

## Snow

Reg Taylor

Mrs Telfer was German and taught grade six. She was firm: 'You will not be late ... you will sit quietly ... you will finish your work ...' but she never hit anyone. By then she must have been in Australia long enough to be used to the weather, but some summer mornings she'd still lift the windows of the baking class room as high as they'd go as if there were a chance the outside air might be cooler. And once in class, when it was nearly Christmas, she'd put on a record called *A Spotless Rose* but took it off before the end because she said it made her think of snow.

She lived down the road on a small market garden like ours that her husband, Dickie, was supposed to look after while she was at work. Our mother was away studying in Adelaide and our father was on his own, and Dickie would make any excuse to come over and yarn with him about music. Dickie's favourite composer was Schubert and one day, after he'd taken all our records home and cleaned them, he picked one of Schubert's out of the box when he brought them back and said, 'Lotte Lehmann really goes to town on that one.'

Lotte Lehmann was a German soprano who was very beautiful when she was young and not quite so beautiful later in life, when she got a bit heavy. Mrs Telfer was a soprano too, Dickie said, and big as well and she wore her hair in braids and a photo I saw of Lotte Lehmann on stage reminded me of her.

Before the start of the Second World War, Lotte Lehmann had to get out of Germany to escape the Nazis, Dad said, but Mrs Telfer and Dickie met in Germany after the war had finished when he was in the Occupation forces, and they got married when she was allowed to come out here. The future must have looked bright for them then: Dickie was supposed to have a promising career as a pianist, but by the time they got married, either because of what happened to him in the war or for some other reason, he'd already started drinking and that was as far as his musical career ever went. He was small and neat and had a trim beard and he could be charming with women, but once he'd had a few drinks he turned into a clown.

One day, after he'd written himself right off, he pranged his car and got locked up for the night and by next morning everyone at school knew about it. When the headmaster stepped into the fight that afternoon between the grade seven teacher, Tommy Scales, and Mrs Telfer and told her, 'I really don't think you should be bringing your problems at home into school,' it made her gasp.

'Do you know what he has just done?' she demanded. 'He has pulled down a little girl's pants in front of the class and hit her!'

'She's twelve!' Tommy protested. 'And she deserved it.'

Tommy Scales was a returned man who'd punched a local copper on Anzac Day the year before and got three months in jail for his trouble. Once he was out, though, he took over his class again and carried on business exactly as before: when a pair of magpies who'd decided to build a nest in a sugar gum in the grounds started swooping kids he brought his army rifle into school and dropped them both. And when Lynette Ashley did something wrong he called her to the front of the class and pulled down her pants and gave her half a dozen smacks on her bare behind. She went white and wet herself and ran out the room crying but Tommy just smirked and told one of the kids to tip some sand on the floor.

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That was when Mrs Telfer stormed in. Tommy tried to wave her out the room at first but when she called him a *schwein*, he called her a 'Kraut,' and after a few more choice words he went to give her a clout. She got in first, though, and he was still digging himself out of the raincoats and school bags hanging up on the wall and kids were shouting 'Fight! Fight!' in the corridor when the headmaster came bouncing in.

'What the hell ... what's this?' he said, slamming the door behind him. 'You'll have us all up before the Department.'

Tommy was blowing hard and probably wishing he had his rifle with him, but he still tried to bluster – 'Won't do the kid any harm, smarten her up a bit' – while he was straightening his tie.

The headmaster didn't waste any time deciding whose side to come down on. 'Tommy's been here for twenty years,' he reminded Mrs Telfer. 'I don't think he needs to be taught anything about discipline.' He cut her off before she could say any more by making a big show of being even-handed: 'Let's have no more of this – from either of you!'

'Well, damn you to hell both,' Mrs Telfer said, and left them to it. The day wasn't done with her yet, though. When she got home it was dark and raining and Dickie was sitting inside – pissed again – and the house was just as she'd left it that morning: no bed made, no dishes done.

'Could you not even light the fire!' she shrieked, and Dickie jumped up like a puppet. 'Don't worry, don't worry,' he said, nearly going arse-up into the empty wood basket. 'I'll get you wood,' and he went out into the rain and launched himself into the wood heap and nearly took his foot off with the axe.

'Just as well we got here when we did,' one of the ambulance men said when they arrived. 'Much longer and he'd have been a goner.'

But Dickie lost his foot just the same.

When he got out of hospital they gave him a special boot to wear but otherwise left him to get on as best he could. He couldn't work his block anymore and the weeds got higher than ever, but he seemed cheerful when people ran into him, and if anyone mentioned grog he gave them a half-smile and said, 'I think I've had my share of fun.'

