

THE FINE ART

MISS FLINT'S face . . . the Miss Flint who taught me in primer two, her face . . . emerges from memory only as a caricature. I recall her as a long pink nose decorated mid-way by a pair of pince-nez connected to her ear by a loop of fine gold chain that quivered when she spoke, her eyes peering at me across the tops of the lenses. That's all. Not another thing. Whether she was raven-haired or blonde, whether she was fat or lean, whether her voice was rich or shrill I have not the slightest recollection. I can only conclude that the rest of her must have been quite featureless, otherwise I would have remembered the funny parts. I also formed the impression that she was elderly—quite as old as my mother, who then must have been in the twilight of her twenties.

But I remember much more clearly some of the things Miss Flint *did*. Such as the only time she hit me. From a woman as patient as Miss Flint the hit came as one of the bitter surprises of childhood. She had been teaching us the letter *f*. The little *f*, the longhand *f*.

"Now, *f* is an aeroplane with two wings. One wing up. One wing down. Like that. All see? I'll do it again. One wing up. And one wing down. Now, do you think you could draw an aeroplane? All take up your slates and try."

I drew the *f*, no trouble, but it didn't look much like an aeroplane to me, so I put a propeller in front of it and a tail behind it, and a dirty big bomb bursting and a man coming down in a parachute, and on the ground below half a hundred of the Kaiser's ruffians making off in terror. I remember showing it to Miss Flint with immense pride.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"It's an *f*," I told her, and the clout she gave me left me astonished. But that was the only time. All else I remember of Miss Flint was patience, heroic patience.

"Any new slates, children?" she used to ask. There would always be somebody to shuffle up to her desk with a new one for Miss Flint to rule. And I have never yet driven from my memory the sound of Miss Flint ruling those slates. She drew the lines with a steel stylus that pierced the slate with a screech like a strangled parrot. I could actually taste the sound of it as I sat there, tense, holding my tongue with all my fingers while the acid of the sound ran among my teeth. Then for minutes afterwards I couldn't speak without a lisp.

But those slates—tell me, was infant mortality higher in those days? Ginger Aitchison, next to me, used to lick his clean, beautifully clean. I, better bred, moistened my fingers in my mouth, then rubbed, moistened my fingers again, rubbed more, cleaning off in little patches. May Barton, in front of me, spat straight on to her slate, hygienically avoiding the dangers of direct mouth contact. Then we all dried the spit off with our sleeves in great revolving motions of the forearm. I do remember a boy with a wee sponge and a little bottle of Jeyes solution, but I think he was too shy to use them.

But far more clearly I remember something else . . . the chief thing, the triumphant piece of cunning that looms larger out of that time than anything else. For a whole year without detection I ate my lunch in school. Never again

by Thomas Hindmarsh

was I to score a victory over a woman as complete, as satisfying as the one I scored over Miss Flint.

The desks of those days were not the lift-up type, but the place-under sort. For eating lunch in school, lovely. You could rest your whole forearm under the desk, leisurely select a sandwich, withdraw it, hold it in readiness, then the moment Miss Flint's back was turned cram the entire sandwich into your mouth. And if she turned unexpectedly, why, all you did was simply sit there lockjawed until the danger blew over. But your eyes never left her and not a second of her inattention passed without a progress report either to your fingers or your jaws.

It is true there were times when she tested me to the point of martyrdom with a question and in that patient way of hers stayed blinking at the incredible stupidity of my silence . . . I, the brightest boy in P2 . . . while all the time the sandwich was melting into warm liquid and draining down my throat. It was a feat. No, that's dismissing it too lightly. It was an art, a fine art, and of all the artists I was the most artful.

What a pity that in growing up a fellow sheds all that cunning. What a success I'd have been with women if I could have kept on playing them as I played poor Miss Flint.

Good grief, was all that 40 years ago? But if I ever met Miss Flint I would know her instantly. She would remember my historic freckles as clearly as I remember her historic nose, but my freckles are all gone. And there are lines carved in my face now by matrimony, debt and despair. Would she know me? Perhaps if I said to her, "I was your brightest boy in P2," her face would light up and she would remember.

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I WAS taking the ticket-window. You know what a railway ticket-window is like. The shape and size of the entrance to a dog-kennel. You sit there, one ear terrier-cocked, your eyes never leaving the lips that mumble past the aperture. It is one of those jobs that are good for the character. Everybody is your enemy. Everybody right down to the mental retardate who says, "Single, please. No, return. No, better make it a single. No, dammit, I'll have a return. Hey, what's this you're giving me?" Are railway ticket-windows made purposely small so that people like me can't reach out and take the public by the throat?

In time you become prepared for anything. Well, nearly anything. But I wasn't quite ready one day for a long pink nose that was framed in the aperture. It is true that the elegant pince-nez were no longer there. They had been replaced by a pair of steel-rimmed glasses that had been pitifully mended with a binding of wire where they had broken at the hinge. But they were half-way down her nose where they should have been, and her eyes peered at me over the tops of the lenses across the gulf of 40 years.

A bony, blue-veined hand rested on the ledge beneath her face, and I saw a wedding ring and by it another ring with three small red stones. I wanted



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suddenly to say, "Miss Flint—you darling, Miss Flint!" But something extraordinary stopped me. She was pressing a coin across the brass plate and the scraping sound of it was magnified into the screech of a strangled parrot, the acid ran among my teeth, and I wanted to hold my tongue with all my fingers.

"Yeth?" I managed to say to her, not in the rude way I would bark "Yes?" at you, but just as I would have said it 40 years ago, as a small boy, lisping.

She took the ticket and was gone. It was all so quickly over it were as if a cameo of a moment of my infancy had been flashed in my face and left me blinking at its vividness, shaken at its unexpectedness.

I had to find her, I had to find her. There was nothing else to do but commit the unpardonable departmental breach of abandoning the window, and I ran out among the people as frantically as if I had given someone too much change.

She was standing alone . . . so small . . . the giantess who had leaned over me and taken my wee, limp fist in the power of her hand and said, "Like this, dear, like this." And I could tell now by the look of fear and loneliness in her face that life in these 40 years must have beaten her flat. I wondered what to say, for it is not easy to open a conversation when you feel that the very thing you say might lead into silence.

"Do you remember me, Miss Flint?"

It is a rotten question to fling at an old teacher. She must have taught hundreds of children: I had had only a few teachers. But she must have known by the name I still called her what part

of her life to search for me, because her lips parted in a surprised smile, but I noticed that the expression remained oddly unrelated to her smile. It was a searching stare of anxiety. I knew then how fearful it must be for an old teacher to get ready to say, "I am sorry—"

I could see that she was not going to give in easily, but the effort her eyes were making was pathetic. I mean pathetic for me. What conceit had ever possessed me to believe that this woman could recall me 40 years out of childhood? I blurted out my name to help her out of my embarrassment, and the anxiety in her eyes only deepened as she searched vainly over my face for some feature still recognisable.

"Remember P2 in 1918, Miss Flint?"

What a ridiculous test for anybody's memory!

"I was your brightest boy."

Were moments ever so painful?

Then I was saying desperately, "But Miss Flint, you must remember my freckles, and my funny little lisp?"

Plainly she remembered neither . . . not even my freckles that had made people wonder if a teapot had been emptied over my head. I suddenly wanted to say to this embarrassing woman, "Oh, look, I've got to go," until I saw her drawing closer, and I saw the expressions of her eyes and lips melting into the unity of a laugh.

"The little fox," she was saying, "not the hungry little fox who always ate his lunch in school?" And once again I felt my helpless hand being taken in the power of hers, this time as she pressed it joyfully.