

Just a Minute, Mr Parry-Jones.



P.E.H. Parry-Jones (1892-1942)

In his autobiography, *My Life and Other Games* (1990), Ian Messiter describes how an incident during a history lesson at Sherborne School became the inspiration for the *Just a Minute* radio panel-game:

On one occasion a master known as Mr Parry-Jones, or P-J for short, was telling the form about Edward V, or it could have been Queen Anne. A swiftly changing cloud formation outside the window was far more interesting, brushed as it was with the pink of evening. Suddenly there seemed to be a great explosion under my face. P-J was standing there with his gown wrapped as tightly round him as a sinister black chrysalis wears its chitinous coat... 'Messiter' 'S-s-sir?' ... he brought out his gold hunter watch... 'You will,' went on P-J, 'in sixty seconds repeat what I have been saying...' No words came out, because I had no clue as to what he had been talking about, and the anticipation of my stuttering magnified the silence. He continued, 'And you may not hesitate...' 'I – er – I – er – I...' 'Or repeat yourself.'

Years later, I remembered that frightening scene, and from it came the panel-game which was first broadcast under the name of 'One Minute, Please.' The panel of six had to speak for one minute on a given subject without hesitation, deviation or repetition.

Ian Messiter (1920-1999) came to Sherborne School in September 1934, aged 14, where he was a member of School House, then run by the Headmaster Alexander Ross Wallace. Eight years later, when asked at a job interview for the BBC what he had learnt at Sherborne he said he learned a lot about rugby, cricket, the army, history, gymnastics and Latin, "but nothing which I can use to get a job."

What Ian probably never realised was that he and Mr Parry-Jones had a lot in common. Both of their fathers were members of the Royal College of Surgeons and both had general practices in the Midlands. Mr Parry-Jones' father, Dr Maurice Parry-Jones, had a large private practice in Derby and was consulting physician to the Derbyshire Royal Infirmary; and Ian Messiter's father, Dr Cyril Cassan Messiter, was a surgeon and general practitioner in Dudley.

Dr Messiter assumed that Ian would join the family practice, however, during his last term at Sherborne Ian announced that he would not be following his father to Cambridge and then into medicine, instead he wanted to be a conjuror. Apparently his father replied that there were plenty of ways of going bankrupt which would be a lot more fun than being a conjuror, and when Ian left Sherborne School in July 1937 it was obviously still assumed that he would go into medicine as that is what is written beside his name in the school register. In fact, Ian did for a while become a conjuror, performing under the stage name of 'Cassan the Mystic', before joining the BBC in 1942 as a Recorded Programmes Assistant.

Years later, the memory of Mr Parry-Jones's punishment during the history lesson at Sherborne School resulted in Ian coming up with a panel game in which contestants has to speak for 60 seconds on a subject without hesitation, repetition or deviation. *Just a Minute* was first broadcast in Britain in 1968, and has since become the BBC's longest-running game show.

Ian Messiter died in November 1999, aged 79. But what became of Mr Parry-Jones, the inspiration behind *Just a Minute*? Percival Edward Holland Parry-Jones, who had attended Sherborne School as a boy (Abbeylands 1906-1911) and worked there as an assistant master from 1919 and as housemaster of Abbey House from 1928 to 1942, died on 6 February 1942, aged 49.

The Headmaster of Sherborne School, Alexander Ross Wallace, gave the following tribute to Mr Parry-Jones in the School chapel on the 8 February 1942:

It is indeed a responsible office which I undertake this evening in telling you something of the extent of the loss which Sherborne has suffered in the death of Edward Parry-Jones. It is hard to believe that there are about a hundred boys here who have never seen or known him, because he was for the rest of us always one of the great outstanding figures of this place. For the benefit of newcomers I should like to recall something of his own schooldays at Sherborne.

He came to the School in 1906 and when he left it five years later he was a prominent member of the Sixth Form, Captain of the School XV in his third year in the side, and a silver medallist and School representative in the Public Schools Boxing. This early athletic promise was amplified in his undergraduate days at Cambridge both on the river and on the football field.

Then came the War, a Commission in the South Wales Borderers and a distinguished military career during which he was wounded in France and attained his Captaincy before returning to his old School to which he has given his whole life and love with its wonderful virility and strength and sanity.

I have spoken so far largely of his athletic prowess, but it would be untrue both to the man and to the tradition which he loved so dearly to suppose that this came first with him. It certainly did not; it has not even second or third place. The great attractiveness of his personality lay in his remarkable combination of hardness and sensitiveness, of strictness and a real sympathy, of discipline and love. It would be a very superficial acquaintance which could associate him only with athletic success and physical prowess, great though these were.

His was a fine and sensitive spirit that contributed much to the rich store of Sherborne scholarship particularly in music. Not only was he himself possessed of a very fine baritone voice, but he made his house and his home a great centre of music, and the effect of all this as a refining and cultural influence in Sherborne is not easy to estimate.

His outstanding qualities as a teacher are too well known to many of you to need further emphasis, and though he drove his boys and made them work as perhaps few School master have been able to do, it was not mere slave driving; for here again his astonishing combination of hardness and sensitiveness showed itself. His boys at least knew that if he drove them hard he drove himself still harder, for he was supremely conscientious. Indeed I believe that he exhausted himself and his reserves in his effort to do just that 'extra bit' which he felt the war claimed from everyone.

