

Here Beginneth the Second Lesson by Nigel Forde

MR. FLETCHER, a teacher of Ancient History, middle-aged, slightly stuffy, thinks he is one of the lads;
CULSHAW, a schoolboy. Lazy but very bright; the bane of every teacher's existence, **SAMANTHA**, will one day be a hairdresser;
DOREEN, quite bright but a bit of a plodder; admires Culshaw immensely,
BRISTER, can just about spell 'and'; sometimes sits the right way up but seldom moves.

The main thing to beware of in this sketch is lack of discipline among those playing the school children. Theoretically, any number of extra actors can be used to fill out the class, but the danger of upstaging the action is thereby increased. In many ways it takes more experience to play a bit-part than a main character. It is a fairly static sketch — the only actor who can move is he who plays the teacher — and the point of the sketch is lost if the arguments are not clearly presented; so pace and energy, though important, must not obscure the dialogue. The pupils' chairs are placed facing downstage and towards centre stage. The teacher's desk is similarly placed but on the other side. The pupils are waiting for the lesson to start; giggling, chattering discussing last night's TV, etc. Brister is deep in thoughtlessness. Mr. Fletcher strides in looking rather the worse for wear. He bangs his briefcase on his desk. No one takes any notice. As he yawns and pulls himself together the class quietens down and looks at him expectantly.

FLETCHER: Morning, everybody.

ALL: (With varying degrees of sing-song lethargy) Morning Mr. Fletcher.

FLETCHER: Right. Now. We're going to carry on this morning with our study of the staff room.

(There is a small murmur of bafflement)

CULSHAW: D'jer what, sir?

FLETCHER: (Bringing out his joke) Life in the Ancient World, Culshaw!

DOREEN: Oh, it's a joke.

CULSHAW: (Reassuringly) Must be Wednesday.

FLETCHER: (Who hasn't heard or takes no notice) Now, on Monday last we looked briefly at Christianity and the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. What did we discover about his actual birthday? Samantha? ac-

SAMANTHA: (Waking from her daydream) Er . . . that he was not born in the year nought, sir.

(The class is clearly surprised)

FLETCHER: Yes. Good. We can't be sure when he was born actually, but it was almost certainly after the year nought, which of course puts a big question-mark over whether he was born at all. (It takes a moment for this magnificent illogicality to sink into the class, but from this point begins **CULSHAW'S** determined attack on

FLETCHER'S credibility) Now, much more interesting from our point of view, is the remnant of another belief, another philosophy — the Stoic philosophy, which we find . . . the

CULSHAW: (Hand up, excited) Sir, sir!!

FLETCHER: (Wearily) What is it, Culshaw?

CULSHAW: Sir, there's a woman walking across the football pitch, sir!

(The class is delighted at something of real interest but quietens immediately **FLETCHER** speaks)

FLETCHER: (Icily) I am sure we are all indebted to Culshaw for his profound and helpful remarks on the peripatetic qualities of the female biped..

CULSHAW : But when was she born, sir?

FLETCHER : How on earth . . . (*Pulling himself together with dignity*) I have no means of discovering that, Culshaw.

CULSHAW : But that puts a big question-mark over whether she was born at all, (*Innocently*) doesn't it sir?

(*There is a pregnant pause*)

FLETCHER : On page 46 we find a brief outline of Stoic philosophy. It was popular with many people. It is a fine belief— strong, stark, courageous

CULSHAW : But was **it** true, sir?

FLETCHER : Culshaw, am beginning to find these interruptions irritating. Was *what true?*

CULSHAW : What the Stoics believed, sir.

FLETCHER : I don't think I quite understand what you're getting at, Culshaw.

CULSHAW : (*Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth*) Sorry, sir. I just wondered whether they believed in strong stark courageous truth . . . or a load of noble codswallop — sir.

FLETCHER : (*Rescuing what he can from the situation*) Ah ! So Culshaw knows what truth is! Well, well, well ! Ladies and gentlemen of 5B, this is an historic day..

CULSHAW : I dunno that I do know what truth is, sir. I just wondered if you did?

FLETCHER : (*Caught off guard*) Truth? Ah. . . er. well. . . truth is. . . ahern. . . truth is what is ultimately. . . urn... something which. . . er...

DOREEN : (*Who looked it up last week and recites*) Something which outlasts fashions and civilisations and remains whether anybody cares about it or not

(*Even **CULSHAW** is impressed. **FLETCHER** founders*)

FLETCHER : Er, yes. Thank you Doreen : well put. That's it. The unchangeable, the basis of the universe.

CULSHAW : (*Relentlessly*) So it wasn't true, then sir?

FLETCHER : (*Patiently*) What wasn't?

CULSHAW : (*Overreaching himself for once*) Stogie tism . . . stosket . . . what you said sir : them ancient beliefs.

FLETCHER : That would be a very rash assumption, Culshaw.

CULSHAW : (*Supported by the class*) No, sir ! You said! If no one believes it any more, if it hasn't lasted then it can't be the truth.

