

Deanne Kennedy



The Eleven Plus

THE AFFAIR BEGAN ON THE NIGHT OF NOVEMBER THE THIRTIETH, NINETEEN eighty three. Miss Payne, in a private room at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and Mrs. Bascombe in the public maternity ward of the same, both gave birth to sons, at seven thirty on the dot. Miss Payne's son was once heavier, and Mrs. Bascombe's baby had more hair, but apart from that, it was virtually impossible to tell one from the other. Even the nurses, who were used to seeing newborns every day who resembled each other and were quite blasé about this occurrence, shook their head in disbelief, and muttered that it was a good thing the babies were on separate floors, " 'cause strange things does happen sometimes."

Miss Payne, young, attractive, and ambitious, gingerly stretched her arms so as not to put a strain on her still aching body and sighed with satisfaction. She would never have to file another portfolio in another solicitor's office, thanks to Baby Theodore. His father, a partner in a successful law firm would see to that. Mrs. Bascombe, plump, heavy-featured, and no longer young at thirty eight, could not stop smiling. The last of her four daughters was nine years old, and at long last she and Mr. Bascombe had produced a son. Mr. Bascombe held his shapeless felt hat in both hands, and gazed reverently at his wife. Not a demonstrative man by nature, he uttered not a word, but his face said all there was to say. In the noise and bustle of visiting-time in the public maternity ward, he and Mrs. Bascombe could have been alone in the world.

It was time to bring the babies to their mothers to be fed. Miss Payne's attendant nurse was helpful, efficient, and knowledgeable about breast-feeding. Miss Payne was rather less than enthusiastic. This being before the days of the "Baby Friendly Regime", what with young Theodore being rather fractious, and his mother lacking patience at the best of times, a bottle of infants' formula was prepared and brought in, much to their mutual satisfaction. Theodore's father was absent. He was at home with his wife and their children. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bascombe held and suckled little Ondré with practiced ease, quite oblivious of the many visitors and nursing staff on the ward. Mr. Bascombe freed one hand from holding his hat to stroke Ondré's toes which had escaped from the tiny blue and white blanket wrapped round him.

Fate determined that the two mothers should meet. All being well, they were both released two days after the birth of their sons. As Miss Payne waited for the arrival of her taxi, and Mrs. Bascombe

watched for her brother's ancient cream-coloured Morris, it seemed only natural to exchange a few words and show-off their babies to each other. As they drew closer together and simultaneously adjusted the angles of their arms to better display their newborns, it was comical to see the two women, so different to look at, with identical expressions of astonishment on their faces. "But he is de whole uh Ondré!" exclaimed Mrs. Bascombe, who found her voice first.

"Anybody would take them for brothers," affirmed Miss Payne. On discovering that the boys not only shared the same date of birth, but were delivered at exactly the same time, their wonderment increased. Miss Payne even let slip her air of condescension for a moment, at this seeming miracle.

Further conversation between the two women revealed that Miss Payne needed an experienced person to help with Theodore, while Mrs. Bascombe was in urgent need of another source of income to supplement her husband's salary, and help to provide for their five children. Telephone numbers were hastily exchanged as the awaited vehicles slowed down under the covered walkway in front of the hospital.

Thus it was, that exactly three week after the births, Mrs. Mildred Bascombe found herself appointed maid to Miss Yolanda Payne. She was allowed to bring baby Ondré to work, and everybody was well-satisfied with the arrangement. It was just as well that Ondré was such a contented baby, as both women had their hands full with Theodore. He drew up his small knees to his abdomen as pain as choleric wracked his little body. As fast as his formula was in, it was out. Miss Payne blankly refused to try breast feeding after her early failure, despite Mrs. Bascombe's efforts to persuade her, and despite the living, breathing proof of its benefits — little Ondré Bascombe.

