

The Staff-Room

A One-Act Play

Gordon Daviot
[Elizabeth Mackintosh]
1954

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Staff Room

Date of first publication: 1954

Author: Gordon Daviot (alias of Elizabeth Mackintosh) 1896-1952

Date first posted: May 28, 2015

Date last updated: May 28, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150568

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Staff-Room

Gordon Daviot (Elizabeth Mackintosh)

First published as part of Plays Vol 3.

CHARACTERS

MISS CARTER

MISS HINCH

MISS BOYD

MISS SIGGINS

THE HEAD

MR WOODINGTON SMITH

THE STAFF-ROOM

The scene is the staff-room of a girls' High School, in the middle of a Spring morning. In the rear wall is a door; near the corner, and to the right of it, as one looks at the stage, a large window. Between the door and the window is a small table, and above it hangs a large baize notice-board, liberally covered with notices. Against the right wall is another small table, and occupying the centre of the room is a large one, strewn with books and attaché-cases and guarded by rush-bottomed chairs. Against the left wall is a set of book-shelves, divided into compartments so that each member of the staff may know her own boundaries and not cause trouble by trespassing. A basket chair is turned to what would be the fireplace in the fourth wall, and at the back, below the window, is a cretonne-covered couch.

At the moment the room is empty except for MISS CARTER, the classics mistress, who is correcting exercise-books at the side table. MISS CARTER is thirty-two, but looks forty-five and does not care. She has a round, flabby face and a round, flabby body, and her hair is done in thick, greasy plaits round her head in a way that she fondly hopes is classical. As usual, she is completely absorbed in her work. Every now and then she draws her pencil vigorously through a word and utters a loud 'humph'. When she has uttered her third 'humph' the door opens and MISS HINCH comes in.

MISS HINCH is the English mistress. She is tall and thin and weary, and her ash-fair hair is always on the verge of falling from its insecure knot at her neck. She likes that knot, however. It suggests art and literary coteries, and most of MISS HINCH'S life is suggestion. It is like the knot; ineffectual and posing. She goes in silence to the table and begins to take the books out of the attaché-case which she has been carrying. MISS CARTER utters another 'humph'. MISS HINCH pauses in the act of laying down a book, and then lays it down with an exaggerated gentleness which suggests that it is only by superhuman self-control she refrains from flinging it on the floor. She picks up the four-folded piece of blotting-paper from the middle of the table, examines it, sighs impatiently at its exhausted condition, and throws it into the waste-paper basket under the table. She goes to the drawer on the down side of the table, and finds it empty.

HINCH There's no blotting-paper, Carter.

[No answer.]

HINCH Carter, there's no blotting-paper.

[CARTER *turns round, the mists of correction still hovering about her.*]

CARTER Isn't there any in the drawer?

HINCH If there was I shouldn't be fussing.

CARTER There must be some somewhere. There! (*Pointing triumphantly*)
There's a bit—in the waste-paper basket.

HINCH Yes, I've just put it there.

CARTER Oh? What's wrong with it?

HINCH It is too literally blotting-paper.

CARTER (*helpfully*) Well, I should take it out again, if I were you. It seems to be the only bit on the horizon.

HINCH But look here, Carter, it's your job to keep this room supplied with stationery. You can't expect us to use blotting-paper as filthy as that.

CARTER (*mildly*) It's your own fault for not asking for it at the proper time. You all know that stationery times are from nine to nine-fifteen on Mondays and Thursdays. If you don't ask then, you'll have to do without. Besides, everyone is far too extravagant with blotting-paper. When Siggins spilt her milk yesterday she mopped it up with a piece that wasn't more than half-used.

HINCH You're a gold-mine to the company, aren't you, Carter?

[CARTER, *already reabsorbed in correction, takes no notice.* HINCH *sits down at the large table with her back to the window and arranges her books for correction. She peers into the various attaché-cases and abstracts a fairly clean sheet of blotting-paper from one. She begins correction with a red-ink pen and a fastidiousness which is a direct contrast to MISS CARTER'S blue pencil and heavy hand.*]

CARTER (*blue-pencilling*) Humph! (*Three lines further*) Humph!

HINCH Carter, I wish to goodness you'd get out of that habit!

CARTER What habit?

HINCH That 'humphing'.

CARTER I wish to goodness Dorothy Baker would learn a little common sense, even if she can't learn Latin. Why don't her people take her away and make a lady of her? It's all she's fit for.

