

## Fact in Fiction

*Educational Leadership welcomes fictionalized writing because we believe that many times ideas may be expressed as well, or better, in fiction as in the abstract language of research. Martha Inez Johnson of Children's Home, New Britain, Conn., tells us her story is part fact and part fiction—some of it pure fiction, we would like to believe. For we hope there are no Miss Allens and Miss Kings in American schools today. It is the young teacher in this story—with her intuitive understanding of a troubled youngster in her class—who breathes life into our thesis that Education Is People.*

### Sylvia's Story

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MARTHA INEZ JOHNSON

SYLVIA REED opened the door of the teachers' rest-room and looked with distaste at the sagging, faded drapes hung at the enormously long narrow windows. She was a little tired this noon. Miss Vernon and Miss James were discussing Tommy Ordway. Sylvia listened in silent pain. She seldom entered into these discussions. She was too new, too young, for one thing. And she would never have dared to say what she thought. Not to these veterans of the years.

Today, however, she could contribute a story of her own. It was about Dale Fisher.

Dale had come to her class in September, had struggled along until October, and then one day he came to her.

"I'm leaving, Miss Reed. I'm going to my mother in Chicago."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dale," she had replied. She had urged him then, she remembered, to try to overcome his habit of cigarette-smoking. Fourteen was too early to begin to smoke. He had seemed eager to respond to her interest. He was such a nice boy, but thin and droopy and melancholy. There was something back of all that, she knew. Something in his home was not right. She was sorry he was leaving. She had hoped she could help in some way.

Now it was the first of May, and Dale Fisher had returned to her classroom that morning. His mother had sent him back from Chicago to South Center after Christmas. He was to stay with his married sister and go to school. Through the principal's secretary, Sylvia had just learned the story. Dale had never entered school. His sister had supposed he was in school. He had left her home every morning, returned every evening. Where had he been? Certainly he had not told in the office the real reason he had not re-entered school. He simply had said, "I went to the country."

Sylvia had hoped he would tell her of his experience, that he would share with

her some of his thinking. She was trying to be especially gentle and sympathetic with him.

If they would stop discussing Tommy Ordway for a moment, perhaps she would tell them about Dale. The thought began to crystallize into words she could say. And it would make her more one with them. Sylvia so often felt isolated. Her unflinching belief in her boys and girls was in itself a cold, hard barrier. Now she was ready.

"You know his mother was Maybelle Sutton," Miss James was going on about Tommy. She had taught at Birnham for seventeen years and knew a great deal.

Miss Allen, who had taught twenty-one years in South Center City and most of that time at Birnham, cleared her throat and replied with heavy meaning,

"That's enough. A child of Maybelle Sutton is bound to be a nitwit. Do you remember the time she gave out two hundred invitations to a Sunday party to be held in Junction Grove? She telephoned the newspapers and had photographers come out. She had no money for food and no plans made at all."

There was an instant's pause—and Sylvia's thought about Dale, which had receded, rose to the surface again. Now she would tell them. It couldn't matter too much. They would find out anyway, and it might make her more one of them. She would say . . .

Miss Allen was shaking her grey curls in disgust. Miss Minton, quite young and new at Birnham, leaned forward eagerly, "And what happened?"

It was Miss James who remembered. "Only three or four came. She had told them to bring their own refreshments." Miss James laughed a little savagely.

Miss Jewel, corpulent, motherly, with wrinkles of kindness running around her cheeks, wondered, "Might it not have been a great longing in Maybelle's heart to be like the others, to have parties and gay times?"

Sylvia listened with bruised heart. Of course Miss Jewel was right. What would they say if she told them about Dale? That would be a choice incident. She COULD tell about Dale. The words she would use came again to the top of her mind, ready to float out upon her lips. She opened them in readiness. Miss King stormed into the rest-room. She was like a little rusty wire, partly bent, ready to snap at a touch.

"If John Brent doesn't behave, I'm going to send him out of my room to stay."

The story of Dale sank to the bottom of Sylvia's mind again. She wondered if she could stand another inventory of John Brent's faults. Sylvia lunched at the same table with Miss King, and with her sandwich and glass of milk she daily gulped down long tales of John's ungentlemanliness, his rudeness, his crude way of speaking. Maybe he wouldn't be so bad, she had often reflected, if Miss King weren't consistently and continually egrossed with his badness.

Miss King was going on about John Brent. Finally she stopped to allow a little breath to go in and out. The memory of Dale's story rose to the surface of Sylvia's thoughts again. She cleared her throat. It would be a strange tale to share with them. They would listen eagerly if she could tell something like this—a wrongdoing of one of her children.

But there . . . she opened her mouth . . . she started . . . "Did you know . . ."

The bell rang. Noon period was over. Sylvia rose slowly to her feet. The children would be waiting for her. In a dark space beside the door to her room Sylvia found Dale Fisher waiting. He looked at the floor, then quickly to her face, warm and eager. Courage came to him visibly in a brief movement of the jaw, a slight straightening of the gangling body.

"Miss Reed, I—I wanted you to know. The reason I didn't come back to school. My dad—he left us long ago. He lived by himself in the country. They told me when I came back he was sick. I found him. I went out every day, fixed the fire, got wood, water, fed him. Then spring come. It was so nice out there. Gee! Have you been in the country in spring, Miss Reed?"

His face lighted with the only gleam of serenity Sylvia had ever seen in it.

"Miss Reed, seems I couldn't leave dad then 'n' come to school. 'Sides he—he didn't get no better. He died—last week."

All the light suddenly as it had come was puffed out. Only darkness and a great, unchildlike weariness remained.

"I understand, Dale. I'm glad you told me. I'm glad . . ."—this was the most terrible unorthodox heresy, but Sylvia Reed was honest—"I'm glad you stayed away from school to help your father."

Ever so slowly and wanly the light flickered on his face again. He lifted his head and walked away with a solemn seriousness widening his eyes, tinted with a faint gladness.

Sylvia's eyes were shiny with the tears that lay on them. In an overwhelming rush of relief, she chanted to herself as she placed the key in her door, "Oh, but I'm glad, glad I didn't tell them."



### Paging China

March 25 to 31 is China Book Week. This occasion will give teachers and librarians an opportunity to call to the attention of students and the community the many fine books available on China and by Chinese authors. The January issue of the *Bulletin* of the American Library Association features articles on knowing and understanding our Asiatic ally and suggests ways of observing the book week. A six-page bibliography, *China: Selected References for Teachers*, has been prepared by C. O. Arndt and is available free upon request from the U. S. Office of Education. A list of informational materials on China may also be obtained from United China Relief, Inc., 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y.

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