

## April Fool's Day

by Pete Humphreys

Danny Applewhite was developing into a rather arrogant young man. True, he was among the top five achievers at his school, but he was the only one of them who would regularly remind the other 150 students at St. Cuthbert's of this fact. Yes, he was a keen mountaineer, probably the best for his age in the county, but he sometimes forgot to thank those people who guided, supported or dragged him up towards his latest peak. Danny's artwork was proudly displayed along school corridors but the minute anyone stopped him to say 'well done' he would tell the viewer not to get too close to his designs, in case they damaged them somehow.

It was late March and Danny was studying the flowers on the route between his parents' house and school. Rollo lived next door and because their parents were friends Danny was forced to walk in with him. Rollo was not like Danny at all. That morning Danny had been forced to wait while his classmate found the correct books, clothes and sportswear from those littering the messy bedroom floor. In comparison, Danny always packed his briefcase the night before, carefully arranging his pocket computer, homework and the sandwiches made by his mum to strict organic specifications.

'What are these ones Danny?' asked Rollo, pointing to some tall plants with yellow, shell-like heads. 'Ah,' said Danny, pausing, as if extracting the name from a locked box deep inside his brain, 'they're Vanillius Seasidicus.'

'Really,' said Rollo, impressed, as usual, by his friend.

Danny swung his briefcase happily, deflecting some Spring sunshine into Rollo's wide eyes, and thought how easy it was to fool people who didn't read books. Poor Rollo, perhaps one day he would catch up. Until he did Danny would make sure his parents always told Rollo he was out if he called for Danny in the evening.

When they arrived at the sandstone wall that marked the edge of the school grounds, Rollo adjusted his glasses in that nervous way of his, and Danny, anticipating the question, had time to prepare his excuse. 'Meet you for lunch?' 'I can't Rollo,' and while speaking Danny touched his nose to suggest some kind of mystery, 'things to do. I'm booked into the technology lab.'

They parted at the elaborate school gates. Made of iron, the ornamental spikes that topped the gates had already punctured some unfortunate footballs that now sat there like cartoon heads. Danny shook his own, baffled by the silly games his schoolmates played. Maybe some serious lab work was exactly what he needed to stimulate that busy brain of his.

The day was drawing to a close at St. Cuthbert's and in his small office Mr Samson was squinting at the year eleven course-work he had to grade by the start of next month. Even when he shielded his eyes from the late afternoon sun, a confused look often remained on his face. His students certainly had a strange idea of History. When the deputy-headmaster saw Applewhite at his door, smiling in that slightly superior way of his, he was more than willing to be distracted.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Applewhite, can I help?'

Danny took a deep breath.

'It's something of immediate importance, Mr Samson, that will affect the whole school for the next few days.'

'You better tell me what's happening.'

Danny went on to explain the results of his lunchtime research. He had received advanced warning, the bewildered Samson was told, that the internet was to be shut down from midnight on the 31st of March until midday on the 1st of April. Why? Because of essential cleaning work. Apparently all those e-mails he had been sending concerning school discipline, all those catch-ups with relatives in Australia, had in some small way contributed to a global cyberspace that was now completely full up with invisible junk.

'But who'll do this job?' asked the deeply confused, heavily bearded teacher, 'You, Applewhite?'

Danny gave a brief laugh.

'No sir, not me. An international team of scientists has developed five very special, highly efficient internet robots. They'll be smuggled onto the net inside special data packages.'

Sometimes Mr Samson would like to have been smuggled back into the past, a place he knew and taught so

well. He often imagined living as a medieval knight or simple farmer somewhere. Now was such an occasion.

He thought for a moment then said:

'I better send an email to warn –'

But Danny interrupted.

'Best not to sir, more for the robots to clean up. You leave it to me, I'll tell everyone to shut down the school computers straight away.'

When Danny and Rollo walked to school two days later only one of them was smiling.

'It's not fair,' said Rollo, 'Without computers I can't play Drag Racer on-line anymore. I miss my racing friends in China. The boys all make me play football now and my glasses have been broken three times.'

Rollo pointed to the tape that secured the muddy lenses of his glasses in place.

'Why don't you do something useful, Rollo – read a book. I've read six since the computers were off.'

