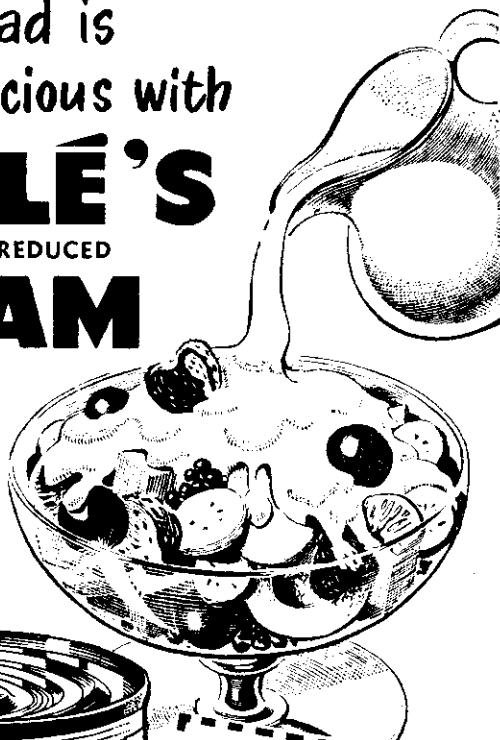


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When the Inspector Called

By F. L. COMBS

AS a worker in the educational field I have often been cowed. For one thing, for forty years I was always afraid of inspectors. (Not all teachers are. I have known some who became impassioned when the inspector had gone and freely and pungently spoke their minds about him.)

Many of these inspectors wore a panoply of austere reserve as who should say "Be your most obsequious, but you are not going to prise an extra grading mark out of me." But dignity, an inborn thing, an added grace, a thing with rhythm of its own, was in my opinion denied to inspectors, somewhat as it is to the common hangman who must be content with the terrors of his office and, no doubt, goes in daily fear of his mother-in-law.

But in the educational pastorate I did know one man who had undeniable dignity. His origins were obscure. He had entered the Board's office as janitor and it was the inspiration of someone there to sponsor his elevation to a far higher post, that of truant officer (or, as it is called in softer times, attendance officer).

This man—I will call him McGinnis, as that is not his name—bore his honours thick upon him from the first day that he began his rounds. Why? Feeble in my analysis of his parts, I reply, because he had it in him. Take first his appearance. He was burly and had a handle-bar moustache. From the time he started he wore only his best suit. Take next his manner: it was tinged with benevolence as of one who had the right of the high justice, the middle and the low, but who, unless defied, stayed his hand. But I think his greatest asset was his eloquence.

His predecessors, forced to do the loathsome work they were paid for, would meander round the classrooms, ask to see the attendance registers, and pick on a few chronic absentees. Not so McGinnis; as already hinted he was uplifted by his office. On entering my room—and I did not bear a good name for efficiency—he gave me a

handshake both courteous and hearty, as of equal meeting equal. The man's the thing. I held a degree and he had scraped through Standard 6 (Form II nowadays). Yet there was an aroma of patronage in his greeting, much as there might be in that of a Royal Duke to a Mayor. Then—a strong point this—he gave the impression of collaborating, of rallying to me, of giving me aid in the performance of my job. His scrutiny of the register was not half-hearted or mechanical. He would seize on a pupil who had not been absent for a twelve-month and praise him highly, much as Hogarth inferentially does the diligent apprentice. The lad would flush with pleasure, being one who rarely received encomiums. Next, quite likely everyone would get a jarring shock. Mr. Mc-

Ginnis's eyes would give out levin flashes and his handlebar moustache would stand out straight. What had occurred? He had come to the name of a lad who had been absent three weeks on end. I (I am imaginative and emotional) almost heard the blood dripping from his tular. "Patrick O'Reilly!" he would exclaim in tones of doom. "Patrick O'Reilly!" The class—fifty-three pens—would stop writing as one man. (I ask, would YOU go on writing at the day of Judgment?)

Playing the attendance officer thus, McGinnis compelled me to rise to the full heights of my head-teachership. It was McGinnis's moment; he held me and my fifty-three pupils in the hollow of his hand.

Turning to me he would say, "Mr. Bodgers, with your permission I will speak to the class." The class, never loath to desist from labour, downed pens.

"Boys and girls," said Mr. McGinnis to the class, average age twelve years. "I know what pain it gives your kind master to hear me speak harshly of one of his pupils and it pains me, too. I feel happy when I come to a class with a good record. I don't like it when I have to prosecute, but I have my duties to do as I fear I shall have to in the case of your fellow pupil, Patrick O'Reilly. I can give you three reasons why he will lose by his truancy. One, he will fail to pass his standards and later on, when he seeks a position, that will count against him. Two, he has broken the laws of his country and that is a bad thing, for it is the duty of all of us to stand up for our King and Country. Three, he will have made his mother unhappy because he has shamed her. Now, boys and girls, next time I come here I hope you will have a clean record. It will please your good master, Mr. Bodgers, who works so hard to get you on and it will please me because I hate to go to court and sue. Let every boy and girl who promises not to miss a half-day till I come round

(continued on next page)



"McGinnis was uplifted by his office"

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 21, 1955.