ALL : Yeah. That's right sir. You said. Come on, Fletch. Etc, etc.

FLETCHER : (*Quieting them down genially*) Yes, yes, all right . . . in a way. But remember, my learned friends, there are many aspects of Stoic belief in that Christianity you're so fond of. Of course it is the central core of Christianity that is so different all and so difficult..

SAMANTHA : Sir, just 'cos it's difficult doesn't mean to say it's wrong!

FLETCHER : (*Bringing out his trump card*) Really Samantha? Well, I should have thought that, if all men were supposed to believe and accept it, it should be extremely *easy to understand* un-

DOREEN : Why do you say that about Christianity, sir?

SAMANTHA : Yeah, you don't say it about anything else.

CULSHAW : Things which you happen to know are true.

SAMANTHA : Things which *you* believe.

FLETCHER : Oh really? Such as what?

DOREEN: Well, arithmetic, sir, and technical drawing.

SAMANTHA : Biology.

BRISTER: Physics.

*(There is a moments pause as all turn to gaze at **BRISTER** with awe and wonder. Then back to the fray)*

SAMANTHA : Yeah, just because electricity is hard to understand, doesn't mean it isn't true.

DOREEN : Sir, you're always saying things need a bit of effort *(And here she quotes him. The others join in as they recognise it)* Nothing great was ever achieved without hard work.

FLETCHER : *(He is embarrassed)* Yes, yes, yes, all right.

SAMANTHA : Well, there you are, sir. Why should it be different when it comes to learning about God?

FLETCHER : Well, I'll tell you, Samantha. You see, all the basic questions about physics, astronomy, geonomy, physiognomy and so onomy . . . er . . . so on, have been answered and, what's more, been proved to be true *v experience*. Now there are some very basic questions about God which cannot be answered.

CULSHAW : There are some very basic questions about cancer, sir, like how and why. But that doesn't stop people dying from it.

DOREEN : Sir, you said it was important to prove things by experience; well, there's a lot of people who have proved Christianity by experience. Why don't you believe them'?

FLETCHER: That's very simple I haven't had the experience myself.

CULSHAW: 'Ere, has Mr. Fletcher ever been up in a rocket?

SAMANTHA : *(Wondering what he is getting at)* No.

CULSHAW : Ah, so he doesn't believe in space-travel.

DOREEN : *(Catching on)* Has he ever fallen under a tube train?

SAMANTHA : *(Enjoying this)* No!

DOREEN : So — he doesn't believe in electrocution then!

SAMANTHA : Hang on ! Has he ever been to Greece?

DOREEN: Don't think so.

CULSHAW : Oh dear, so that probably doesn't exist either.

SAMANTHA : I wonder why he bothers to teach us about it?

DOREEN : It's awful when you think what he's missing.

SAMANTHA : Yeah, shame really!

DOREEN : I mean, he doesn't believe in the Indian Ocean, Battle of Waterloo, Oxygen..

CULSHAW : Brain surgery, radio waves, childbirth..

DOREEN : Igloos, kangaroos.

FLETCHER : *(Who has had enough)* All right, all right, that'll do. This is all getting rather silly and the arguments are fatuous.

CULSHAW : *(Quickly)* Yeah, well they're all based on your reasoning, sir.

FLETCHER: *(Grasping his ear and giving it a tweak)* Look, Culshaw, you ignoramus; I can read books, understand historical documents and believe what intelligent people tell

me.

CULSHAW : Yeah. Always excepting The Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

FLETCHER : Yes. NO !! Urn, that's different. It can't be proved.

DOREEN : Any more than anything else. Right!

FLETCHER : All right. **OK.** *(He is quiet and very much in control of his mounting impatience. But he's got them now)* You prove to me, you prove to me, that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed. ac-

(The room falls quiet as Culshaw takes up the challenge)

CULSHAW : You prove to me that your great-granny actually existed.

FLETCHER : Well . . . that's easy; I've got her birth- certificate.

DOREEN : Forged.

FLETCHER : *(Disconcerted. He tries again)* And . . . and photographs. Plenty of photographs.

SAMANTHA : Fakes.

FLETCHER : *(With the quiet certitude of desperation)* Look, there are lots of people who actually remember her.

CULSHAW : *(Quietly but finally)* They're lying.

FLETCHER : I've got diaries!

ALL Ooooooh. Tut tut!

SAMANTHA : Very unreliable sources.

DOREEN : Subjective.

SAMANTHA : Biased.

CULSHAW : Emotional.

FLETCHER : *(Not even trying to remain calm anymore)* Look, this is ridiculous ! How can I prove anything if you constantly disallow the evidence?!

CULSHAW : *(With mock surprise)* Isn't that funny, sir? That's exactly what I would have said about Jesus. Oh there is just one other thing I could bring up as proof, since you things can be proved by experience. say

FLETCHER : *(Pause. But he is interested despite himself)* Well?

CULSHAW : *(After a long pause, without removing his eyes from FLETCHER)* I've met him.