Fortunately the choleric disappeared after four weeks and both babies grew apace. It soon became apparent, however, that Ondré was reaching all the milestones of development before Theodore. Whether it was the close contact of his mother as she fed him, the breast milk itself or numerous eager hand and voices around him at home, he smiled, rolled over, sat up, crawled and explored his toys and surroundings long before Theodore. When the differences became too obvious to ignore, Miss Payne first concerned, then anxious, then disturbed, began to change in attitude to Mrs. Bascombe. She began by dropping the "Mrs" when she addressed her, then by adding extra tasks to her already full work load. She took to glancing sideways as the babies played side by side and her expression would sour as Ondré scooted across the smooth parquet tiles as Theodore was content to watch him, then follow at a leisurely pace.

Despite Miss Payne's envious attitude and vindictiveness to Mrs. Bascombe, and Mrs. Bascombe's grim acceptance of the situation, the boys loved each other with a passion seldom demonstrated even in twins. They howled when they were out of sight of each other. Mrs. Bascombe's departure with Ondré at the end of her day's work became a constant battle. Eventually, even the somewhat shallow Miss Payne was touched by their devotion, and grudgingly admitted to herself that it wasn't Ondré's fault that Theodore could not keep up with the other child.

Time passed. It did not seem possible that Ondré and Theodore could be old enough to attend nursery school. For the first time they were separated. Ondré was taken to a Government run day nursery by Mrs. Bascombe before work and Theodore was driven to a private establishment by Miss Payne, in a Toyota donated by his father. "He will get more individual attention there", declared Miss Payne to Mrs. Bascombe, who nodded grimly and said nothing. She needed her salary. All her daughters were now in secondary school.

The boys continued to be fast friends. Miss Payne attributed Theodore's slower pace of learning to "Superior teaching techniques which concentrated on more grounding and repetition". Mrs. Bascombe only nodded.

Then it was time for primary school. Ondré "went cross" to the primary school attached to his nursery. Theodore was registered at a nine hundred dollar a term private school where "the classes were smaller". Mrs. Bascombe nodded.

The boys now resembled each other so much that strangers took it for granted that they were twins, and respective family friends frequently mistook one for the other. They ignored the coldness between their mothers and became closer still.

When Theodore entered Junior Two Miss Payne added lessons once a week to supplement his education and to increase his father's bills. By Junior Three he was attending every day after school. By Junior Four he was going on Saturdays as well. Ondré had always been top of his class. He had joined the Public Library, and did extra work on his own "for fun". Mrs. Bascombe smiled proudly, and again said nothing.

Miss Payne was seriously worried. The eleven plus loomed near. Theodore's father had attended a prestigious school and was expecting Theodore to follow in his footsteps. He also wanted to see some returns for his years of expensive fee paying. Miss Payne no longer had long, carefully manicured nails. They were bitten nearly down to the quick.

By now both boys wore glasses Ondré's myopia was hereditary — Mrs. Bascombe was also shortsighted. Theodore's condition resulted from too many lessons. Naturally the frames were almost identical, the boys insisted on that, although Theodore's cost three hundred dollars and Ondré's less than half of that. His oldest sister was now working and helped to foot the bill.

As the days passed Miss Payne became more and more thoughtful, and as a result Mrs. Bascombe grew more and more worried. In the past, when Miss Payne grew thoughtful trouble usually followed. More efficient cobwebbing could be demanded — Mrs. Bascombe hated spiders — or the ever present threat of forfeited Bank Holidays, or work on Saturday afternoons. Miss Payne had other things on her mind besides housework, however. Yolanda Payne was a woman with her Theodore's future — and her own — constantly on her mind. Mrs. Bascombe grew more apprehensive. She went as far as telling her husband that as the first girl was now working, she would seek a less lucrative job, and they would still manage.

Finally, it was the time for confrontation. Miss. Payne called Mrs. Bascombe into the small study leading from her bedroom, and asked her to sit down. Never during Mrs. Bascombe's years of employment had she been asked to sit down in Miss Payne's study. She was seriously alarmed, as she perched her bulky form on the edge of the indicated chair. Miss Payne began to talk. She talked and she talked. She knew Mrs. Bascombe's position, number of children, and her desire to own a home of her own. As she proceeded, her confident tone faltered, and a pleading note entered her voice. She spoke of Theodore's father, and his expectations of his son. She hinted at diminished income, and the danger of Mrs. Bascombe having to take a cut in pay. Finally she came to the point. She wanted Ondré and Theodore to exchange names on eleven plus day.