HINCH I think she's a nice child. You can't blame her if she doesn't think her future is going to be empty because she can't translate Cicero.

CARTER It's Ovid.

HINCH Well, Ovid. I should say that she had too much imagination to take well to dead languages.

CARTER Oh, I forgot you were friendly with Mrs Baker. Sorry! (*She giggles a high giggle, which comes particularly ridiculously from her bulk*) Quite the wrong thing to say!

[*Enter MISS BOYD. She is the gymnastics mistress, and is dressed in the usual blue tunic and black stockings of her tribe. She is about twenty-five, and has a quiet but alert air. A looker-on at things.*]

HINCH Don't be silly. Dorothy writes the best essays in her form. I don't see why she should be considered mentally deficient just because she doesn't take any interest in Latin. (*To BOYD, who has crossed in a leisurely fashion to the open window and is staring out into the sunlight*) Don't you think so, Boyd?

BOYD What?

HINCH What is Dorothy like for you?

BOYD Dorothy who?

HINCH Dorothy Baker.

BOYD (*indifferently*) Oh, nice kid. Awfully flat feet, though.

CARTER How are *you* free just now?

BOYD My patient isn't here today.

CARTER Well, I must say, some people get off easily. I wish *forms* took to being absent so that *we* could have unexpected free times—and no correction to do.

BOYD Cheer up, Carter! When someone falls off the fire-escape no one brings the mangled heap to your door. It's an ill wind, you know. Besides, you know you'd be bored stiff if you had a 'free'. Oh, blast! I have a hole in my stocking. (*She sits down on the couch, removes her shoe, pulls the stocking forward at the toe so that the hole at the heel disappears, and resumes her shoe*)

HINCH D'you know, Boyd, that Amy Higgs and Betty Bartlett were kicking the netball along the corridor to the garden door yesterday afternoon, and they didn't make the slightest attempt to stop because I was coming. I had actually to step aside to avoid the ball.

BOYD Oh?... Sorry!... I expect they were on their way to games and feeling a bit

above themselves.

HINCH Well, it isn't the kind of thing we can afford to encourage. The discipline in this school is a byword already. Not that you could expect anything else with a Head who thinks yelling is good for children. But, still!

BOYD I'll talk to them, if you like. They can miss their next game. That will sober them, I'll warrant.

HINCH No girl is allowed to miss a game as a punishment.

BOYD Oh? Well, I didn't know that before. But surely the punishment should fit the crime.

HINCH No girl is allowed to miss a game. And, anyhow, I would rather you didn't say I complained. I've no desire to find myself in Amy Higgs' black books.

[BOYD makes a slight grimace, swings her legs on to the couch, and lies there looking out of the window.]

CARTER Do you know what Amy Higgs did in Grimmett's lesson yesterday?

HINCH No?

CARTER Grimmett asked them to suggest a question for their next French debate, and Amy suggested 'Are form mistresses bad form?'

HINCH I told you she was an odious child!

CARTER That was just to show that they knew all about the row between Grim and Kelly over having the fifth form.

HINCH What did Grim do?

CARTER Nothing, apparently. Looked silly, I expect.

HINCH She *is* a dreadful funk. Besides having no conscience in other respects. She took the only Swiss bun on the plate at break today, although she knows quite well that I always have it. Just because the Head kept me talking and I was a minute or two late. I had to have a Chelsea, and I simply loathe Chelsea buns. And she always bags the *Punch* first on a Wednesday. It never seems to occur to her that someone else might like to see it first.

BOYD Talking of *Punch*—I see the voting list is up for next term's papers. Don't you think we might have something a little—a little more frivolous than the things we have now?

HINCH As what, for instance?

BOYD Oh, I don't know. The *Tatler*, or the *Bystander*, or something. Something

not so terribly educational as the *Illustrated World* and the *Photographic Year*.

CARTER What on earth would we get the *Tatler* for? We don't want to see photographs of dressed-up ninnies making fools of themselves at Ascot.

BOYD You needn't look at it that week. But it would give us an idea how the world wagged and what skirts were looking like at the moment, and so forth.

HINCH You can see that in Wickins' window for nothing.

BOYD The skirts, perhaps, but not the world.

CARTER We don't want to buy papers for the staff unless they are of some use to us.

BOYD Oh? But no one ever opens the ones we get.

