

Lekki Headmaster Chapter Six by Kabir Alabi Garba

Ade as Well as Jide

COMES vs. COME

PEN Days were very important at Stardom Schools. For the management, it was an opportunity to update parents on academic activities. A staff meeting was held prior to each edition. It needed no reminder teachers and non-academic members of staff knew it was a day when they had to look their best, especially because they would have personal encounters with parents. Generally, Stardom encouraged-and in some cases, compelled the teachers to look presentable. Some had even been fired for flouting dress code instructions. At the end of a session, the best-dressed teacher was identified and presented with an award

The event was a promising moment for many teachers too, including the principal. It proved that the reward of teachers did not have to wait till they got to heaven. Some parents came with gifts, in cash and kind, for specific staff, especially class teachers. The Gbavi family was outstanding. Smart Gbavi's mum, Mrs. Vike would gift the school several packets of beverages. Her husband worked in one of the leading beverage companies. But Open Day was also dreaded by teachers because parents often came with trailer-loads of complaints. Any teacher who had offended any pupil, genuinely or otherwise, deliberately or inadvertently, could receive packets of bottled anger.

Mr. Bepo recalled an episode. Mrs. Ibidun Gloss had sent for him, asking him to appear in her office urgently. With her was a parent, Mr. Guta, seated in a chair in front of the MD's desk. Bepo greeted the duo as he walked in. But the MD indicated she did not need any pleasantries. "Where is Fafore, the one that calls himself an English teacher? She asked.

(A few lines are missing here. It is not clear on our one copy. Please do well to look for the few lines here for better understanding of this chapter)

Shocked, the principal looked Mr. Guta in the eye, searching, frantically for a due.

He saw none. Not in Mrs, Gloss' face either. The parent did not betray any sympathy for the teacher about to be flung, out of a job. Rather, he looked calm, reassured and pacified by the sack order.

If there was an instruction Bepo hated, it was issuing a sack letter. He had done so a number of times. The management rarely sacked anyone directly. It executed what he considered the dirty job through his office. He always felt pained when anyone had to lose a job, especially for issues he felt were not grave. There were limey when no one could really help matters: such as in the case of the teacher who, the previous term, was caught altering a student's result for a fee. Some had been sacked for perennial incompetence and child abuse, suspected or proven. Mr. Bep,

remembered that the management, through his office, had also booted out some whom, he believed, were either not seriously guilty or not guilty at all -just hapless victims of circumstance or even conspiracy. Whatever the offence or its magnitude, Bepo always felt a void in his heart every time a colleague lost his or her job. Perhaps, that was because he had experienced joblessness before. He understood what it meant for a family man like Fafore.

What Mr. Bepo considered the most embarrassing moment of his life happened while he was out of job. An ugly situation had forced him out of a school where he worked. He had no savings, and no new employment was in sight. At the height of the financial drought, he 'ate' the N2,500 electricity tariff he collected on behalf of tenants in the crowded face-me-I-face-you house, where he lived in Iyana Ipaja, also in Lagos. To cover up the deed, he lied that he had remitted the cash.

But as the Hausa say, *kullum ta barawo, rana daya ta mai kaya*: every day is for the thief, one day for the owner. One day, NEPA (electricity) men arrived and disconnected the power cable. Then truth dawned on everyone. The furious tenants rained insults, curses and mockery on Oga Tisa, as he was called. The most aggressive complainant, that God- forsaken day, was Iya Mathew, the no-nonsense wife of Mr.

Adio, a co-tenant. The short devil grabbed a full bowl of elubo, cassava powder. Since her hand could not reach the headquarters of his skull, she jumped, rocketing her stumpy frame off the ground, and dunked the bowl on the teacher's head. Immediately, Mr. Bepo became a 'white' man. And as though the cassava flour baptism was not enough, Iya Mathew spontaneously burst into singing:

Oga Tisa, ole! O na owo ina!

Oga Tisa, ole! O na owo ina!

(Mr. Teacher is a thief!

He has spent the electricity tariff!)

"Madam, what is the matter with Fafore?" the principal asked the MD

"Mr. Bepo, please, do what I asked you to, first, then come back later with a query. Or you kuku send the query to me electronically,"

Rather than get to his office and send for Fafore, the principal went straight to the stall room. According to an Igbo proverb, *mmiri oku anaghi ano ogologo oge n'ire*. Meaning that hot water does not stay too long on the tongue. The English teacher was not in the staff room he was in the SS 2 class. That meant Mr Bepo would have to do something he very much detested, stopping a lesson halfway.

"Good morning class" the principal greeted as he walked in. And without taking an excuse from Mr. Fafore he addressed the students: "I need to urgently have a word with your teacher in my

office Be responsible while he is away." And before he could ask "Am I making sense?" some students had teasingly, helped him out while others chered laughingly: "Yes."