April the first, how Danny loved this date. This time last year he had spread a rumour around the school that it was a non-uniform day at St Cuthbert's. All his foolish schoolmates had been punished for their appearance. And some of the fashions! Rollo had dressed in a ripped black T-shirt and worn an earring! Why couldn't they all accept that the best way to dress was in a well-ironed shirt and tie, like him?

Danny's first surprise of the day came at the school gates when Lucy Lang, captain of the girls' football team, deflected a ball towards them.

'Hey, kick it back then. We've got a game to finish here,' she yelled.

Despite his damaged glasses and the innocent expression on Lucy's face, Rollo sensed that something wasn't right. Turning to his friend he quickly warned him not to touch the ball.

'Don't be daft, Rollo, it's a stupid game but I still know how to play it. Watch this – I'm aiming for the roof of the arts block.'

Although Danny's technique matched his ambition and his shoelaces struck the ball dead centre, what happened next is rarely seen in the professional game. As foot met leather an explosion occurred that left Danny's entire right side covered in a sticky yellow substance – a thick and gloopy custard fresh (but not very) from the school's infamous canteen.

'April fool!' shouted Lucy at the top of his voice.

Danny didn't mind the custard but he'd never been called a fool before. Somehow he had also lost his watch. It was only a cheap one but it wasn't like him to lose things so easily. He glared up at the school clock – 9am. Three hours to go. Danny regained his cool. After all, he would have the last laugh minutes before the midday deadline when, according to the rules, any person still fooling others became the fool.

By the 11 o'clock break Danny was feeling much better. Mr Samson was walking towards him across the yard, and he suspected he was about to learn his excellent History grade.

'Dreadful work, Applewhite, really amateurish, I'm going to have to give you extra assignments.'

Like Lucy's, these were words Danny had not heard before and he was surprised to find his cheeks were burning red.

'But sir,' he protested.

Mr Samson winked at Danny as he turned away.

'April fool's – you make sure you're as sharp in person as you are on the page,' he advised.

In seconds Danny proved his sharpness – quickly seeing that Samson was walking directly towards an open drainage hole in the yard. The juniors had been fishing again.

'Mr Samson! Look out!'

The teacher smiled.

'You can't fool me that easily Applewhyyyyyyyyyyyy!'

And he was gone. When Samson opened his eyes he found he was in an underground tunnel, dark and damp. Surprisingly, he felt remarkably content. It would a simpler life down here, he thought, watching a rat watching him, compared to dealing with those strange creatures up above.

Danny asked Rollo for the time. There were ten minutes before midday – it was time for his cunning trick to be revealed. A famous writer was speaking to the entire population of St. Cuthbert's today and everyone was moving into the main hall to hear him read. Knowing a quick route back-stage, Danny positioned himself behind a thick velvet curtain and peeped out at the rows of uniformed children. The writer looked nervous and Danny sympathized – this crowd could turn nasty at any time. Just as the middle-aged man was getting ready to read, Danny jumped out on stage.

'Ladies and gentleman!' he announced. 'More bad news I'm afraid!'  
Some of the younger kids looked scared. At the back the teachers raised their eyebrows. Danny continued:  
'Due to a terrible robot malfunction the internet is closed for another week!'

Danny was laughing so much to himself that he struggled to hear a thin voice addressing him from the third row.  
'No it isn't Danny. You're making it up.'  
It was Rollo.

'What?' Danny turned to the writer, hoping that he might share his exasperated expression.

'I got a text from my friend Yang in China. They've been on the web all week. You're a liar.'

'Rollo, my old friend -'

'And another thing,' Rollo was holding something up. It was Danny's watch.

'It's ten past twelve and you are the fool!'

'Rubbish,' said Danny, determined to win, 'what about the school clock? It says five-to-twelve.'

Mr Samson stood up, still wiping away mud from his trip below ground.

'That was my work Applewhite, I'm afraid – I arranged for the clock to be running 20 minutes fast. Sorry old potato, all part of the fun.'

The whole school was now laughing at Danny. The students who knew about the trick beforehand laughed as long and hard as those who had just found out about it from their friends. Even the famous writer was laughing with the horrible kids and old, bald teachers. Danny decided that when he became an incredibly wealthy businessman he would buy the internet and close it down. But then, looking at Rollo's infectious smile, he thought he might like to get to know his neighbours, far and wide, first of all.

**THE END**

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