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CHARLES FORTUNE IN THE LECTURE ROOM

by W. WALDMAN

CHILDREN have a genius for imitating whatever takes their fancy. In Standard I, Louise, enchanted with her mother's hats, wears an old one with the studied unconcern of her mother in a new one at the Durban July. In Standard X, Donald, impressed by his father's manner when dining out, tips the waitress in the milk-bar with the deliberate casualness of the old man telling the waiter to keep the change. At all ages from one to eighteen, and long after if they remain children, our boys and girls become the sedulous apes of whatever takes their fancy in others, especially if it is a way of speaking.

Boys and girls will not take a fancy to someone's way of speaking and so will not imitate him — his sentence structure, sentence arrangement, paragraphing and style — unless what he says interests them. If Charles Fortune interests boys, there is a fair chance that they will speak like Charles Fortune; and if he bewitches and bemuses them, there is a better chance that they will end up by writing as he speaks:

"Who will it be now? Will it be Portia, dressed like a doctor of laws? Ah, there she is! It is Portia dressed like a doctor of laws. She gives her hand to the Duke. He takes it graciously. A gracious person this, the Duke of Venice. One, two, three, four, five seconds pass. She turns round. Yes, it's Shylock who is going to listen to what she has to say, Shylock, pulling at his beard, a little nervous perhaps. She unrolls her scroll and begins her speech:

'The quality of mercy is not strained . . .' "

This is from an essay written by a candidate in the Transvaal Secondary School Certificate Examination (English Higher Grade: Literature). Like Charles Fortune, he makes the most of very little, and has something to say when there is nothing to report. Like the commentator, he doesn't shape his words laboriously from the granite of his unconscious, but finds them round about him, pebbles for his purpose, even if that purpose is only to rattle them in an empty tin.

Clearly, the candidate found Charles Fortune a more effective teacher than his English master.

If rugby interests boys, if they are bemused and bewitched by what Ian Balfour has to say about the All Blacks versus South Africa, there is a fair chance that more than one of them will write after this fashion:

"Mr. Winkle has the gun. He presses it to his shoulder. The rooks rise. Click! It wasn't loaded. Mr. Wardle takes it, gives it to the fat boy. Winkle has it again. Bang! A scream from behind a tree to the right of Winkle. Mr. Tupman has been hit! Mr. Tupman has been hit in the left arm on the far side of the rookery in full view of the Pickwickians!"

The above is an extract from an essay of another candidate who wrote the Transvaal Secondary School Certificate Examination (English Higher Grade: Literature). Like Ian Balfour this candidate has a great deal to say and little time in which to say it; and like Balfour he says it without effort. Clearly, he also found the commentator a better teacher than his English master.

In the following essay also written by a T.S.S.C. Examination candidate, we discern the hand of the teacher and, in the bit about moonlight, probably the gentler hand of the girl friend from a sister-school. Doubtless, the pedagogic hand had been an inconsiderable phenomenon in the classroom for some time until, at the beginning of the third term, its existence was noted and eagerly sought:

"Keats is definately the world's greatest poet. There is many and varied colours in his poetry. No other poets have so many colours like, red, black, green, yellow, blue etc., which are Keat's favourite colours especially the first and last (red and yellow): 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold.'

"I would much rather read Keats with a companion in the moonlight to listening to Superman. Poetry is good for you and not at all 'sissy' like 'Flower petals on the grass.'

"As I have said Keats is without doubt the world's greatest poet of colour like red and yel-

low (gold): 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold.' He is also famous for his sensuousness like feeling, listening, hearing, seeing and odour (five in all). The following lines uttered by Sir Morte d'Arthur illustrate his sensuousness:

'The old order changeth yielding place to new
And God fulfils himselfs in many ways.
Lest one good custom . . . .' "

The candidate concluded his essay by quoting most of Arthur's dying words, and so was able to inform the examiner by the cryptic (450 plus/minus) that he had satisfied the requirements with regard to length.

The essay lacks sense. The expression is ungrammatical and the language stagnant. It is clear that the teacher was without the appeal of a Charles Fortune.

This is the crux of the matter. If a teacher were a Charles Fortune to his pupils, his pupils would be able to discuss poetry as fluently, intelligently and grammatically as the commentator discusses cricket. But many of his pupils are not interested in poetry, and so they write the T.S.S.C. Examination, scoring 40% for their essays on Shakespeare and 20% for their essays on Keats.

One might argue that it is the teacher's fault that so many of his pupils are weak in English. In the sense that there are not enough competent teachers of the subject in the lower classes and often in the upper classes of the high school it is his fault.

At the beginning of 1959, 52 Arts graduates came to the Johannesburg College of Education to complete their training. Of these, 14 women —there were no men—had English as a three year major. At the beginning of 1960 there were 90 posts vacant for teachers of English in the schools of the Transvaal. Of the 14 women who had majored in English only 7 chose to teach the subject. Eighty-three posts remained vacant. The statistical melodrama does not end here. The 14 women who had majored in English at the end of 1958 were part of a class of 86 College of Education students taking first year English at the University, most of them intent on majoring in the subject.

It is difficult to understand why so few College of Education students survive the first year English course at the University, for prospective students are interviewed by a selection committee at the College and are strongly advised against taking English for their degree if they have not obtained a satisfactory symbol in the subject — at least a C — in the Matriculation Examination.

There is no doubt that those who take English for their degree take it because they are more than moderately proficient in the subject according to the Joint Matriculation Board. It is one of the functions of that body to ensure that the Transvaal Secondary School Certificate Examination shall be an adequate test of a candidate's fitness for higher education. Presumably, if he has obtained a Matriculation Exemption Certificate and has obtained a satisfactory symbol in English, he is eligible for further study in the subject at a University.

It is difficult to find a reason for the wastage. When students are rated eligible by a recognised authority, when they are considered capable by a carefully constituted committee, when they elect to study a subject about which they are enthusiastic, and when those who lecture to them are among the best qualified men and women in the country, one wonders why so many of them should fail.

It has been said that they are immature. We submit that immaturity might be to their advantage, for, where there is immaturity coupled with ability and enthusiasm, it is not difficult to give them a goal they can reach.

One wonders whether lecturers do not perhaps forget the age of their students — they are chiefly sixteen and seventeen years old. Can it be that their lecturers forget that these young people still possess a genius for imitating whatever takes their fancy, in this case, English? Can it be that these men and women have been too much like Wisden and too little like Charles Fortune in their approach?