



Mr Archibald

by Oliver McLean, Arrowtown School
Winner of the Elsie Locke Writing Prize 2015

Edward kicked at the gravel and quickened his pace. It wasn't his fault his father hadn't signed up. Why couldn't he fight like everyone else?

"Looking for some eggs?"

Edward spun around, the small stones crunching underfoot. It was Mr Archibald, the shopkeeper. In his hurry, Edward had walked straight past the store.

"Yes, I was," Edward said, wondering how Mr Archibald had known. No one knew very much about Mr Archibald. He had moved to the district from Dunedin about ten years ago. Edward knew he was old and troubled – but by what or whom, he had no idea.

The shopkeeper rearranged his wrinkled face into a smile. "Sit down, boy," he said. "Something on your mind?"

"No, I just need some eggs," Edward said, lowering himself onto a bench.

Mr Archibald ignored this. "I saw your father yesterday."

Edward clenched his fists. "He's a coward! He's too scared to do his duty like all the other men around here. It's not my fault, so don't blame me."

Mr Archibald raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"I'm sorry," Edward mumbled. "It's just ... I hate my father."

The shopkeeper reached into his pocket and pulled out a pipe. "How can a boy hate his father?"

Edward looked away.

"Listen well, lad. In my life, I've done many a thing and been to many a place. But nothing at all, *nothing*, has changed who I am more than war."

Edward looked up, confused. "But you're too old to go to war, aren't you?"

"This time around maybe. But not last time."

"You were in the Boer War?"

The smoke rings from Mr Archibald's pipe seemed to freeze in mid-air. Edward's eyes bulged with excitement.

"I was."

"What was it like? Did you fire a gun? Did you win any battles?"

Mr Archibald gave a long, tired sigh.

"You know, a long time ago, I used to think much the same way you do. But war isn't what you think it is."

“How do you mean?” asked Edward.

“I mean that war is confusing. It has nothing to do with us – not you, me, your father, or any of our soldiers at the front. The only people wars are about are the leaders. The ones who drag us into their mess.”

“But we’re fighting for the Empire, aren’t we? We’re loyal to the British.”

“Oh yes, the British! Open your eyes, boy. Look around you. Do you know how many lives have been destroyed by the British Empire?”

“When I was fighting the Boers, we would raid houses. We killed people farming their own land. Forever, I have to live with the knowledge ... the memory ... that I have killed.” Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes. “I am a murderer,” he said quietly.



“Sir, I ...,” but Edward didn’t know what to say.

“You may think your father is a coward, but what he is doing is braver than anything I’ve ever done in my life. He’s risking his reputation, risking everything, by refusing to kill people. Be proud, boy. You can grow up saying your father didn’t make the same mistakes I made.”

“I never knew,” Edward said.

They talked some more, until the sun broke through the grey sky and then fell behind the pine-topped hills. As the red dusk spread through the valley, Edward stood.

“Thank you, sir, for everything. I don’t know how to repay you.”

Mr Archibald stood up, too. “Please, call me Bill. Now let’s get those eggs.”

Later, Edward began the walk back home, thinking of all the things he had to say to his father.

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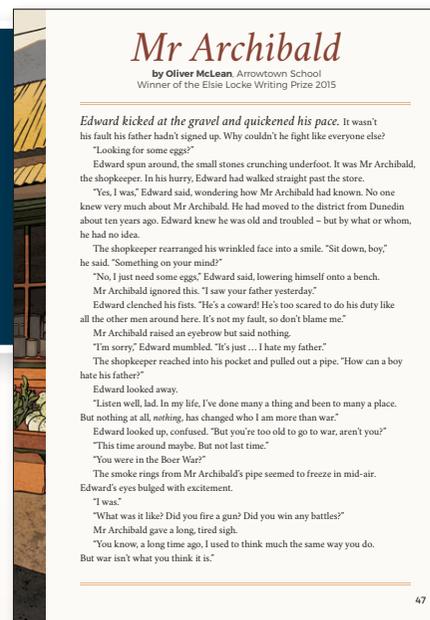
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