

## **'A LAND FIT FOR HEROES'**

*The discharged soldier and the 'land fit for heroes' — an educational episode (with extracts from The Train and Other Ghosts by Arnold Ridley).*

The 'Edwardian Summer' ended with the Great War. If they survived the Flanders mud, the 'lions' who had been led by 'donkeys' in the trenches, frequently discovered that the 'land fit for heroes to live in' was a sham and a deception.

I was barely twenty-one, the possessor of an income of 13/9 a week disability pension and in a pretty poor state of health. For days on end I would suffer headaches so severe as to make coherent thought almost impossible. My other wounds ached abominably, and once the elation of return had worn off, it was succeeded by abysmal depression. My temper was vile. The slightest word of advice or minor criticism would arouse my defensiveness and send me into a blind rage. All my old friends were either dead or still in the services and I refused to make new ones, preferring to wander alone through the streets and gardens of Bath in a state of Stygian gloom. At last, quite suddenly, self-preservation came to my rescue. I realized that I had to make a supreme effort and pull myself together. The first fact that stood out a mile was that I must find employment of some sort.

In an effort to re-build his life my father decided to return to 'schoolmastering'. It seemed propitious that the educational authorities in Bath were advertising for certificated teachers.

I applied for a position. Everything seemed plain sailing when, a few days later, I received an invitation to attend the Education Office.

To my great astonishment I was offered an uncertificated post. The clerk in charge could offer no reasonable explanation and I asked for an interview with the Chairman of the Education Board himself, a pseudo-literary grocer prominent in Baptist circles.

'Why,' I asked, 'when you are advertising for certificated masters do you offer me, a University-trained and fully-qualified teacher, an uncertificated appointment?'

He hummed and hawed, blinking through his gold-rimmed spectacles and wagging his beard, while he digressed on the advantages I should enjoy by living in my home town.

'That is beside the point,' I argued. 'I am a fully-certificated schoolmaster and you admit you have vacancies. Why should I accept an uncertificated job at a salary considerably less than that to which I am entitled?'

He raised a reproving forefinger. 'Well,' he said, 'I was hoping not to mention this but you haven't been quite honest with us, have you?'

I asked him to explain.

'When you wrote and applied for a certificated position, you didn't disclose that you were receiving a pension, did you?' He leant back in his chair

and placed his hands together in a ‘magisterial’ manner. ‘Surely you must see that we couldn’t possibly offer a position on the higher rate of salary to someone who is in receipt of a pension, could we?’

This was my first experience of what at the time was common practice – attempts by employers, especially public bodies, to steal a discharged soldier’s pension by the simple means of deducting it from his salary. Once again I lost my temper. ‘Who’s been fighting and getting shot to buggery in this bloody war?’ I enquired. ‘Me or you?’

I was not employed.

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