Fafore did not like the interruption but he had to obey his boss. He thought about handing over his note to the class prefect, so that the students could copy it. while he attended to the principal. But this was no longer permitted at Stardom. The management stopped it yeurs back after a parent sued the school.

The parent, an accountant with an oil company, learnt that his daughter, who was blessed with very good handwriting was asked to scribble a note on the marker board, for others to copy. He had advanced counts bordering on exploitation. cheating, oppression, and visual exploitation. His lawyers further argued that the teacher was indirectly imposing a career on the girl. According to them, she might become influenced to become a teacher, whereas her parents wanted her to study Medicine. On the allegation of visual exploitation, the parent said the teacher subjected his daughter to corrosive eyes that might have sexually leered at her as she stood in front of the class.

The matter was eventually settled out of court, after a lot of pleas by the school. And while the student was compensated with one tuition-free term, the teacher was suspended without pay for three months. The English teacher remembered the case: the principal too did. Fafore decided to let sleeping dogs lie and even snore as they liked, by leaving the students to themselves.

"Mr. Fafore, what issue do you have with the management?" Bepo asked, earnestly, when both men got to the Principal's Office.

The management..? I have no problem with anyone," Fafore answered.

"When did you get to school today?"

"7:30am."

"Did you flog any pupil?"

"No. I don't cane students."

"Did you have any argument with any parent or the management? Or when actually did you get to school today?"

"Principal, why these questions? Why would I argue with anyone? You know, I hardly come late."

Candidly, the principal knew Fafore hardly arrived late to school. Although he lived quite far away, he planned his itinerary in such a way that he, rather, arrived very early. Like many other members of staff, he could not afford the rent charged in the Lekki area. A two-bedroom flat

could cost more than five million naira, with most landlords demanding two-year rent upfront, besides other expensive charges. Successive governments had tried to compel landlords to charge less and give less stringent terms. Official declarations were made to that effect, but they were rarely enforced or were simply unenforceable. This led some critics to believe the authorities were not sincere. They argued that the same governments that claimed they wanted landlords to charge lower rents were fond of slamming high prices on their housing schemes. When a two-bedroom flat built by the government cost about N10 million,

how would the masses benefit from it?

Despite being a graduate of 22 years, Mr. Fafore's salary remained N175,000.

How could he afford a million naira rent per annum? How could he buy the government's flat, even when all he needed, as initial payment, was a 25 per cent deposit? Besides, residents knew there would be other unadvertised charges.

Fafore's first solution to the housing challenge was to rent a one-room apartment in Ijaye, near the boundary between Lagos and Ogun states, in the Iyana Ipaja axis.

He paid N170,000 per annum. After he got married, he moved further away to Sango, where he rented a mini flat for N300,000 per annum. Three years later, he purchased half a plot of land in Ifo, a little deeper into Ogun State, where he built a two-bedroom apartment. He had barely completed building the facility when he moved in with his family. As a matter of fact, two years after, he had yet to plaster the house and had neither installed a bath nor a toilet. What mattered to him most was the joy that he was no more a tenant. He had become a landlord, a bona fide member of the community's landlord association. He paid rent no more. He lived no more in fear of landlords who often behaved like land gods. The only sacrifice he made daily, to guarantee punctuality at Stardom, was permanently maintain shorter nights at home. He woke up latest 4:00am and set out for school at 4:30am. Thus, he would get to the premises by 6:00am, rest his head on his desk, and snooze for about an hour before his colleagues arrived. There were about five teachers who ran a similar schedule, living in the Ifo, Ojo and Ofada axes of neighbouring Ogun State. The principal was aware of these and should, ordinarily, not have raised any query pertaining to lateness.

Fafore had, indeed, twice won the Most Punctual Teacher Award.

"I am sorry, I have to bombard you with these questions," Bepo said, relaxing a bit. "But there is a problem, a major problem. The MD called me to her office. She is very angry. Livid. By the way, I wonder if you had any argument with Mr. Guta, the father of Dorah in SSS 2 and Nicholas in JSS 2".

Fafore said he had no discussion with him, let alone an argument. "He came to the class. He checked his son's books and said nothing before he left. Well, it seemed he left abruptly. Perhaps, angrily too, given the way he stormed out. He did not have any word with his son or me..."

"Definitely, there is a problem. The MD says you have to go."

"Go? Go where?"

Fafore crashed into the sofa at the office. Sacked? How? Why? Questions raced through his mind. His thought flashed to his home, where his wife was heavily pregnant. He had also yet to complete the payment of his children's school fees. He had put the two of them in a school near his abode in Ifo. Apart from the long distance to Lagos, he could not afford Stardom's fees. The management gave teachers who had been in the school up to seven years the concession of paying only 50 per cent fee on any child. Other charges remained sacrosanct — like those for books, feeding, uniform etc. Yet, Fafore could not buy in. He would still have to pay up to N250,000 on each of the children if they had to school at Stardom.

When he returned to the staff room, he found some of his colleagues were already discussing his matter. He wondered how they knew. But, of course, at Stardom, information travelled faster than light.

