

The Teacher

Miss Hunkin was a formidable lady. She wore box pleated skirts that swung as she walked in her sensible lace up shoes. Her usual demeanour was uncompromising. It did not do to cross her.

I was about 8 or 9 years old when I moved up into her class, having left behind the kinder and rather elegant Mrs Francis.

There are 2 or 3 things that have stayed in my memory about the year I spent in Miss Hunkin's class. There was the daily chanting of a list of numerical facts relating to measurement that we were supposed to remember and find useful one day. It started with "12 inches 1 foot", as I recall and ended up with something about rods, poles and perches. I still have no idea what either of the last three signify. Luckily I have never needed to refer to them.

There was an unfortunate incident during the weeks before Christmas. We had been given the task of designing and making our own Christmas wrapping paper but the first part of the task was quite tedious, involving measuring and drawing 2 or 3 inch squares all over a sheet of paper, so that we could produce an evenly repeating pattern. During the morning we were instructed to go and collect our daily bottle of milk from the crate and take it back to our work table where we could sit and drink it.

I duly collected my milk and on taking it back to where I was working, somehow dropped it or knocked it over. A large white puddle spread all over my friend's work. I was absolutely mortified and looked around for a cloth or something with which to minimise the damage. Miss Hunkin bore down upon me like a cruise missile, shouting at me, something like – "You clumsy child! Now look what you have done!"

I was well aware that physical co-ordination was not my strong point, so did not need to have it pointed out to me and in any case the spillage was a complete accident. My "punishment" was to rule up a clean piece of paper for my friend, who was as upset by the haranguing I had received as by having her festive efforts spoiled.

Luckily I have a happier memory of being in Miss Hunkin's class. She taught us country dancing and I loved it. I loved the music and the sequential nature of each dance and the challenge of remembering that sequence. I looked forward to those lessons like no others.

Many years later, soon after I had qualified as a teacher myself, when I was visiting a friend's family who still lived in the Cornish town where we had grown up, I met an elderly Miss Hunkin in the street. She was so interested to hear what I was doing and was so amiable and friendly. It was like meeting a different person.

Country Dancing

We are standing in a ring, hands linked

Waiting for the music to start

The ancient gramophone whines and crackles into life

And off we go

In 2, 3, 4, out 2, 3, 4

In 2, 3, 4, out 2, 3, 4

Turn and make a daisy chain

Swing your partner round again

I love the pattern and sequence of the dance

Its order and logic make perfect sense

I am intrigued by the names of the dances

And turn them over in my 9 year old mind

Circassian Circle – is there a country called Circassia?

Trip to the Cottage – where is this cottage?

Bonnets so Blue – why not pink or white or yellow?

Thady you Gander – such strange words – is it something to do with geese?

Our teacher is a formidable lady
She is not to be argued with
Her gaze scans the playground as we practise for the festival
Like Wellington before Waterloo
Are all her troops ready and in the right position?

I did not know then that one day I would be a teacher too
I can only hope that I never inspired in my pupils
The fear that she kindled in me

We welcome a spell in the fresh air
Away from the tyranny of the squeaky blackboard
All unaware that we are learning to train our memories and to work
together
Useful lessons indeed.

Jan Rees April 2022