

BROKEN WINGS

(Short Story)

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As Miss Reyes racked her brains for the title of an appropriate song for the next day's opening exercises, she realized how intensely weary she was and how badly she needed a shower and some of her mother's cooking. One day, if she dared, she would make her seventh graders sing "Why Did I Kiss That Girl" just for the fun of shocking her priggish companions. In the meantime, "Life Is but a Stream" would do. After all, even the measly forty-five pesos which she had to work night and day to earn was something to give to the mother who had mortgaged her lands so that she, Miss Reyes, might go to college.

"Life is but a stream,
Forever onward flowing.
Whether we will or no
Down the stream we are going."

Yes, down the stream and under the deep blue sea was where she would soon be, deader than a doornail, unless she passed the senior-teacher examination and qualified for a one hundred-twenty-peso job. At the same time that she was giving her room a final look-see, her thoughts went hopskotching over the various events that had wedged her where she was—in a job that kept her on tenterhooks and awake nights for a salary which, if put on a slide and viewed through a microscope, might be considerably more difficult to find than even the minutest and most wiggly microbe.

Really, thought Miss Reyes, it was the fly with the broken wing that had undone her. Just a few months over a year ago, she had graduated from the University of the Philippines, one of a

number of majors in English who finished with very high hopes for themselves and a remarkable ignorance of the great difference between practice teaching, so called, and grim reality. There was just one thing that stood in the way of a permanent appointment to a high-school teaching position, a job not to be sneezed at in those days: passing the senior-teacher examination. That she would pass the first one she took, in spite of all rumors about its being formidable, she did not at all doubt. Had she not completed the four-year course in seven semesters and passed the types A and B examinations effortlessly?

Came examination time in May, 1933. Most of her companions had enrolled in review courses but she could not, being unable to pay the fees. Not having taken any courses in mathematics in all of her stay in the University, she wished she could have had the benefit of a refresher course in the subject. At any rate, she thought she might be lucky enough to get even fifty per cent, the rating of a dunce, and she was not at all a dunce in her estimation.

The general information and the principles and methods of teaching tests were not at all easy, yet she felt she had not done so badly in them. The thesis was her special baby. Just wait until they read this, she silently commented. Already she had visions of the smart Miss Reyes, the most classily dressed and best shod of the teaching staff of the small provincial high school from which she had graduated. One hundred and twenty pesos was a lot of money. She would hire a cook and let her mother take a good, long rest.

She was going places, in her ruminations, when a voice intruded by announcing the mathematics test, which, strange to say, every one had to take and pass, even such as she who would never touch more than the four fundamentals with a ten-foot pole.

As the sheets containing the questions were being distributed, her heart did a fierce pizzicato, whatever that means, a rather surprising circumstance, since she had taken the first three tests calmly enough. This, my pet, is the deciding game for you, she told herself grimly. Please, God, I need to pass this test. Puffish me in some other way for my many sins.

With a deliberateness that would have put Ethel Barrymore to shame, she turned the question sheet over and looked at the first of the eight problems. Although it was of the inevitable if-two-men-can-do-a-piece-of-work-in-three-days type and looked harmless her three attempts resulted in three different answers. Using the eeny-meeny-miny-moo system, she chose one of the three. The second problem was one that involved pendulums. The formula for that one was buried so deep in her brains that even the world's crack archaeologists would have had a sweet time trying to unearth it.

If the second problem had her completely stymied, the third took the cake for sheer inanity. She had gotten as far as the seventh word "A fly with a broken wing crawled"—when she got a bad case of the *willies*. In her opinion, this was the last place for such a zany question. There was just one thing to do with such a fly and that was to step on it before it dragged its deadly cargo any farther. If the examiner had wanted to discover what they had forgotten about triangles, why had he not used some plain language instead of choosing such an impossible situation? But of course, whoever had time to watch the

antics of a fly with a broken wing could hardly be expected to use his common sense. The longer she looked at the question, the more her fury mounted. Looking back, all that she could remember was leaving the Normal School with a headache and a feeling best expressed by a minus sign.

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When she received her ratings after three horrible months of waiting, she knew that her twenty years notwithstanding, she was well on her way to being a raucous old woman. General Information, 77; Experience and Training, 75; Principles and Methods of Teaching, 70; Thesis, 87; and horror of horrors, 33 for mathematics!

That she lived through the next few days was something of a minor miracle and proved that she was not at all wanting in vitamins. Only the little that was left of her pride kept her from burrowing into the earth, mole-like and not talking to any of her acquaintances. Finally, her mother had taken her in hand and given her a lecture that had the same effect on her guts as the "I dare you" of one child to another. She had gone to the superintendent feeling like a pariah and asked for any job and here she was, the teacher in charge of a seventh-grade class, among a million other things. And she would probably flunk the second examination which she had taken.

A noise at the door put an end to her meditations. It was Nena, another teacher, and she looked like good news.

"My brother has just arrived from Manila with a copy of the paper containing the news of those who have passed the last senior-teacher examination. Your name is sixth in the list."

Her answer did not make very much sense to Nena. "Just by way of celebration, Nena, I'd like very much to step on a fly with a broken wing."