

Socrates' Assistant

Bernice Fox

AT THE start of every new quarter, Mr. Edwards would hunt up his discharge pin, and for the first week he'd shift it from one suit jacket to the other until he, and the pin, had met all his new classes. It was bad enough, Mr. Edwards felt, to be an English instructor; what little brotherly love the pin might arouse in the bosoms of his hard-bitten veteran students ought to be utilized. But the wearing of the pin, in itself painful to Mr. Edwards; and the meeting of new classes all the time, created strange and unnatural patterns in his behavior. And what went on in his mind . . . well, that was not his responsibility.

It was the pin that did it. Mr. Edwards imagined the damned thing fairly trumpeted for notice. He was sensitive to the student glances that rested on it; the men's eyes sometimes softening a little; the women student's not in the least impressed. But it wasn't really to impress anybody that he suffered the pin, Edwards convinced himself. It just made it easier for him to do what he had to do the first few days of each quarter.

First of all, he always had to tell them his name. He'd get up and write it on the board. This, the Dean always stressed, was a good psychological device for capturing the class attention. But Mr. Edwards knew very little about the practical side of psychology and as far as he could see, it accomplished nothing and only left him standing with a piece of chalk in his hand. And so, like a dispirited actor who'd over-learned his lines, he would stand, yearning to sit down, and begin the tiresome task of explaining what the course was about, why it was one of the most important courses offered, what the minimum requirements were, and how much material was to be covered. Always, when he began this speech he fancied the faces stared back at him without any evidence of human emotion. But always, before he'd progressed into the minimum requirement phase, he had identified shock, contempt, amusement, consternation, skepticism, worry, fear, and . . . here and there, murderous hatred. It was here that the discharge pin both helped and hindered.

"It won't do you any good to waste your energy hating me for all the work I'm going to make you do," Mr. Edwards silently

advised his veteran students, while aloud his voice coasted on through his introductory remarks. "It'll do you guys good to have to buckle down and dig hard for a grade . . . and earn it. I'm your buddy. See? I got a pin, too. They let me wear it for doing the same kind of ear-banging you did in the service. I know just how you sacrificed. And just how scared you are now, coming out of that pleasant dream, back to dull routine. It's going to be a helluva come down to actually work again. No more all-night crap sessions after pay day. No more 72-hour drunks. No more riding around the world, free, on transport planes. No more blowing your last twenty and borrowing another until pay day. No more women fawning over you and telling you how nice you look in your uniform. You look like hell, now, if I may say so—in these assorted ensembles you're privileged to wear. Even there, you have an advantage over me!"

At this point, Mr. Edwards' explanation of the requirements of English 102 usually took on a tinge of needless rancor which his listeners found vaguely fearsome. It was because he was thinking bitterly, "Sure, it's all right for *you* guys to wear your old beatup combat jackets . . . your parachute boots . . . your service overcoats . . . your good comfortable flight gear—yes, by God; even your fatigues to class. But if I even wear G-I socks, it's not considered proper. I've got trunks of that G-I stuff, too. But will you let me wear it? No. It doesn't look 'right' on me. A college professor, you seem to think, is supposed to wear a different suit every day, and starched white shirts, and ties, and suffer! Damn you. You're so stinkin' critical. But it's me that's got to shave every day. It's me that's got to worry whether my laundry will come back before I run out of clean shirts. You sure as hell don't. You big lucky stiffs. All you gotta do is decide which ungodly combination of shirts, pants, and jackets happens to be handiest. . . ."

At a little later point, in his discussion of the distasteful things to come in English 102, Mr. Edwards would appear to cast out the darker thought that had been possessing him and allow a brief note of compassion to pad his tone. This was where he began stating the number of themes that must be handed in during the quarter, and his more or less hopeless wish that some of them would show a little more originality than the "What-I-Did-On-My-Vacation" variety so prominently featured in high schools. Always, when Mr. Edwards got on this wistful subject,

he invariably forgot his own martyr complexes. The thought, always fluttering weakly in a corner of his mind, now buzzed into excited power dives that *this* class might . . . just might have in it a kid with some imagination. Maybe, even one with a flair for writing. Even a grain . . . a tiny morsel of talent, that's all Mr. Edwards asked. Such a thought never failed to thrill Mr. Edwards . . . that ever-thwarted, ever-persisting little hope of his. And he'd scrutinize the faces, actually looking hard at their twitching masks, into their eyes, and be thinking.

"Why don't I ever get to know any of them, I wonder? All these excitingly different personalities. If I just knew them . . . even the ones with the fire-proof curtains drawn across their eyes . . . maybe if I could ever talk with them, I'd find out a lot of things. Oh hell! why should I want to find out anything? Here I go getting sentimental again. Teaching's not like that. I wonder what ever gave me the idea it was? It would be, though, if there were more time. As it is, when *could* I talk with them? Oh-oh, there's that Hatcher girl I had last quarter. She's pretty good . . . My God, I think I told her she was! Mistake. Shouldn'ta told her. Now she'll expect A's on everything she turns in. I think I even went so far as to invite her to stop in at the office sometime, and maybe I could help her with her short stories. She'll probably do it, too! I must've been mad. I can't be wasting time shooting the bull with students. Not with all the papers I have to correct and all the reading assignments to look over, and tests to make out. That's all I am . . . a machine! Running on alternating current. First this set of papers, then the next, then the next . . . no time of my own. Damn! if I only had more time. . ."

And here Mr. Edwards frowned and soared into abstractions in what he was telling the troubled and subdued class. His words went on automatically reiterating with biting sarcasm that English was nothing for anybody of normal intelligence to tremble over. They could, he assured them without conviction, turn in good themes if they'd just remember . . . and on and on, his words flowed effortlessly over worn thought beds, leaving his mind to wander off alone and afraid, where forelorn thoughts echoed in the mocking stillness. "What about Time?" Why should I resent these kids' intrusion, nights when I'm huddled before those towers of theme papers? I want to know 'em. I want to be invited to dinner in their trailers. I want evenings

with 'em, noisy, laughing, arguing, around a table, drinking coffee . . . everybody talking at once and not quite able to tell what it *is* they mean. Well, hell, they haven't got time, either. Even if I did set aside the early hours . . . and only got five hours sleep instead of six . . . nope, it just can't work out. . ."

Just a few minutes before the end of the first hour, after he'd succeeded in antagonizing the entire class, Mr. Edwards would seem to emerge suddenly from the grim preoccupation that had been bothering him. He'd casually assign a whopping big theme and then walk back to his chair to sit down. And though he'd smile, dismissing them, he'd notice how cold the steel chair felt, and a pestering mental note would be recorded again. "Damn, I've simply got to scrape up the money somehow for a new suit pretty soon. . ." and then the class would clump out and he'd hear them murmuring in the hall, consoling each other, deciding this was going to be a "rough" course.

Always, after the first week or so of each quarter was safely started, Mr. Edwards would find it necessary to go away for a week-end. He'd look haggard and be nursing a quiet case of the shakes for a few days after that, but he'd keep his mind on his lectures a little better. And his discharge pin would be lost somewhere among the junk on his desk.



Picture

J J S, Jr.

One long low lake,
Two long low skies,
Two round white moons,
Like two dead eyes.

I hear three sounds—
Winds sweep the lake,
The weeds grow long,
Thin glass hearts break.