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From Black Teacher

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Abstract
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I began to despair of ever getting a teaching post. There had been a time when I'd arrive back at my digs each night and expect my wise and sympathetic landlady to hand me a letter saying I'd been fixed up at last from the Divisional Office.

But as the months went by I didn't really expect a letter any more. I cast around in my mind for some other way to get into teaching and it seemed to me that a job in a church school was the answer. I had always been a good Anglican - an ex-Sunday school teacher - and I regularly attended a church in South London. I knew they wanted an infants' teacher in their local school and so I applied.

I wasn't even called for an interview. The priest put a fatherly hand on my shoulder and told me, 'You see it's difficult, my dear. I know you're a good person and Christian, and I'm sure you're a gifted teacher, but don't let's forget that the children are at an emotional age. And then there's the parents. I'm afraid they just wouldn't accept you.'

He said this with the implication that I should understand. Well, I didn't. There was no one in the school doing anything I couldn't do. And the parents, who were they? Once a week Christians, to be sure.

I was becoming short of cash for Christmas, and one lunch-time I saw a card in a window littered with junk, advertising clerical work. Thinking that a change from Mr Coppett and Co. was about due, I pushed the door open. A bell muted with dust and age pinged gently. No one stirred. I peeped into the deep gloom. It was then I noticed a man sitting at a table eating a ham roll. Fiercely he bit off a large mouthful and, as he chewed, a slither of ham danced on his chin like a worm on a line. I stood waiting and after what seemed like hours, he turned his head ever so slightly.

'Hello,' I said. 'Came about the job.'

'Can't you read the card? It says no blacks wanted.'

I went to have another look at the card.

'It doesn't,' I said.

'Well, it bloody well ought to. I don't expect blacks to come 'ere pestering me when I'm 'aving my grub. You clear off - you hear me? Clear off.'

That was my only effort to earn more money for Christmas. The festival brought a flurry of activity to our office.

'Cor,' said Hilda, 'I can't 'ave all this cutting done wiv two 'ands.' And
fussed some more.

On Christmas Eve Mave, who always preferred last-minute shopping, slipped away to the market and came panting up the stairs, carrying a large Christmas tree.

‘Hi, hi!’ said Hilda. ‘What we got ‘ere then? Ooh, ain’t it lovely? Lovely and spiky. Now why don’t we ‘ave a tree like this and do ourselves a party?’

Mave looked up at her and said, explosively for her, ‘Here, take this one. I’ll get another on the way home.’

At the news of the tree we all became children again. Excitement grew from a spark to a flame. Hilda worked like the proverbial black, decorating, prinking, handing, matching, chopping and changing the tree until it stood resplendent.

We went back to our desks and worked until four that afternoon. Then Hilda suddenly cried, ‘Shut shop, girls! Off to the workroom with you – drinks are on me.’

We followed her into the room. The large table on which she cut her dresses was beautifully set out with gleaming glasses and bottles of cider and sherry. She handed round the glasses brimful of drink – sherry for some and cider for others. Mave gulped her sherry and left soon after. That was more like Mave.

Mr Coppett still sat at his desk, pieces of paper crepitating at his touch, his back ageing and hunched. He sat there intent and involved – silently sabotaging, we thought, any enjoyment of the party. He seemed neglected, solitary and sad. Impulsively I took an undersized cone-shaped hat and placed it on his head.

‘We want to toast you, Mr Coppett,’ I said. He smiled briefly, as if I had made the most natural remark in the world, stood quite erect and waited.

‘To Mr Coppett,’ I said.

‘To Mr Coppett,’ reiterated all the others. He bowed, skimmed his sherry with his lips, removed the party hat as if it symbolised something rare and beautiful, and then with an expansive gesture settled down to his work again. He took no further interest in us and later disappeared like an apparition at dawn.

There was one further toast to come. As if inspired by my tribute to Mr Coppett, Sue stuck her face in Hilda’s and cried in her vibrant, generous way, ‘Three cheers for the old girl wot puts ‘erself out – for everyone!’

Hilda blushed a deep crimson, evidently touched by this quite unprecedented and unsolicited testimonial of regard. Or she might have been suffering a pang of guilt at the sheer, shaming untruth of it.

Anyway, she was momentarily overcome and left us briefly, murmuring, ‘I’m goin to ...’

We filled in the dread word for her.

Mickey elected himself Master of Ceremonies. He fished out a bottle of gin and drank it neat between swigs of sherry.
‘I like Christmas,’ I said, as I topped the glasses with the last of the sherry, and somehow, instead of leaving soon, we lingered.

‘So do I,’ replied Hilda. ‘Everyone does. I don’t know ‘ow they come to mix a nice time like Christmas with all them animals and such – cows, sheep, donkeys and all that lot.’

She made a wry face. ‘Fancy ‘avin’ that poor baby in all that cow dung. All them flies and smells.’

‘There weren’t any dung there,’ chimed in Liz. ‘Me Gran said God ‘elped them cows to ‘old it. ‘ave you ever seen any of it in the pictures about Christmas?’

I found this extremely amusing.

Just to show they really accepted me they gave me first go in what they called ‘the carsey’ saying: ‘Go on, Beryl, you can ‘ave first go.’

When I came out, Sue eyed me with a look of prurient curiosity.

‘Not bein’ rude,’ she said, ‘just bein’ inquisitive. What do natives do when they ...’

‘Go to bed?’ I asked.

‘You know,’ she said, self-consciously gesturing, ‘your monthlies.’

‘You mean when we menstruate?’ I asked.

She nodded.

‘Well, Sue,’ I replied with mock seriousness, ‘we swim! We jump into the nearest river and swim and swim for miles. Some of us swim for three days and some for four, but that’s what we do.’

I put on my coat and slipped out. The cold gripped me fiercely as I hurried to the bus-stop, past windows that now seemed tawdry with their flimsy paper-chains and cotton-wool snow. The shadow thrown by a street lamp showed that I still wore my party hat, an untasselled fez. I flung it into the gutter.

It was then that I saw a man watching me from across the street.

‘Hullo,’ he said. ‘How are you, my beautiful Caribbee?’

I didn’t know what to make of him with his spivvy clothes and heavily greased hair parted in the middle. I didn’t wait for more. I ran back to the office. Panting, I ran up the stairs and into instant comfort, directly they all knew what had happened. I’d been ‘chased’. This had a weird significance for them. It seemed we were sisters under the skin, all right, when it came to the threat of rape.

There was much talk about dirty old men.

‘Anyway,’ Hilda said at last, ‘it’s an ill wind, ain’t it? You see we forgot to give you your present. Fancy that, now. We got somethink special and we forgot to give it to you. Just the thing to cheer you up now you been chased.’

I opened the parcel. It contained a tiny bottle of perfume and a beautiful scarf of brilliant red.

‘D’you like that scarf?’ Liz asked, the deep concern in her voice ringing like a lump of sugar in an empty teacup. ‘I got you that. Changed it three
times, I did — just like traffic lights. First I got green, then orange, then I got red.’

I spluttered into my glass, and then I laughed. How could one cap that, especially when she was so obviously thrilled that the gift pleased me.

I got out my own small gifts and handed them around. I hadn’t forgotten them. It was just that I was mortally afraid of being the first to give ...