from William's house.

'Equal to *them*,' said William. 'Why, just think of the things they've got. They've got lots of money, haven't they? – lots more than what we have, an' they can buy anything they want, an' they stay up for dinner always, and go out late at night, an' eat what they want with no one sayin' had they better, or cert'nly not, or what happened last time, an' they smoke an' don't go to school, an' go to the pictures, an' they've got lots more things 'n

we've got – bicycles an' grammerphones, an' fountain-pens, an' watches, an' things what we've not got. Well, an' we're 'uman beings, too, an' we ought to be equal, an' why shun't we be equal? – an' now's the time for *Action!* They said so.'

There was a silence.

'But—' said Douglas slowly, 'we can't just *take* things, can we?'

'Yes,' said William, 'we *can* if we're Bolshevists. They said so. An' we're all Bolshevist Branches. They made me,

'. . . AN' WE'RE 'UMAN BEINGS, TOO, AN' WE OUGHT TO BE EQUAL, AN' WHY SHUN'T WE BE EQUAL . . . ?'

an' I made you. See? So we can take anything to make us equal. See? We've got to be equal.'

Here the meeting was stopped by the spectacle of the Senior Bolshevists issuing from the side door wearing frowns of stern determination. Douglas's brother fingered his red tie ostentatiously; Ronald pulled down his cap over his eyes with the air of a conspirator; Jameson Jameson limped slightly and smiled patiently and forgivingly upon Robert, who was still apologising for William. The words that were wafted across to listening ears upon the Spring breeze were: 'Next Tuesday, then.'

Then the Branches turned to a discussion of details. They were nothing if not practical. After about a quarter of an hour they departed, each pulling his cap over his eye and frowning. As they departed they murmured: 'Next Tuesday, then.'

Next Tuesday dawned bright and clear, with no hint that it was one of those days on which the world's fate is decided.

The Senior Bolshevists met in the morning. They discussed the possibility of getting in touch with Lenin, but no one knew his exact address, or the rate of postage to Russia, so no definite step was taken.

During the afternoon Robert followed his father into the library. His face was set and stern.

'Look here, Father,' he said, 'we've been thinking – some of us. Things don't seem fair. We're all human beings. It's time for action. We've all agreed to speak to our fathers today and point things out to them. They've been misjudged and maligned, but we're going to purge them of all that. You see, we're all human beings, and it's time for action. We're all agreed on that. We've got equal rights, because we're all human beings.'

He paused, inserted a finger between his neck and collar as if he found its pressure intolerable, then smoothed back his hair. He was looking almost apoplectic.

'I don't know whether I make my meaning clear,' he began again.

'You don't, old chap, whatever it may be,' said his father soothingly. 'Perhaps you feel the heat? – or the Spring? You ought to take something cooling, and then lie down for a few hours.'

'You don't understand,' said Robert desperately. 'It's life or death to civilisation. You see, we're all human beings, and all equal, and we've got equal rights, and yet some have all the things, and some have none. You see, we thought we'd all start at home and get things made more fair there, and our fathers to divide up the money more fairly and give us our real share, and then we could

go round teaching other people to give things up to other people and share things out more fairly. You see, we must begin at home, and then we start fair. We're all human beings with equal rights.'

'You're so very modest in your demands,' said Robert's father. 'Would half be enough for you? Are you sure you wouldn't like a little more?'

Robert waved the suggestion aside.

'No,' he said, 'you see, you have the others to keep. But we've all decided to ask our fathers today, then we can start fair and have some funds to go on. A society without funds seems to be so handicapped. And it would be an example to other fathers all over the world. You see—'

At this moment Robert's mother came in.

'What a mess your room's in, Robert! I hope William hasn't been rummaging in it.'

Robert turned pale.

'William!' he gasped, and fled to investigate. He returned in a few minutes, almost inarticulate with fury.

'My watch!' he said. 'My purse! Both gone! I'm going after him.'

He seized his hat from the hall, and started to the door. His father watched him, leaning easily against the doorpost of the library, and smiling.

From the garden as he passed came a wail.

'My bicycle! Gone too. The shed's empty!'

In the road he met Jameson Jameson.

'Burglars!' said Jameson Jameson. 'All my money's been taken. And my camera! The wretches! I'm going to scour the country for them.'

Various other members of the Bolshevist Society appeared, filled with wrath and lamenting vanished treasures.

'It can't be burglars,' said Robert, 'because why only us?'

'Do you think someone in the Government found out about us being Bolshevists and is trying to intimidate us?'

Jameson Jameson thought this very likely, and they discussed it excitedly in the middle of the road, some hatless, some hatless, all talking breathlessly. Then at the other end of the road appeared a group of boys. They were happy, rollicking boys. They all carried bags of sweets which they ate lavishly and handed round to their friends equally lavishly. One held a camera – or the remains of a camera – whose mechanism the entire party had just been investigating. One more had a large wrist-watch upon a small wrist. One walked (or rather leapt) upon a silver-topped walking-stick. One, the quietest of the group, was smoking a cigarette. At the side near the ditch about half

a dozen rode intermittently upon a bicycle. The descent of the bicycle and its cargo into the ditch was greeted with roars of laughter. They were very happy boys. They sang as they walked.

'We've been to the pictures.'

'In the best seats.'

'Bought lots of sweets and a mouth-organ.'

'We've got a bicycle, an' a camera, an' two watches,

THEN AT THE OTHER END OF THE ROAD APPEARED A GROUP OF BOYS. THEY WERE HAPPY, ROLLICKING BOYS.

an' a fountain-pen, an' a razor, an' a football, an' lots of things.'

White with fury, the Senior Bolshevists charged down upon them. The Junior Bolshevists stood their ground firmly, with the exception of the one who had been smoking a cigarette, and he, perforce a coward for physical rather than moral reasons, crept quietly home, relinquishing without reluctance his half-smoked cigarette. In the Homeric battle that followed, accusations and justifications were hurled to and fro as the struggle proceeded.

'You beastly little thieves!'

'You said to be equal, an' why should some people have all the things!'

'You little wretches!'

'We're 'uman beings an' got to *take* things to make equal. You *said* so.'

'Give it back to me!'

'Why should you have it an' not me? It was time for Action, you said.'

'You've *spoilt* it.'

'Well, it's as much mine as yours. We've got equal rights. We're all 'uman beings.'

But the battle was one-sided, and the Junior Branch, having surrendered their booty and received punishment, fled in confusion. The Senior Branch, bending lovingly

and sadly over battered treasures, walked slowly and silently up the road.

'About your Society—' began Mr Brown after dinner.

'No,' said Robert, 'it's all off. We've given it up, after all. We don't think there's much in it, after all. None of us do, now. We feel quite different.'

'But you were so enthusiastic about it this afternoon. Sharing fairly, and all that sort of thing.'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'That's all very well. It's all right when you can get your share of other people's things, but when other people try to get their share of your things, then it's different.'

'Ah,' said Mr Brown, 'that's the weak spot. I'm glad you found it out.'