

Lieutenant America and Miss Apple Pie



stories

Tom DeMarco

P-4133: Psycho-Sociology

THE CATALOG DESCRIPTION OF P-4133 WAS SO PROMISING. It mentioned “elements of a Tichnerian macro-psychology,” and “a radical theory of sociopathy,” obviously good stuff. But then the first lecture was a major disappointment, at least to me it was. Professor Niedelmeir began by making a joke. We were ready to give the man a break and laugh at the appropriate moment, only he botched it so badly no one could tell when the moment was. He plowed on without even a pause. The first part of his comments on Tichner’s early work seemed like part of the joke. It was painful. I can’t remember much of what he said. I do remember that his collar tips began to curl up until, by the end of the class, they were pointed back up toward his chin.

By 9:30, at least half the class was asleep. Reardon, at the desk next to mine, had let his head fall forward onto his chest. He snorted out loud one time, causing a few twitters. In the first row, I could see the broad back of Palmer Porteus, the only graduate student in P-4133. He was sitting up straight at the beginning, and then slumping more and more as it became clear what an ordeal the course was going to be.

Perhaps I slept a bit too. I looked up as Niedelmeir was coming to the end: “Well then, class... I do think that is approximately all...

I mean, all that I had to say for this morning. In fact, it is all. Uh ... I don't suppose there are any questions?"

There weren't. It was still nearly fifteen minutes till the end of period. The Professor waited for questions. It seemed for a while that he might be prepared to wait the entire fifteen minutes. Finally Porteus spoke up.

"I'd like to say a few words to the class. If that's all right, sir."

"Oh. Sure. I guess." He waited at the lectern for Porteus to say his piece.

"Um, you can go," Porteus said.

"Oh." Professor N. looked down at his notes and then began to gather them up. "I won't be a moment." He dropped one sheet on his way to the door, looked back at it hesitantly, and then hurried out, leaving the sheet behind on the floor.

Porteus let a moment elapse before he stood and maneuvered his desk around to face us. Then he settled back heavily into his chair. He was very fat. "Well," he said, sighing. "Isn't this going to be fun? I can't wait for Lecture Two." Another pause. He was drumming his fingers on the desk. "I'm not sure how many of you stayed awake at all, but there was a critical piece of information conveyed over the last hour." He stared at us, challenging us to say what that might have been. "Something about our professor."

"The man's a nitwit?" Reardon offered.

"Exactly." Porteus nodded. "A nitwit. And we are in for an extended course in nitwitology unless we do something about it. And I do intend to do something about it. Life is too short for seventeen more lectures like that one. You are going to help me,

because I need your help. The reward for helping is that you might actually learn something, or at least be amused. So ... are you with me?"

Say what you will about Porteus—campus cynic, troublemaker, or whatever—at least the fellow has some presence. It was a relief to give our attention to him after bearing with Niedelmeir for most of the last hour. There were some nods around the room. Anyway, nobody left. Porteus went on to explain his grand plan. By the time he was done, the prospects for P-4133 were looking up.

Professor Niedelmeir was a pacer. At the beginning of Lecture Two, he paced to our left, mumbling something about Tichner's Premise of Cause. We sat up and paid rapt attention. Then he paced in the other direction. We let our attention lapse as he moved across the stage. By the time he got to the far side, we were, all of us, looking about distractedly. Then he moved back to the left and we focused on him again. A moment later, he was going right once more. Reardon yawned. I opened the magazine in front of me and began to read. Porteus sighed and slumped in his chair. Nancy Cavanaugh was looking out the window.

Within twenty minutes, we had him pretty well trained. He finished up the lecture on the left side of the room.

Porteus kept us after the class again. As soon as Professor N. was gone, he took a piece of chalk from the board and drew a line along the extreme left side of the stage. The line was only three

inches from the edge. "On Thursday, we're going to train him into this area," he said.

Sure enough, by the midpoint of class on Thursday, we had him tottering on the extreme left edge of the stage. Once he even fell off.

Meanwhile, Porteus was moving him forward little by little. He had told us to take a cue from him and laugh when he did. The first time was in the treatment of Tichner's early theory of Compulsive Ordinality. Porteus leaned his head back and laughed appreciatively. The rest of us yukked it up right along with him. Professor N. looked up, startled, not aware that he'd said anything funny. But then he smiled slightly as we continued to chuckle. "Yes," he said. "Well. Be that as it may." A few moments later, Porteus laughed again and we followed suit. The Professor laughed right along this time. He looked as if he was starting to enjoy himself, though he was unsure of what it was that we found so amusing in his words. Once he repeated a line that we had laughed at, obviously puzzled, and we laughed again, even harder. He grinned. Of course, Porteus had us laughing only when the Professor was near the front of the stage. By the end of class we had him balanced on the very front left hand corner of the stage.

In the classes that followed, we moved him to the right and then back to the left again. One day we moved him right out the door. He finished his lecture from the hall. There was some discussion about whether it would be possible to train him to scratch his crotch. We allocated one full class to that, but it took us only twenty minutes. In subsequent classes we got him to take off his jacket and his tie and to open his shirt. By this time it was spring

and the room was pretty warm in the mornings. It required the better part of two whole sessions, but we finally got him to take his shirt off entirely. We decided to strip him to his underpants by the end of term. We didn't make it, but we did get his belt off along with his shoes and socks. Porteus says we could have had him naked in another two weeks.

See the review from Kirkus on the following page.

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From Kirkus Reviews (July 15, 2002)

DeMarco, Tom

LT. AMERICA AND MISS APPLE PIE

Down East (208 pp.)

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Strong collection of 12 stories largely set in the author's home state of Maine, as was DeMarco's *Dark Harbor House* (not reviewed).

The opener, "Prince of Darkness" seems to promise more than it delivers. Young George, an overly well-behaved boy, treats the small wrist burn of a pretty young girl, a summer visitor to his island, and she tells him, "I'm going to have breasts soon. And when I do, you may touch them." One night on the mainland, George hears a hellfire sermon at church and, as he rows home in the fog, finds himself chased by a Devil hungry for girl-lusting sinners like himself. Does DeMarco dismiss opportunities that would delight Hawthorne and Washington Irving? Well, he's out for different fish, as he shows especially in the long title story, which turns out to be a Tarkingtonesque picture of Maine, served magnificently by its reserved voicing, and covering more than a century. It opens in the late 1850s, telling of a First Congregational minister and his wife who later gives birth to Cutie Pie, or Apple Pie, or just plain Pie Calderwood, who becomes Superior Court Judge Apple P. Calderwood. Apple's childhood sweetheart, Leslie, is a dim bulb in high school while Apple becomes class president. Leslie leaves to help the French air force fight Germany, becomes a leading war ace, returns home a triumphant national hero. Apple thinks they'll marry, but Leslie turns drunkard and marries a Philadelphia deb while Apple becomes the lone woman lawyer in the state to work with battered women. Once she saves him from booze, their amazing life together begins and leads to her defense of Bangor's Communal Kitchen in the Supreme Court. And don't miss "Proper Cover" about a stroke victim who wakes up paralyzed, with no visitors expected for days: "So this was how it was going to be."

Beautifully detailed stories, bathed in warmth.