

Mr. Thacker

Mr. Timmins was reading an extract from *Pickwick* to his class. He was a newcomer to them, and so far they had taken him at his face value, exercising caution and restraint. They listened dutifully to Mr. Winkle's attempts to subdue the recalcitrant horse, and laughed when Mr. Timmins appeared to expect them to. Mr. Timmins loved his *Pickwick*, and persuading himself that he had captured their interest, continued to read on after he had arrived at the place he had marked as the end of the extract. The afternoon was hot, and the class had made themselves as comfortable as their desks would allow. Mr. Timmins read happily on, and on, and on.....

— He became aware that something was going on at the back of the class. He continued to read, but out of the corner of his eye was able to see that one of his pupils, finding the *Pickwickians* rather dull companions for a hot summer afternoon, had evolved for himself an amusing pastime. This consisted of tilting his head back, balancing his pen carefully across the bridge of his nose, and slowly bringing his head down again, allowing the pen to roll gracefully down his nose and into his waiting hands. The boy sitting next to the criminal would certainly have imitated his example but for the fact that he was of a rather timid disposition, and suspected, not without some justification, that the eye of Mr. Timmins was upon them. That gentleman, observing that the practice was confined to one boy only, continued to read. He did not wish to spoil the enjoyment of the remainder, and he was reading the end of his chapter.

But by some instinctive process known only to children and perhaps to psychologists, a boy in quite another part of the class became aware of his fellow-sufferer's antidote to boredom; and soon there were two pens slowly rolling down noses, and being caught silently in waiting hands. Mr. Timmins began to realize that he had read for too long, and hurried on to the end of his chapter. But his attention was distracted by those pens. Surely one of them must drop to the floor? Why hadn't he collected the infernal things in before starting to read? But those little devils always found something to play with. There — Shelbington was going to drop his now — no, he had just managed to catch it — and now Mr. Timmins saw that the two were engaged in a competition as to who should come nearest to dropping his pen without actually doing so. He was very near the end of his chapter now, and he read

on more for the sake of finishing it than for anything else.

Three lines from the end of the chapter Shelvington dropped his pen and fell off his seat in a frantic effort to recover it. The class came to life; Mr. Timmins stopped half-way through the last sentence, and slowly closed his book.

He was very annoyed and very disappointed. He had hoped to finish off the lesson by pointing out some of the beauties of "Pickwick"; now he would have to punish these two, and the mood would be unsuitable for a discussion of humour.

He fixed the main offender with his eye.

"Come out here, Shelvington," he said, and out Shelvington came.

Mr. Timmins addressed the class.

"Shelvington," he said, "has found a most delightful little game for himself, which he is going to show us how to play. It's a pleasant little pastime, which could only have been evolved by one of Shelvington's high intellectual capacity — I'm sure you'll all love it. Do show us, Shelvington."

Silence from Shelvington — who is not particularly afraid of Mr. Timmins, and who has a great mind to do as he is asked.

Mr. Timmins decided to fire another volley.

"Shelvington," he declared to the class, "is shy. He is hiding his light under a bushel. Come now, Shelvington, you were doing it so beautifully just now. The class are very curious to know what it was."

Shelvington, smarting under the lash of sarcasm, said:

"I ain't got me pen, sir."

Angels would have retired gracefully, but Mr. Timmins rushed in.

"Good heavens, don't let that stop you — give him a pen, somebody — now, Shelvington, we're all waiting."

Shelvington stole a look at his teacher. How far dared he go with this bloke? He didn't know him very well, but from what he'd already seen, he didn't think much of him. These thin, sarcastic chaps always collapsed if you called their bluff.

Mr. Timmins, watching Shelvington, saw the devil in his eyes, and realised for the first time that the boy was not afraid of him. He wavered for half a second, half deciding to send the boy back to his seat. In that quick glance Shelvington saw the indecision in the man's face. He tilted his head back, carefully balanced his pen across the top of his nose, and, slowly bringing his head forward, allowed the pen to fall down into his hands after the

approved style. The class were delighted. This was much better than Pickwick. There was some applause, which died out as the interest became once more centred on the protagonists in this little drama. What would old Time do to Shelbington now?

Mr. Timmins was completely taken aback. He had not for a moment thought that the boy would dare to take him at his word; he had simply meant to make him look a fool in front of the class. And here was the ground cut from under his feet, and the culprit standing before him with something very like an impudent grin in his eyes. Mr. Timmins began to feel an awful sense of failure. What was he to do now? He could hardly punish the boy for doing what he had been told. Besides, — but perhaps he was making too much of this. The boy probably thought it was funny. The class thought it was all a joke. Yes, that was the best way out. Pass it off as a joke.

Mr. Timmins made an attempt at a smile.

"Don't let me see you doing silly tricks like that again, Shelbington," he said, and sent the boy back to his seat.

But Mr. Timmins had made out his death warrant and handed it over to his executioners. He turned to write on the blackboard to cover up his feelings; and when he turned back there were twenty pens rolling down noses; more were being balanced on fingers; some were being used as darts. The confusion was increasing with every minute; Shelbington was demonstrating the finer points of the art to a small crowd of admirers; and an opposition firm in the way of paper aeroplanes had already been set up.

"Stop this noise!" shouted Mr. Timmins.

There was a momentary silence. Then out of it came a voice:

"Please, sir, can I come out an' show 'em now?"

A howl of delight greeted this question, and chaos rushed in; pens, pellets, ink and books were used as missiles indiscriminately; and amid it all stood Mr. Timmins, shouting and powerless. He had lost control of his class.

His misery was only ended by the bell, when the warriors, headed by Shelbington, rushed out of the room and into the street, to congratulate themselves upon their victory.

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P.T.O

The episode is entirely imaginary, the writer having ~~no~~ teaching experience of children.

The teacher's first mistake was in failing to conform to the preparation of his lesson, and risking boredom by reading too much. His second was in failing to check that boredom when it arose; his third was in using sarcasm as a weapon; his fourth in failing to estimate the character of the boy and his probable reaction to sarcasm; he was also guilty of indecision and of allowing his class to see that indecision. At the climax of the situation he failed to appreciate its probable development (as shown in the last paragraph) and took the easy way out. He was not strong enough to handle the boy, and he was quite helpless when the class perceived his weakness and broke the bounds of convention. ✓

You have achieved the touch of realism in this situation

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