He had a discriminating and almost faultless taste in all matters not only of musical but also of literary appreciation, as those who were privileged to hear his paper read about three years ago to the "Duffers" Society will readily acknowledge. But it was perhaps as a Housemaster that he was really at his greatest, and I use the word deliberately for such I know him to have been a really great Housemaster, sent, I believe, to carry on the famous tradition of his father-in-law in this place in a way which won him a reputation far beyond the frontiers of our School.

He knew, if anyone ever did, how to combine hard discipline and sympathy, and with it he combined, as his boys know well, a great and tender love for his house and his boys and his Old Boys, which was returned and is returned in overflowing measure.

No one who has seen him swinging back from a walk on a Sunday afternoon with his Prefects, or has heard what his Old Boys write and think about him can be in any doubt of this. I know it because I can recall with gratitude the many occasions on which he would drop round for a pipe over which to discuss some difficult case or some problem of School administration: and always at these times I was struck by the shrewdness of his judgment, his breadth and sanity of mind and his wonderful sympathy with the wrong-doer.

He was indeed greatly loved by the overwhelming majority, not indeed by all. The slacker, the shifty, the slovenly, the slipshod, the vulgar and the blatant, these all avoided him – and wisely. Again it was in this wonderful combination of hard discipline and sympathy that lay the secret of his inspiration, because he was and is an outstanding example of what real Christianity can be, as opposed to the bogus imitation seen in the simpering saints of our Victorian stained glass windows. It is one of the most difficult things in the world, as every Schoolmaster knows, to rid the minds of boys and men of the common fallacy that Christianity is something soft and sentimental and effeminate, to persuade them that it is hard and virile and heroic; but the task is made comparatively easy when there are men like Edward Parry-Jones about the place.

No one could say that he was soft and effeminate. Soft and effeminate men do not represent their Schools at Boxing and Rugby football. Soft and effeminate men do not produce houses like Abbey House, and equally clearly no one can deny that he was an avowed, faithful, practising Christian. He never paraded his Christianity – he never concealed it. It was just there.

I suppose he had his faults. We all have; but it would need a far more critical mind than mine to sum them up and to analyse them. I know we did not always agree. We had indeed some blazing rows more than once. The occasions do not matter and the reasons why I can recall them without regret is that they never left any bitterness behind.

One day, when he had just returned home for the last time, I said to him how stupid these old differences of ours now seemed, and he replied, "No, I don't regret them, Chief, they have not separated us but brought us closer together." That was the man's secret. He harboured no meanness and no malice, and whatever others may think of the term and its justification I believe myself and shall go on believing that he was of the stuff that saints are made of and I am not alone in that belief.

If you were to ask the doctors and nurses who attended him through his last long illness you would find they would agree. Think for one minute what he had to face. Struck down almost at the zenith of his powers by this sinister and inscrutable disease, he was told as long ago as last November of the unanimous, irrevocable verdict of his doctors, confirmed some days later as the result of a painful operation. His first thoughts on regaining consciousness from the anaesthetic were never for himself but for others, his wife and his family and his school: and never throughout the whole of that dreary time of waiting through the grey Autumn days did any word of complaint or petulance pass his lips. Nothing but gratitude and praise for the skill and attention bestowed upon him; nothing but absolute loyalty right up to the very end.

I will not disturb you by telling you of his sufferings so patiently borne. What hurt him most was the thought of leaving his family and his school. Death for himself he feared not at all. He gazed straight into the face of that dread enemy long and unflinchingly. "If I could only work", "If I could only get back to the Courts just once," these were the cries of anguish which were wrung from his tortured mind. Mercifully towards the end the curtain of darkness dropped for the greater part of the time over his mind, but even then the mention of a boy's name in his house or of some School matter which interested him keenly brought back to the surface the old fire and enthusiasm.

Such is the man whom we love, whose loss we have to mourn. What his passing must mean to his family we can only dimly guess, for his life in the gentle intimacy of the domestic circle was always a perfect picture of what a Christian home should and can be.

The news of his passing will echo far and wide over this country and over the seven seas, indeed wherever Shirburnians foregather and it will mean to all of them a sense of bitter personal loss. It is to his colleagues that perhaps it must mean even more, for we were, up to the time of his illness, so much in daily contact with him and so used to relying upon his strength and wisdom. If it is not impertinent I should like to take this opportunity of paying a tribute of personal gratitude. A Headmaster's lot, particularly when he first takes up office, is no bed of roses. He is quite rightly and inevitably the target for a mass of criticism, personal and official, and he is apt sometimes to feel an intense loneliness. So situated he looks eagerly for those upon whom he can rely for support. I have been more than fortunate and never more fortunate than in Edward Parry-Jones, and I can never forget how often he has stood up to defend me against attack.

I knew in dealing with him that if there were anything wrong he would come and say so outright. I have a horror of Committee Government, but it would be a terrible loneliness if one had not staunch and loyal friends upon whom one could rely for sound advice from time to time upon the many problems that confront us in this place. Such was he, and I have come more and more to rely upon his sanity and his good taste and judgment, among, I am happy to say, many others in this place. So in taking leave of him I am reminded at once of another great character, not in real life but in fiction, and that is the character known as Mr Valiant-for-Truth in Bunyan's great classic. May I read to you the description of his going? I think you will see the aptness of the passage.

"Then, said he, I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I go hither, yet now I do not repent of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battle who will now be my rewarder." When the day, that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside into which as he went he said, "Death where is thy sting?" and as he went down deeper he said, "Grave where is thy victory?" So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."