

# A Teacher's Lot.

[My first paid literary effort, completed while I was still serving out a teaching appointment at a small rural high school in northern New Zealand. The piece, which was intended as a satirical comment on the culture of the place, appeared in the *New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers' Journal*, a publication distributed directly into schools, three days before my scheduled return to Australia. It was an interesting three days.]

It had all the makings of a bad day. He overslept – not just the usual five minutes but a full half hour, which disrupted his entire early morning routine. He nicked his neck shaving, just at the spot where the shirt-collar would pass, and had to spend several frustrating minutes dabbing the wound with a face-cloth before the blood congealed. His tie, for some reason, refused to hang vertically, and when he finally got it to do so the thinner end protruded conspicuously beneath the wider. To cap it all, his wife went back to sleep, only rising when he repeatedly slammed the wardrobe doors, and then in a temper as foul as his own. For that, at least, he was grateful.

That was just the beginning. The moment he parked the car in front of the administration block, the clamour of voices surrounded him, each voice seemingly independent of the others, as if the speakers had no concept of conversation. He pursed his lips and set out firmly across the playground, his exterior calm betrayed only by the white-knuckled grip on his briefcase.

The noise level rose sharply as he opened the door to the room; like the climax of some kind of demonic symphony, the voices merging into a single heinous note. He felt dizzy, disoriented, overwhelmed. The air was bitter with tobacco fumes; he saw Fergusson, in the far corner of the room, carelessly mangle a cigarette butt underfoot.

Better to ignore it, he told himself; no sense in antagonising them so early in the day. He went to his chair and sat down. The arms were sticky – a dark glutinous substance that might, at some time, have been ice-cream or lemonade – but he suffered the discomfort and patiently wiped the mess from his sleeve. Not to get riled, that was the thing. He no longer believed, of course, that such acts were unintentional; he knew the provocateurs too well. They were out to get him, to prod him into some kind of retaliatory outburst that they could use against him. At the first sign of irrationality, they'd converge on him like sharks.

He studied them over the rim of *The Education Gazette*. Sally Donalds, directly opposite, was discussing her latest sexual adventure (real or imagined, he wondered) with her mesmerised confidante Clara Hughes, in a voice calculated to be heard by everyone in the room. Clara giggled uncontrollably, glancing around to see if anyone was listening and catching his eye, which he hastily averted.

His gaze settled on Grey, dumpy and scholastic, picking his nose with his index finger. Grey withdrew the slimy digit and, after discretely nibbling at its contents, inserted it into his remaining unpillaged nostril. Even though it was a ritual that the teacher had watched a hundred times, he was captivated, and it took a loud expletive from elsewhere in the room to distract him.

The cry came from David Cromwell, challenging young Whitehead over the outcome of some obscure sports fixture. There were tears in Cromwell's eyes as he jumped up and shouted his claim again, shaking a fist at Whitehead, who returned the gesture with a contemptuous smirk. Cromwell appealed to the group for confirmation of his position, but received only silence, jeers or abuse, and eventually stormed out, kicking the door in frustration as he passed.

There was a quick squabble of voices as others in the room mocked Cromwell's inadequacies and praised the beaming Whitehead. George Bailey took advantage of the subsequent lull to recite his latest obscene joke to the group, crowning his triumph with an indecent suggestion to Martha Brett, who tittered in mock astonishment.

*My God, the teacher thought, scanning the bizarre array of faces, this is getting out of hand. There's no order here, no discipline, no control. Where will it end?* His gloom deepened as he surveyed the ravaged walls, the filthy floor, the assaulted furniture. Someone began flicking paper pellets at the rubbish bin, the tiny projectiles zipping across his unblinking vision. *Where will it end?*

A bell rang somewhere, and the teacher rose and picked up his briefcase, glancing from habit at the clock on the wall. Nine-fifteen: it was going to be a bad day, all right. He braced himself, offered a silent prayer, and left the staff-room.

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