



Whee-ee-ee-oo!

The Under-Secretary's whistle dodged through the keyhole, along the corridor, and out into the street, where it frightened a tram off the line. People thrilled who heard it; it gave them the sensation of being turned inside out and held over the infinite by a single hair. That was precisely the sensation of the Under-Secretary. He had been in the department for twenty-three years, and the experience was quite unparalleled.

"Ask Mr Jones to step here," he said at length, taking his hand out of his hair. Mr Jones was a relic of even greater antiquity, and there was a chance that he would supply a precedent. Without a precedent a government official is a child lost in the never-never.

"Now, Mr Jones, can you explain those?" Mr Jones read the letters carefully, stroked his beard, meditated, and vowed he couldn't. "Totally unprecedented," was his verdict. The Under-Secretary gasped.

The female teachers of Nameless had resigned in a body. Nameless was one of the most important towns in the colony, and the thing was monstrous.

"Well," said the Under-Secretary after a pause, "you can request the lot to reconsider. It's the only thing to do." It was done, and each sent a reply thanking the Department, and stating that the resignation was final.

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Six months previously the transfer of Mr Rosie Drooney to the post of first assistant at the Boys' School at Nameless had been duly gazetted. Speculation as to his character and appearance was the staple of teachers' gossip until he arrived. His name was against him, some thought. "A man with a girl's name must be a ---", and the critic, a rather masculine assistant, who wore a dim moustache and always failed in needlework, closed her sentence with a sniff that spoke three volumes. Her friend, a susceptible P.T. 4, did not dare to dissent openly.

Mr Drooney arrived, and the floating impressions of him presently crystallised into a definite estimate — he was "queer." Drooney was a tall, loose-jointed, young man of passable looks and pleasant manners; but he had extraordinary eyes which looked right through you and out on the other side. Often, while he talked, he would break off abruptly; his gaze would fix and his form become rigid; for five minutes he would look like a body without a soul. Then consciousness seemed to return, and he would resume conversation. The teachers used to refer to this habit as "seeing ghosts." It was known that Drooney dabbled in hypnotism, and he was an excellent subject for a joke. Wilkins, his senior in the school, referred to him as "Dosy Loony." The Presbyterian minister invited him to join the Bible class, but was met with questions on the relation of Christian dogma to the Incomprehensibility of the Inscrutable which were both surprising and shocking.

Six months after "Dosy Loony" came to Nameless he had an idea. The idea was followed by an experiment. He had made hundreds of experiments before, and they never failed to fail. This one succeeded, and the results were — but you shall hear.

The first victim was the susceptible P.T. 4. She astonished her class one afternoon by stopping suddenly in the middle of a lesson and rushing wildly into the distance without her hat. Ten minutes later she turned up in Wilkins's school, breathless and dishevelled, and threw herself at Drooney's feet, clasping him tightly round the legs and murmuring terms of fondest endearment. The news was over the town like wildfire, but next day something still more awful happened.

Drooney was walking home, when five teachers darted at

him from behind a corner, and kissed him publicly in the street, hugging and clinging so that he could not shake them off without assistance. It was put down to sunstroke, but after the performance of the day before the scandal was immense. The most ardent of the five was the masculine assistant who had snubbed Drooney at every opportunity. Perhaps next in warmth was the head teacher with the highest classification in the town; while the others, pupil teachers in their teens, gushed "Darling, darling Rosie!" in every cadence of amorous laughing. Two of them belonged to the Y. Union, and had sworn never to kiss a man without the written permission of the president. These were the most shameless. It was frightful.

But there was worse to come. The same evening, just as midnight struck, Drooney's landlady was roused by a tremendous knocking at her door. She was a widow, and not afraid of men at night, so she hastily got into a dressing gown, and went to see what was up. Twenty-five female teachers were up — all the town contained but one — and running about the garden calling for "Rosie." Two or three were dressed, but the others were in nightgear of various degrees of picturesqueness, and looked like tombstone angels revisiting the pale glimpses of the moon. As Mrs Brown gazed, the twenty-sixth teacher ran up panting. She belonged to an outlying school, and could not get to the rendezvous as soon as the others. Her bare feet were cut and bleeding, and she had left half her nightgown on a stump.

Mrs Brown was horrified, although a widow. "You—you—you hussies," she shrieked, shaking her fist at them, "go home at once." But they would not. The neighbours had been aroused, and a crowd was gathering when Drooney came to the door and waved his hand. The twenty-six teachers fell asleep on the instant, and were wrapped up and carried home. The town was stupefied. People tried to exchange ideas, but words failed them. They could only make inarticulate sounds and gestures of idiocy.

Drooney was frightened. He did not go to school next day, but sat in his bedroom making experiments, while his face grew continually paler. It was late at night before he gave up. Then he wrote two notes, spent an hour in packing, and lay down for a short sleep before the train went.

In the early morning he slipped out with his portmanteau and walked quickly to the station. He had just got his ticket when there was a pattering of fifty feet on the platform. Drooney ran into the waiting room, and crawled under the seat. In another moment the room was overflowing with female teachers. He was pulled out and furiously embraced by fifty-two arms, the outlying teacher arriving just in time to add her quota. Drooney managed to free himself and waved his hand. The teachers were quiet at once, and he locked the door. Then he spoke.

“Ladies,” said Rosie Drooney, “I am a desperate man. In a moment of madness, angry at your indifference, I mesmerised you by a new process, and made you fall wildly in love with me. Unfortunately I cannot break the spell. I have tried, but it will not come undone. By making this pass” — and again he waved his hand — “I can hold your feelings in suspense, but only for a few minutes. You are placed in mysterious rapport with me, and involuntarily I control your movements. If you were my wife it would not matter, but this is a Christian country, and I cannot marry you all. There is only one way to release you, and that is to kill myself. This I am now going to do. Good-bye. In a quarter of an hour you will be free. Pray for me.” He moved towards the door.

“But — ” The susceptible P.T. started up and stopped him, whispering something in his ear. His face brightened. “Ladies,” he said, “I am a young man, and I have an aged mother who is entirely dependent upon me. I do not wish to die. A course has been suggested which if, for the sake of my aged mother, you can bring yourselves to approve, will — ” He could hardly be heard for the clamour at the door. As it was burst open, they fell simultaneously upon his bosom. “Yes, yes!” they said, “how could you doubt us.”

A policeman who tried to arrest Drooney for riotous behaviour was nearly torn to pieces; and next day twenty-seven resignations were on their way to the Department of Public Instruction.

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Some months later a Salt Lake newspaper contained the following paragraph:—

“By coach yesterday arrived among us Brother and Sisters (twenty-six) Rosie Drooney. They are from Australia, and received a hearty welcome from President Young. Sister Drooney, senior, who was also a member of the party, will be sealed to the President tomorrow by special licence. Some of the newly-opened Western land has been allotted to Brother Drooney. It is very gratifying thus to see the pure tenets of our faith victorious among the distant Gentiles.”