"Fafore, what happened?" Mrs. Ose, the Igbo Language teacher, asked.

Before he could answer, three more questions had jumped out of the mouths of other staff.

"Honestly, I don't know," Fafore said, as he began to sort personal items on his desk, indicating to his colleagues that the ordeal was real. The staff, visibly unhappy, wondered what went wrong. It was a lesson to them all: there was no job security in the establishment.

"What do you expect when you are working in a one-man business?" Audu asked, unusually serious. "I have always said that the job we have is the type of the wind can blow away any time, any day, depending on the mood of our employer. I think we shouldn't allow this matter to go on like this."

"What would you do? What power do you have to change anything? Do you want to fight your employer?" the Agric teacher, Mr. Obi, queried. Just then, a message came from the principal: all teachers were to congregate at the MD's office for an emergency meeting.

It was at the meeting that the still-enraged MD announced why Fafore had to quit, and why others could soon follow suit. But no sooner did she begin to speak than she stopped and winced, as pain fired her buttocks. She had sat down for hours during the day. Now, her bum had begun to revolt. She squirmed and readjusted her backside on the chair. Her fate welcat a her, ever die traits tons, and her distressed bum. Everyone that saw her, however, believed her case was all about the embattled English teacher.

Armed with the double-barrelled frustration, the Mi declared the a ted up with the embarrassment teachers were causing the school whenever they demonstrated incompetence, especially, in the presence of parents. "This choi wil no more tolerate incompetence," she dropped. "We employed you because you wid you were professionals. Whether in Maths,

Biology, Government or English - nce you show that you are raw or more illiterate than the woman from whom you buy onions and pepper in Obalende, then, you have to go.

"I'm sure some of you must have learnt that Fafore, the so-called English teacher, is leaving this school today. And I think the principal too will, henceforth, have questions to answer. If you cannot monitor your teachers, if you do not check their notes, and parents have to uncover the abomination we ought to have eliminated internally, then you are bound for trouble. Imagine! A supposed English teacher! This is what a parent, who labours day and night to pay his children's fees, found in a note Fafore gave the students..."

Mrs. Ibidun Gloss collected five notebooks from the secretary, seated on her left.

On the right was the principal. She had asked the secretary to randomly gather the notebooks from the class Fafore handled. The MD then opened a page and pointed out what she believed was a grammatical atrocity.

"Ade as well as Jide comes early," the MD read. She observed the staff, eager to see shock written all over their faces. "This was what the parent, Mr. Guta, saw and became so angry about that he threatened to withdraw his children from the school.

What sort of an English teacher or any kind of a teacher would say, 'Ade as well as Jide comes', instead of 'Ade as well as Jide come'? Ladies and gentlemen, a teacher like Fafore-Mr. Ade-as-well-as-jide- comes-has no place in this school," she submitted.

"Is this the reason we are sacking the man, ma?" the principal asked, with a chuckle.

"Is it not grievous enough?" the MD asked

Some of the teachers murmured in her support or, at least, in mild protest against the way Bepo trivialised the matter. The principal's response infuriated the MD greatly. At once, she thought he also might not survive the scandal. "So, Bepo, 'Ade as well as jide comes is your position too, and your estimation of what represents the standard of this school?"

"There is nothing grievous about the statement," Bepo began, unruffled. "There is no error whatsoever. It is a piece of Standard English. As a matter of fact, we have to quickly call Fafore back and update Mr. Guta too. I wish he had not left. More importantly, we have to call Fafore back. What he taught the students is correct. When you use 'and', the verb that follows is come. But when you use as well as', together with alongside' etc., we go for the singular verb with's. The clause is in the subjunctive mood and does not align with normal grammar rules."

Not impressed by the blasphemy' the principal was muttering, the MD directed everyone to bring out his or her smartphone and investigate the assertion online.

Interestingly, all discovered that Fafore and the principal were right. Mr. Guta was wrong. The MD was wrong.

Silence. The MD had ranted publicly about an error that didn't exist. She had set in motion the sacking of a guiltless employee. She had embarrassed hardworking Fafore. Now, she felt deflated. Some teachers felt sorry for her. Others thought she could have been more discrete about the affair. No one knew exactly how to break the ice. But Mr. Audu was on hand to save the day.

He cleared his throat and confessed he had something "even more important" to add to the grammatical trial. Everyone waited to hear what that could be, especially as the English question had already been roundly resolved. "I just want to say that Mr. Fafore," he began, picking his words heavily,

"as well as the principal," he continued, "is correct. And the MD, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss, is hereby pardoned, discharged and acquitted."

The room rocked with laughter. Audu had done what he knew best. He stood to his feet, smiling mischievously, and gave the already-amused Mrs. Ibidun Gloss a Japanese bow.

"Audu, if I lay my hands on' you!" she returned. "Principal, give him the sack letter as soon as you collect it from my great teacher, Fafore." Everyone laughed again.

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