HINCH Speak for yourself, Boyd.

BOYD Oh, *I* open them. I read 'em all. I know all about the habits of the great auk, and the new railroad in Timbuctoo, and the various kinds of cactus, and all the rest. I like being educated. But don't you think we might get something for the staff-room that didn't educate us? Hyacinths to feed our soul, you know.

CARTER Hyacinths! We get enough flowers from the children to——

HINCH Don't be silly, Carter. Boyd is speaking figuratively, of course. You can put it on the list, Boyd, you know, and it will go to the vote in the usual way.

BOYD Here's the postman.

[*She springs to her feet and goes out hastily. The others exchange looks.*]

HINCH Carter, I must say I didn't think you would have been so stupid as to let her imagine you didn't understand her allusion.

CARTER But I didn't. Never heard of it. Hyacinths, indeed! A silly sort of expression—and quite beside the point, as far as I can see. It would suit her better to be attending to her work than making silly remarks about hyacinths. She's far too flighty for her job.

HINCH Oh, she's flighty. I grant you that. But she does keep the kids in order, and that's more than Pennington ever did. Not that I would flatter her by telling her so. I think she fancies herself as a disciplinarian. But, still!

CARTER What's the good of keeping the children in order when she wears a hat like the one she is wearing now?

HINCH It isn't the hat, my dear, it's the way she wears it. You know—so that people look again. And her landlady—don't repeat this—her landlady told my

landlady that she never wears anything but crêpe-de-chine underneath.

CARTER Oh, Grimmett's told me that.

HINCH How did she know? Are Grimmett and Boyd getting friendly?

CARTER Oh, I don't think so. Her landlady probably told her. They're awful gossips, landladies. How do you think she can have crêpe-de-chine underwear on her salary? It takes me all my time to buy Jaeger, and I get nearly twice what she does.

HINCH Well, the Head did hint to Fry that her people were rather well-off.

CARTER What's she working for if her people have money?

HINCH Oh, something to do, I suppose.

CARTER Don't you believe it. Who would work if they hadn't to!

HINCH Carter! What a strange thing to say. Lots of people work because they like it, of course. (*She leaves it to be inferred that she herself is included in the 'lots'*) And as for you, you positively invent it, so you must like it.

CARTER I don't, but someone in this institution has to have a conscience.

HINCH Poor Atlas!

CARTER Poor what?

HINCH Oh, nothing. Then you don't think Boyd's people are well-off.

CARTER Not well enough off to keep her in crêpe-de-chine.

HINCH Then how do you think she gets it?

CARTER I really couldn't say. (*Her tone means that she not only does not know but would rather not speculate*) You did promise to take Fry's form last period this morning, didn't you?

HINCH I didn't promise. I was press-ganged into taking it. I wonder if a term will ever pass without Fry having something go wonky in her inside.

CARTER Well, do you mind if I speak to the form for a moment before you begin? I want to tell them about the Classical Society's——

HINCH Oh, you can speak to them for the whole of the lesson if you like.

[*Enter BOYD, carrying an opened letter and an envelope with a halfpenny stamp.*]

BOYD Nothing for you, Carter, and only a bill for Hinch. (*She gives the envelope to HINCH*)

HINCH I fail to see how you came to the conclusion that it was a bill.

BOYD Well, since it's nearly the end of term it can't be a receipt, and I don't suppose your best man puts a ha'penny stamp on his letters.

[In a silence which can be felt but of which she seems unconscious she retires to the couch and continues to read her own letter.]

CARTER *(at the notice-board)* Boyd, will it be all right if I send half of Fry's form into Fifth Form gym next period?

BOYD *(reading)* Imphm.

[HINCH and CARTER exchange looks.]

CARTER You don't mind?

BOYD *(reading)* Oh, not a bit. The more the merrier.

[CARTER pauses at this unscholastic outlook, but recovers herself.]

CARTER Well, that's Fry's lot settled for today, anyhow.

[Enter SIGGINS. She is the geography mistress; small and plump and excitable. The kind who asks three porters and the guard, but is never sure until she arrives at her destination that she is in the right train. At the moment she is full of the importance of the bearer of dreadful news.]

SIGGINS Girls! Do you know who's here?

CARTER No. Who?

BOYD Not the Prince of Wales, evidently.

SIGGINS Woodington Smith!

HINCH No! Siggins, no! Oh, no!

