

TRAMPING ON EACH OTHER

I have two distinct memories of Mr Lategan. One of the sound of his feet on the wooden boards of our school hostel's dining room. Another of the expression on his face when he bent down over the table the post was always spread out on, the last time he was about to cross the room before he went on holiday and then to another school.

Actually the room, though I called it a dining room, had no such separate function. In those days we had only the one room to eat in and learn in and relax in, which also served as a walking-through room for anybody wanting to reach the side of the building furthest away from the school. Where Mr Lategan had his room. And the one time I have remembered clearly of all the times that he must have tramped across was so audibly impressed on my memory because while Mr Lategan was treading the space between door and door I was listening to the Hungarian Rhapsody. Or trying to — leaning over the hostel's hand-yanking His Master's Voice gramophone, on the same side table as the post got sorted out on at lunch time. It was afternoon and later than we normally expected the teacher to come in from the school. It must have been else I wouldn't have got caught like that.

The Hungarian Rhapsody was not the most popular of the records we boarders played — of the others that we preferred I can remember vaguely that they might have had the flavouring of the Bluebird of Happiness and somebody's famous March. But the Rhapsody was strictly for very occasional play though it had something the matron pretended to like, as she once made us put it on again when we had stopped its incomprehensible rhapsodic swirl.

I don't know how it was that I sometimes listened to the Liszt on my own as I didn't care for it much when others were around but it may have been because I felt of the few records we had, each one deserved to have a turn. And the truth was that gradually, as I got to know the piece better, I got carried away by it more and more. The music brought out my goose-flesh and worked me up and calmed me down.

When the door nearest the school opened and Mr Lategan walked in I felt done for. The mad flow of the Rhapsody had trickled out into moody bits of hurried notes interspersed by lengthy, petulant pauses. And I knew there wasn't very much forthcoming just then. I prayed there might be and wished I could speed up the 78 revolutions to double speed, but of course I couldn't and I heard Mr Lategan's regular steps treading hard and loud and monotonously, and all my Franz Liszt could produce was low register gasps — and more pauses. And the steps brutal and loud and heavy trod him down and traversed that interminable long space from door to door. And my record revolved shakily with more pauses.

I sweated for Liszt's honour, I wanted to say, Meneer, if you would just wait and listen you would hear how it all builds up again and ends in triumph. It's not such a stupid piece at all, though it may seem a bit foolish, my sitting here bare-foot and listening, but there's something to it. But to my great shame and embarrassment all that did happen while the big male feet trod and the sound of the steps boomed and the table shook was that just before the futher door was reached and opened the music rebounded with another brief hiccuping gasp and Mr Lategan slammed the door behind him. And that was that.

My other memory of Mr Lategan has the visual emphasis, the caught-in-action still of the photograph. But it needs more explaining.

We were all of us against Mr Lategan. Oh, it wasn't that he was Afrikaans and our upbringing German, it was more that being Afrikaans he didn't fall into the pattern of another Afrikaans teacher we had had. The previous one had always read love stories from the 'Huisgenoot' and Mr Lategan didn't. And he didn't show any love for us either and we had decided that we would show him that we didn't like him more than he liked us by not giving him a present when he left school. And what's more, to emphasize how much we disliked him, we would give a present to a German student teacher who had been at the school for only a term. And that present would be twice as big as it would have been if we had bought a present for each. There were some of us girls who felt some doubts but the farmer sons were adamant, they would most certainly not give a single penny for Mr Lategan. And so it was.

I didn't see from close quarters how Mr Lategan conducted himself over the incident of not being given a similar shaving and grooming kit in leather case as the student teacher received. I was allowed to be sick and I stayed in bed and the bed had a good view out of the door and into the big room. When I heard the door at lunch time I felt safe to look. I could take the long view and remain unobserved. And, though I had feared otherwise, I gave fifty percent chance to the possibility of seeing a man who had learnt his lesson and not suffered too badly. As the others had maintained he would. I had virtually talked myself into counting on that possibility — so when I saw Mr Lategan's face it came as a shock. I knew then that I had been right all along. In my foresight and fears and even in my keeping out of it — though one should live up to one's convictions as many times as one possibly can. After all I hadn't liked him either.

Mr Lategan stood there looking at the post -- as usual. I saw that he was concentrating hard. He had to, he didn't want any post to be left lying around after he'd shaken the dust off his feet. But it didn't seem as though he was thinking of letters while he was looking at them so piercingly. His pre-occupation with the table-top and the letters, his bending over them, looked like the ordinary routine. But there was too much worry or sadness or hurt pride in his face to delude me. I didn't know which or what exactly the expression on his face meant. But like the glare of the exposure on a photographic plate, it gave me a jolt and a sting.

I remember myself freezing up with a lot of unchewed carrot salad in my mouth, sick children's lunch was always early and that day there was an awful lot of juice from farm oranges in the carrots. And I couldn't eat when I'd seen Mr Lategan's face.

The children coming in from school took no notice of the bent figure, they kept on streaming past and Mr Lategan seemed oblivious of them and the sound of their tramping feet. I felt rejected for them and for myself, I wanted to give them another chance, Meneer, they are not so cruel really. But after standing absorbed for a long time Mr Lategan went and did just shake the dust off his feet — and the door slammed quite hard on the further end of the room, where I couldn't see it.

It was raining that day, I remember too, and that Mr Lategan looked wet and wore a coat and that he had a moustache and dark, wavy hair. But more than anything else that in the vast room on the table where I had had the gramophone on another day the post was spread out and that he was intensely pre-occupied, steeped in emotion, as I could be in the gloomier notes of the Hungarian Rhapsody. (Copyright) □