

Mr Lace – Ruskin's schoolteacher – stood in front of the class and sucked his pencil.

Pencil-sucking was Mr Lace's favourite pastime. Sometimes he had up to five pencils in his mouth at once. Apart from his mouth, he had pencils in all his pockets, behind his ears, and even in his hair.

Mr Lace was tall and thin and always wore a green scarf (even when it was summer) and a flower in his buttonhole (even when it was winter). His most striking feature, however, was not his pencil-sucking or his green scarf or even his flower, but the way he sang his words when he spoke, as if singing along to music no one else could hear.

Ruskin sat at the front of the class. Because he didn't have any friends, no one was sitting next to him.

The only other person to have a whole desk to himself was Elvis Cave. Elvis, however, sat alone because his padded shoulders left no room for anyone else. He spent all his time talking to Sparkey Walnut (who sat at the desk behind) or bouncing his ball.

Da-boinggg! went the ball.

'Heroes, heroes, heroes,' Mr Lace said (or sang). 'What a problem heroes can be. Don't you think, class?'

'Yes, Mr Lace,' the class replied.

Mr Lace ran his fingers through his hair. A few pencils fell to the floor. He picked one up and started to suck it.

'Who is to play our hero?' Mr Lace said. 'That is our problem. And that's why we've got this ...'

Mr Lace indicated something that had been at the front of the class since first thing that morning. No one knew what it was – because it was covered with white sheets – but it was very big.

'Can you guess what's under the sheets?' asked Mr Lace.

'A taxicab?' someone suggested.

'No,' Mr Lace replied.

'A speedboat?' someone else suggested.

'No, no, no,' Mr Lace said, waving his hands in the air impatiently. 'It has something to do with the play.'

The class thought for a while.

'Is it alive or dead?' Sparkey asked.

'Well, it's dead now,' Mr Lace replied. 'But our imagination will bring it to glorious life.'

'A tree?' someone suggested.

'No,' Mr Lace replied.

'A hill?'

'No.'

'A hill alive with ants?'

Mr Lace was desperate now.

'No!' he cried in frustration, more pencils falling from his hair. 'You can't be as silly as this. Think, class! Think!'

Ruskin had guessed what was under the sheets ages ago, but only spoke now.

'A dragon,' Ruskin said in his squeaky whisper of a voice.

Mr Lace looked at him and smiled triumphantly.

'At last!' he exclaimed. 'Of course.'

And he pulled the sheets away, revealing a large green dragon. It was made of paper and chicken wire, with red milk-bottle tops for its eyes and cardboard egg cartons for



the humps on its back. It had claws, sharp teeth, and a tail with a point at the end.

Ruskin shuffled with excitement.

'Right,' Mr Lace said. 'Now you can see what you'll have to confront in the play. Who wants to do battle with the dragon?'

For a moment no one moved.

'Come on,' Mr Lace urged. 'Who's our hero?'

Elvis put his hand up.

'Only Elvis?' Mr Lace asked, glancing at Ruskin.

Slowly, Ruskin put his hand up as well.

'Very well,' Mr Lace said. 'We have two contenders. Ruskin Splinter and Elvis Cave. Ruskin, you can be first. Come up to the front and stand next to the dragon.'

Ruskin's legs were shaking as he walked to the front of the class. The dragon was so big beside him. He felt insignificant in its shadow.

The class started to laugh.

'Shush now,' Mr Lace insisted. 'Give him a chance to say his lines.'

But the laughing got louder.

'Shush, class,' Mr Lace pleaded, waving his hands in the air. 'Give Ruskin a chance.'

But it was no good. The sight of Ruskin standing beside the dragon and wanting to be a hero was just too much for the class. Their laughter grew louder and louder and louder.

Some of them pointed at Ruskin and cried, 'He's so small!'

Others cried, 'He's so thin!'

Others cried, 'His hair's all red and frizzy!'

'Shush now,' Mr Lace yelled. Then he looked at Ruskin and said, 'You'd best sit down, Ruskin. I'm afraid the idea of you playing the hero is making the class laugh so much they might all burst a blood vessel.'

Sadly and slowly, Ruskin walked back to his seat and sat down.

The class stopped laughing.

'Elvis,' Mr Lace said. 'Come up to the front of the class and stand beside the dragon.'

Elvis stood up and bounced his football.

Da-boinggg!

Da-boinggg!

He walked up to the dragon and stuck his finger into one of its paper nostrils.

'I'm not afraid of you,' Elvis said. 'Silly dragon!'

The class started to clap and cheer. They clapped and cheered Elvis every bit as loudly as they had laughed and jeered at Ruskin.

Elvis goaded them on. 'I'm the hero!' he yelled. 'Yeah? YEAH?'

'YEAH!' roared the class. 'YEAH! YEAH! YEAH!'

'Very well,' Mr Lace said. 'Elvis will be our hero.'

Da-boinggg!

Da-boinggg!

Da-boinggg!