SIGGINS Woodington Smith.

CARTER But the Head didn't tell me. Why didn't the Head tell me he was coming?

HINCH She said quite distinctly last week that he wasn't coming till the beginning of next term.

CARTER How do you know he's here?

SIGGINS How do I know? That's a good one. My dear, I've had him for more than an hour. He listened to me while I took a whole lesson, and stood there saying absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing, my dear. I nearly died. Honestly, I did. You know the way he sits there saying absolutely nothing so that you wonder all the time what he's thinking. Simply nerve-breaking. And then when the bell rang and I

thought it was all over he made me yank out the sand board and made the kids do a map on it there and then. Awful, my dear! Simply awful!

CARTER Is he staying?

SIGGINS Yes, I think so. I heard the Head say 'You'll have lunch with us', so he's staying to the end of the morning, anyhow.

HINCH (*wailing*) Oh, and it's my morning with Five B! It would be my morning with Five B. What shall I do?

SIGGINS The Third were simply awful, my dear. Joan Marriner said that the Euphrates was in Somerset. Can you imagine it! The Euphrates! In Somerset! I nearly killed her. And even then, he didn't say a word. Just sat there and said nothing. It was simply awful. Simply awful. And then Daphne Simpson upset the sand board and they had to start the map of Ireland all over again. I never hated Ireland so much before—not even in the rebellion. And there weren't enough blue beads for the towns to go round.

HINCH Oh, *what* can I do with Five B?

CARTER I really think the Head might have told me the minute he came, even if he walked in unexpectedly.

HINCH It *is* unsporting of him not to give us warning. He's worse than Grimmett. He would take a Swiss bun from a baby.

SIGGINS And Doris Palmer had hiccups in the middle and pretended she hadn't, instead of going out like any sane creature. In the end I had to say, 'Doris, I think you'd better go and have a drink of water, hadn't you?' I don't know what Mr Woodington Smith must have thought.

BOYD Who *is* Mr Woodington Smith?

HINCH Who is he? The H.M.I., of course!

BOYD What's that?

CARTER What's an——! Oh, of course, you did hospital work before. But I should have thought that in nearly a term of school you couldn't have escaped hearing about an H.M.I. An H.M.I., my dear innocent, is His Majesty's Inspector of Schools.

SIGGINS If only he'd *say* something! It's his not saying anything that's so awful.

BOYD What does this Smith man inspect?

CARTER Well, his own subject is French, but of course he inspects anything.

BOYD Why 'of course'?

HINCH Because that's his job. To come and pick holes in us.

BOYD (*comfortably*) Well, I don't suppose he knows anything about gym, thank goodness.

HINCH Oh, that won't make any difference.

BOYD Oh, won't it! It will if he starts to criticise.

CARTER My dear Boyd, don't make an enemy of Woodington Smith whatever you do. He could make things very unpleasant if he wanted to.

BOYD Does he insist on the Woodington?

CARTER Well, it's his name, isn't it?

SIGGINS You *would* think that a child who had hiccups would have enough common sense to know that she was a distraction to the others without having to be told, wouldn't you?

CARTER Did the Head stay all the time?

SIGGINS No, only for the first few minutes. That was one comfort. She smirked at him with that silly smirk of hers and tip-toed out. If she hadn't tip-toed no one would have looked at her, of course. As it was they were all watching till she shut the door. It was like an elephant being coy.

CARTER Well, I do think she might have come and told me he was here, instead of letting me find it out for myself. Especially since she wasn't with him all the time. Where is he now?

SIGGINS I think he's in the office with her.

CARTER Oh! Perhaps I had better go and see. Perhaps she hasn't made arrangements with Mrs Fox about lunch. It would be better, perhaps, if I——

[*Exit* CARTER.]

HINCH Hurt in her tenderest place! Isn't she priceless! I shouldn't wonder if the Head did it willingly. She must be as big a trial to the Head as she is to us.

SIGGINS Well, it's my day for taking School dinner, thank goodness, so I won't have to think up things to say to him at lunch. I think I deserve that bit of luck after the time I had this morning.

HINCH Oh, that's not so bad. I don't mind that so much. Anyhow, the Head is usually so all over him that you don't have to say anything. But what am I to do with Five B? You know what they're like. What am I to do with them?

SIGGINS They'll behave when he's there, and that's more than they'll do any other

time. You have that for consolation.