Mrs. Bascombe was stunned. Never once, in all her weeks of wondering, had it entered her mind that such a devious plot was afoot. "Miss Payne", she spluttered, "you mad"! Now it was Miss Payne's turn to be stunned. It was the first disrespectful utterance she had ever heard from Mrs. Bascombe in her eleven years of service. "Miss Payne", she continued "if I was suh stupid as tuh do da dey, wuh would happen tuh my son den? Whu bout his school?" "Oh, I would pay for a private school for him. He would do well anywhere. It would mean so much to Theodore's father if he got in for his old school." "Sorry, Miss Payne, but I in doin' nutten so." Mrs. Bascombe was quite adamant. She stood up, squared her shoulders and marched swiftly out of the room. Miss Payne was not giving up so easily. She did not broach the subject again, but instead she bided her time until Saturday, when the boys would be playing together in her house. She knew that they would do anything for each other.

Saturday came. Mrs. Bascombe was sent to purchase a few things that Miss Payne "forgot" to buy. As soon as it was safe the boys were called in and the plan was explained. Ondré was extremely concerned. He knew how his family was counting on him to do well, and did not want to disappoint them. Theodore was simply miserable. He had no desire at all to go to a school where he would have to work hard just to avoid coming last. He visualized having to have extra lessons for the rest of his life. Then, maybe because the situation required desperate measures, Theodore had the first brilliant idea of his life. "Ondré, do it for me. You can always get a transfer or something." Ondré stared at Theodore in amazement. What was he doing? Theodore always told me he wanted to go to a private school where he could work at his own pace and hopefully catch up. Then he saw it. Theodore winked twice. It was their secret sign. They used it again and again when they wanted to go off on their own.

"We're going to talk this over, mum," said Theodore, and away they fled, relieved. The boys did not stop running until they reached the small plywood play house which was at the far end of the back garden. It had been made for Theo some years ago. No one would disturb them there. They dragged two benches from one corner and sat down. Ondré looked at Theodore, anxious and enquiring. Theodore looked back then revealed his plan.

The boys' schools fell within the same catchment area, so they would be sitting their eleven plus at the same secondary school. Theodore's strategy was this — they would pretend to go along with his mother's plan as long as, on eleven Plus day, they were dropped off together at the gates, and then left immediately for "security reasons". They would then join the students from their respective schools. Only afterwards would they exchange places, so it would appear that they had done what Theodore's mother had asked when it was time for them to be picked up. Ondré nodded. He could see how Miss Payne would be fooled, but what about when the results came back. Theodore had thought of that too. "We could say that you had a bad, bad headache, but I suddenly remembered every thing I did at lessons!" Only Mrs. Bascombe would be in on the plan from the beginning.

Eleven Plus day dawned warm and bright. Ondré was quietly confident. Theodore was calm and ready to do his best, especially now that the pressure was off. Afterwards they joined the excited groups of children being claimed by parents and guardians, some of whom had been keeping vigil since early morning. In the excitement nobody noticed the switch, and Miss Payne was happily planning another eleven years of being maintained in the manner to which she was accustomed. Mrs. Bascombe just smiled.

The results were announced. Ondré Bascombe, 225 A, Theodore Payne, 165 C. Ondré would be going to the school of his first choice. Theodore would be traveling miles away to a private secondary school. His father, disappointed but resigned would pay the fees. Miss Payne, now on a much reduced budget, was forced to take a computer course to update her office skills and enter the job market. Mrs. Bascombe was at another place of employment where the pay was good. She was not required to work on weekends and bank holidays. The rest of the family continued to give Ondré all the love and support they could muster. As for Ondré and Theodore, their bond of friendship grew stronger still after their successful ambush of Miss Payne's plans for the Eleven Plus.