When we passed their house in the mornings it had always been quiet, with Dickie more often than not nursing a hangover, I imagine. Now we frequently heard him running up and down the keys of their piano and it reminded us that there really was life inside.

And then, at the end of the year, Mrs Telfer gave everyone a shock by saying she and Dickie were leaving. Dickie had family in Perth, she said, and they were going to go over there and both teach music and make a fresh start.

Before then, there was the end-of-year concert in the Cooltong Institute and Mrs Telfer was asked to sing as a way of saying goodbye. It was a bit awkward for the audience having to watch Dickie hoick himself up on stage to accompany her on *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*, but once they got going people forgot everything else and at the end Dickie and Mrs Telfer looked at each other and smiled as if they wished they could make the moment last.

Dickie really had no idea, though. People said he couldn't organize a free keg. On the day before they were due to leave, with everything packed, he decided he had to drive into Renmark to make sure his piano was safely loaded on the train, and then – on the way home – he got himself cleaned up by a semi-trailer.

I saw the police car come down the road and when I walked past their place Mrs Telfer sitting outside with a policeman next to her and her hair straggling down her face. 'God save us,' she said when she saw me. The policeman had tried to persuade her not to come in to the hospital

and see Dickie – ‘until they’ve had a chance to tidy him up a bit’ – but she was going in just the same.

She still left Cooltong – ‘There is nothing for me here now’ – but there were no farewells this time, and she wasn’t going to the West: she was doing the full circle, heading all the way back to Germany. Before Dickie died the thought of him and Mrs Telfer going and leaving everything behind had made me feel like one of those prisoners who cheer up when one of their mates gets out of jail, but now for some reason it felt as if no one was going anywhere.

Once Dickie was out of the picture it was as if Dad had taken over from his drinking, too. Some nights when he wasn’t too bad he’d try to make us listen to Beethoven or someone on the wireless, but there were other nights when he could hardly stand. Our block had never been big enough to be any good and once or twice now, when my brother and I came home empty-handed from doing a round of our rabbit traps, Dad served us up something too awful to eat and we went to bed hungry. With Mrs Telfer gone from the school, it was as if Tommy Scales had got his second wind, too. When I couldn’t pay for some school book he sneered in front of the class, ‘Looks like you’ll have to manage without it then,’ and when the others were going on an excursion one day and I couldn’t pay for that either I just got left behind.

Our mother hadn’t been back to see us since she left for Adelaide, not even for a weekend. She wrote, but in the end our father apparently stopped answering. He might have been feeling too guilty to write by that stage. He might even have imagined that her family in Adelaide had convinced her to leave him for good; they’d never approved of him. When he stopped talking about her altogether we started to wonder if she’d died.

Then I got a letter from Mrs Telfer. ‘I am here, doing the best I can,’ she said, ‘even teaching some English, which would make you smile.’ I wasn’t sure why she picked me to write to, although when she used to talk to the class about her home or pass around old photographs of her family I was one of the few who showed any interest. Now she said how happy she was to be back in Germany. ‘You would like it,’ she said, and this time I really could see her in one of those old timber-framed houses with flower boxes at the windows.

I thought about telling the other kids but after I spoke to Dad I decided not to. We were collecting wood out in the scrub when he explained that letters could be special private things and how his aunty once wrote to him and put a five-shilling postal note in the envelope for his tenth birthday and by the time he got home from school everyone in his family had read what his aunt had to say.

He hadn’t been drinking for a week. It didn’t necessarily mean much; lots of men up there got off the grog for a while, but most of them went back on it again. He was good to be with then, though; even his smell was nothing like the sour one Tommy Scales carried around. And he was cheerful: we had two acres of peas nearly ready to pick and he said if we weren’t let down by the weather we should do alright. But now, as it got dark and the south-westerly that had been blowing over the shallow slopes around us all day dropped, and there were just a few scraps of cloud where the sun had gone, when we asked, ‘Do you think there’ll be a frost, Dad?’ he could only shake his head. He was right to be nervous: next morning when my brother and I woke up under the veranda even our blankets felt stiff and the peas were ruined; the sun was out but the sap would have already frozen and burst the plants’ veins, I knew. But I watched our father – walking head down among the bushes till his trousers were soaked to the knees – without really understanding what it must mean.

We were young and didn’t know how poor we were, and it wasn’t till Dad started drinking again and let on that Mrs Telfer’s home in Germany had been flattened by a bomb during the

war that killed all her family and she'd had nothing at all to go back to that I started to think about what it must be like to be grown up and have to face things all on your own.

I wished it would snow then and bury us under it so our mother would never need to come home.

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