HINCH Yes, but you know what utter dolts they are. Mary Robbins said in an essay last week that the three great poets of the Renaissance were Burns, Shelley, and Yeats.

[BOYD *laughs.*]

BOYD Cheer up! That's nothing. She said in my physiology paper that we breathed through paws—p-a-w-s—in the palms of our hands.

HINCH That's your bad articulation, my dear.

BOYD Yes. I suppose I should have called them 'poorrrs', like Mac.

HINCH If I give them poetry they'll all be self-conscious and won't say a word. And I can't very well read a play with them. He mightn't consider that a lesson. And a grammar competition is rather childish for Five B.

SIGGINS Some beast has stolen my blotting-paper. (*Looking up from the attaché-case in which she has been searching, and challenging HINCH*) Did you go away with my blotting-paper?

HINCH I never saw your blotting-paper.

SIGGINS Boyd, did you take my blotting-paper?

BOYD Not guilty.

SIGGINS Well, someone has. I had a perfectly new sheet of blotting-paper in my mark book, and now it's gone. I do think it's hard that one can't leave one's possessions on the table without having them rifled. Some people haven't any conscience about other people's belongings. They think because a thing isn't worth five pounds, or something, that——(*She pauses for a moment, looking intently at something on the table. She leans forward quickly and snatches the blotting-paper from under the book which HINCH has been correcting*) There's my blotting-paper!

HINCH Your blotting-paper! What nonsense.

SIGGINS Oh, yes, it is. I know it by that red-ink blot. You took it out of my attaché-case, you beast.

HINCH My dear Siggins! Don't be ridiculous.

SIGGINS Well, if you didn't, where did you get it?

HINCH I took it out of the waste-paper basket, because there was none on the table.

SIGGINS And what beast put it into the waste-paper basket?

[Enter CARTER.]

CARTER The door is shut, but I can hear them talking inside. I thought I had better not disturb them. But Mrs Fox has been told about lunch. She's not pleased, either. That makes two extra. Some child is staying without notice, as well, it seems. She isn't a bit pleased.

SIGGINS That means only one helping of pudding, I suppose.

CARTER It doesn't matter. It's tombstone. I saw it on the table in the kitchen. (*She giggles her high giggle*)

HINCH What! Is Woodington Smith going to be offered that?

BOYD You should be glad that Mr Woodington Smith is going to suffer as you seem to be going to suffer with Five B!

HINCH I do think she might concoct something when Woodington Smith is here. Trifle, or something.

CARTER Heaven preserve me from any concoctions of Mrs Fox's. Oh, that nearly rhymed! I didn't mean to be clever.

HINCH We absolve you. Oh, what *shall* I do with Five B?

SIGGINS He mayn't come to you at all. He's got to spend at least one period with Grimmett, poor devil. Last time he said their French accent was more like Russian. Grimmett cried to Kelly about it afterwards. Don't say I told you.

HINCH My dear, everyone knew that.

SIGGINS (*aggressively*) *How* did everyone know it?

HINCH The same way as you did, I suppose. Kelly told them.

SIGGINS Well, I don't think it's very nice of Kelly to go round telling people——

[*The door opens, and the HEAD comes in. She is a buxom woman of forty-five, and looks rather like a successful farmer's wife. She is dressed in a very 'good', very ugly dress of slate-blue cloth with red-brown collar and cuffs. Her smile is saved only by its breadth from being a simper.*]

THE HEAD I know you won't mind; I've brought Mr Woodington Smith to see the new staff-room. As you know, it was largely due to him that we had it redecorated.

[*She ushers in MR WOODINGTON SMITH. He is a smallish, fair man, with pince-nez; about thirty-five, rather shy, and so harmless-looking as to be almost a nonentity. He belongs to the type who continually say*

'Absolutely!' when they have made a statement, because they feel that they have been insufficiently impressive. He has an Oxford voice and a dithering manner.

[At the entrance of the HEAD, CARTER, SIGGINS, and HINCH have leaped to their feet as men do at the advent of the orderly officer. BOYD removes her feet from the couch and sits up.]

THE HEAD You know everyone here, I think, Mr Woodington Smith. Oh, no. Let me present Miss Boyd. Miss Boyd is our new games mistress. I don't think you have met her before.

[BOYD gets unhurriedly to her feet.]

BOYD (*gently*) Hullo, Biffie.

SMITH Why, Nell—Miss Boyd! Good gracious! Who would have thought of meeting you here. Well, well. (*Holding her hand, and going on shaking it*) This is a surprise. I'm frightfully glad to see you again. I didn't know you did (*he waves his hand vaguely*) this sort of thing.

BOYD Yes, this sort of thing is my job, you know.

SMITH Oh, of course. I'd forgotten you people were so versatile. Dancing and massage and everything, all mixed up, isn't it? And so you've taken up educational work?

BOYD Yes.

SMITH That must be a change for you.

BOYD Yes.

SMITH They must miss you at the hospital. Is this your first term?

BOYD Yes.

SMITH I say, I should love to see you take a gym class. Would you mind if I came in for a little?

BOYD No, not a bit. There's senior gym in the afternoon, if you'd like to see that. They're the best lot. My show-off people, you know.

SMITH Oh, thank you. I'd like to see that. Well, I mustn't be holding up the traffic, I suppose. How is your brother? Did he go abroad?

BOYD No, he has a job with a silk firm now. He's married and awfully settled down at Ealing.

SMITH Oh? Well, I shall see you this afternoon if not before. You really don't mind

my coming in?

BOYD No, not a bit. But would you mind staying at the back, where they can't see you all the time? It doesn't really matter, but it's less distracting for them.

SMITH Oh, certainly—rather! The shrinking violet won't be in it compared with me. I'm awfully glad to have met you like this.

[*He bows to the others and turns to go. Then he remembers that it is the room that he has come to inspect. He turns back.*]

SMITH Oh, yes. A very nice room indeed. Charming!

THE HEAD (*a little strained*) The kindergarten was done at the same time, if you would care to see it. It is just at the end of the corridor here.

SMITH Oh, thank you.

[*They go out, the HEAD shutting the door. There is a meaning silence.*]

CARTER (*coldly*) I think you might have said that you knew Mr Woodington Smith.

BOYD But I didn't know I did. He didn't have a Woodington when I knew him. He was a patient at the Ministry hospital where I worked. I think I knew his name was Smith, but no one ever called him anything but Biffie.

HINCH And why Biffie, may one ask?

BOYD Well, it was B. F. really, only it got shortened to Biffie.

CARTER B. F.?

BOYD Yes.... Short for silly ass, you know.

SIGGINS Did you—was he one of your patients?

BOYD Yes. (*She goes to her shelf of books and extracts a small notebook, which she consults*) Siggins, do you mind if I have Mary Hopper from geography instead of from Maths? King says she mustn't miss any more maths before the exam.

SIGGINS Oh, *must* she have remedials just now!

BOYD Yes, she must. Her back's a lot crookeder than her chances in the exam.

SIGGINS Oh, well, I suppose you must have her if you want her.

HINCH Did you—was Mr Woodington Smith your patient for long?

BOYD About six months. Thanks, Siggins. I won't keep her a minute longer than I can help. (*She goes on consulting her notebook*)

HINCH You knew him quite well, then?

BOYD Oh, well enough. But I did twenty men a day, you see, so we can't be said to have been intimate.

[*A bell rings violently in the distance. MISS HINCH gasps, and begins to collect her books as one going to the scaffold.*]

SIGGINS Well, I have a 'free', thank goodness. And I shan't do any correcting, either. I think I'll go down-town. Anyone want anything?

CARTER Oh, yes, get me half a pound of butter, if you would be so kind. (*She is rushing round the room, collecting books which she packs into her attaché-case*)

SIGGINS Fresh?

CARTER What? Oh, yes.

SIGGINS International?

CARTER No, Maypole.

SIGGINS All right. (*To HINCH as they go to the door together*) Cheer up, Hinch. Good luck.

HINCH Don't talk to me!

[*This is meant to convey that one kind word may upset MISS HINCH irretrievably. They go out leaving the door open.*]

CARTER It *will* be all right about your taking those extra people of Fry's this period, won't it?

BOYD Oh, yes. That's all settled.

[*CARTER bustles out, leaving the door open. BOYD replaces in her tights' pocket the mirror she has been using in the process of combing her hair, pulls up her stockings, and tightens her suspenders. She is taking a last critical survey of the seams of her stockings, when MR SMITH passes on his way back from viewing the kindergarten. He is alone, having left the HEAD among the infants. He sees BOYD and pauses.*]

SMITH Hullo. D'you know, I can't tell you how surprising it was to find you here like this. (*Comes in*)

BOYD And it is very—amusing to find you here.

SMITH I say, you never would come out with me in the old days, so I'm almost afraid to ask you, but will you come out and have lunch with me in the town?

BOYD My dear man! And run away from staff dinner?

SMITH I shouldn't call it running away. It's a strategical retreat.

BOYD But they're expecting you to stay to lunch, aren't they? I heard them talking about it.

SMITH Yes, I usually stay. For policy's sake, you know. But I'll make that all right with the Head. She's an awfully nice woman, isn't she? A bit gabby, but awfully nice really. So—will you?

BOYD You'll miss the tombstones if you don't stay.

SMITH Tombstones? What are they?

BOYD Slabs of cold pastry. They taste like water-biscuit, and look like something dug up in an excavation.

SMITH I say, you know, I never imagined you in this sort of—milieu. Do you like it?

BOYD Oh, yes, rather!

SMITH (*doubtfully*) What do you like so much about it?

BOYD I like the kids.

SMITH Oh, yes, I see. But——(*He finds himself unable to express what he means and gives it up*)

BOYD Why do you put the wind up everyone here the way you do?

SMITH Me! Put the wind up them! What nonsense.

BOYD But you do. You frighten them into fits. It's nothing short of bullying. They blanch at the very mention of your name.

SMITH Nell! You're not serious, are you? Why, it should be the other way round. They're a dreadfully intimidating lot, really. That Carter woman, for instance. She makes me feel like a small boy who's been caught stealing jam. Absolute fact! I'm always afraid she'll ask my opinion about a timetable or something. She's a whale for timetables, and timetables never were my strong point.

BOYD No, you were always late.

SMITH And you were always angry.

BOYD I was never angry!

SMITH No, you let it be understood that you were not greatly pleased.

BOYD I had no idea that you were such an august person, of course.

SMITH I wasn't then. I was just schoolmastering. But one of my uncles knows an

old bird in the Board of Education, and he wangled this for me.

BOYD And do you like it?

SMITH Oh, rather! Frightfully interesting job. And of course, it's all rot about their being frightened of me. I'm as mild as milk. I never say anything. I have to shove in a little report now and then, but I never say anything damning, you know. Just enough to earn my keep.

BOYD Well, perhaps when one becomes an H.M.I. one frightens automatically, as it were.

SMITH Oh, nonsense! What would they be frightened of? I say, you will come and have lunch with me, won't you?

BOYD I've just remembered that I've only a burberry to wear. It's a staff habit. We put a burberry on as a matter of course to save us having to think about our clothes. But if I go out to lunch in it on a nice bright morning like this it will be a deterrent for the rest of my life. Do you mind suffering for my ultimate good?

SMITH You're coming, then? By George, it is frightfully nice to see you again.

BOYD You'll have to take me to a 'Burberry' place, you know. Somewhere where they say 'Mash or chips?' I don't know that it will be very dignified for an H.M.I.

SMITH I say, don't rot. I'll go anywhere you like. Shall I wait for you at the front door when the last bell goes?

BOYD Yes, I think that would be best.

[Enter CARTER, through the open door.]

CARTER Oh, I beg your pardon. I had no idea.—So sorry.

[She makes a movement to withdraw.]

SMITH Oh, please don't go, Miss Carter. Miss Boyd and I were talking over old times.

CARTER I didn't mean to intrude. I just came back for a book I forgot. It's on the table, I think.

SMITH I'm just going. (To BOYD) *Au revoir*.

[Exit SMITH.]

[CARTER searches frantically round the room.]

CARTER You're rather late for your lesson, aren't you?

BOYD Yes, a little. I thought perhaps one waited to be dismissed when one was addressed by an H.M.I.

CARTER Where is that book? I'm sure I left it here. Have you seen my Ovid?

BOYD No. Where is the dinner book?

CARTER Under the notice-board. Oh, dear, and now I can't catch Mr Woodington Smith, and I wanted to consult him about the new timetable. I know he'll find fault with it if it isn't given to him for approval first. What are you doing with the dinner book?

BOYD I'm scoring out my name.

CARTER Aren't you staying to dinner, then?

BOYD No. I'm going out to lunch with Mr B. F. Woodington Smith.

[Exit BOYD, leaving CARTER staring after her.]

CURTAIN

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Staff Room* by Gordon Daviot]