

Michael's Town Hall

By Elsie Locke

New Zealand Department of Education © Crown

I was waiting at the window when Michael and his mother arrived. Michael jumped out of the car first and ran to press our doorbell. He kept it ringing noisily after I had opened the door.

"Hello, Mrs Locke," he said happily. "That's Mr Locke's bell. He likes to hear it." On another visit Michael had seen my husband putting in the new bell and pressing it to test the sound.

Michael is a full-grown man, but his mind has not developed with his body. He is intellectually handicapped. He lives at Templeton Hospital and Training School, except when his mother brings him out on special occasions, like this one.

Jack, my husband, heard the bell ringing, and came to the door to greet Michael and his mother. Michael was wearing his best suit, and his mother had on a fur jacket over her long green frock.

"You look as if you're going somewhere special," - Jack said.

"I've got a new tie," said Michael. "D'you like it?"

"Spot on," said Jack. "Lovely bright colours."

"What about me?" I said. "Am I fit for the big night?"

Michael looked over my blue dress and jingled my belt of silver discs and chains.

"That's pretty," he said "We're going to my Town Hall," he explained to Jack.

The way he said it, we might have been going to the Queen's Palace. Nothing in Michael's world loomed larger than the new Christchurch Town Hall and what was to happen inside it. It had only been open for a few days. Tonight there was to be a special concert with the National Orchestra and our two leading choirs, and Michael's mother was to be among the four hundred singers. -

"My mother's getting married tonight," said Michael, to Jack.

He means I'm wearing a long dress, explained his mother softly. To Michael, every long dress is a wedding dress.

"I haven't seen inside the Town Hall yet," said Jack.

"They just finished it," Michael told him. "I went up the stairs. Mum's in the concert. Come on, get going."

He hooked his arm around mine and led me to the car, where he shook hands vigorously with Jack and said, "See you later, Mr Locke."

* * * *

It would be hard to say whether I was taking Michael or whether he was taking me. He had me firmly by the arm when we came from the car park past the elm trees.

"I saw the bulldozers," he said. "They weren't allowed to knock the trees over. They're still here!"

For the last two years, on almost every visit to the city, he had watched the building grow. He had seen the machines digging holes for the foundations, and the cranes lifting the slabs of concrete and copper. I myself had passed the building site many times, but without looking so closely. Michael had the feeling that the Town Hall in some way belonged to him.

Now the finishing touches had been added. Leading up to the entrance doors were lines of fancy paving like the rays of the sun, inviting us in. Above the doors hung the brightly-coloured Christchurch coat-of-arms, and above that the banners were waving.

The foyer was hung with lights like clusters of silver moons. Michael's mother left us there, because she had to join the other singers in the dressing room.

"I'm going to show you around my Town Hall," Michael said to me. "Look, red carpet on the stairs! This way!"

We walked up like V.I.P.s, past the counter for selling ice cream and coffee, and admired the mural with its gay colours and whirly-twirly lines. The artist must have painted them with thoughts of music and dancing and dinners and exciting happenings in the different parts of these buildings.

We came down the other stairway and re-crossed the foyer.

"Come on - the fountains!" said Michael. He had seen them being put in, but without the water playing.

Outside the glass doors was a terrace with tawny - coloured steps leading down to the Avon River. The fountains were like great dandelion puffs, shining white and pale gold.

Michael let go my arm. He was speechless. He didn't seem to notice two small children who bumped into him as they ran down the steps. The trees were silvery in the

floodlights, the pool was shining and the river twinkling, and on the other side the old fountain in Victoria Square was sending up its jets of water lit with crimson. Neither of us had expected all this.

"There are *two* fountains," said Michael at last.

"The one in Victoria Square has always been there," I explained. "Let's look at them from the terrace."

At the edge of the paving, Michael stopped in astonishment. Two weeks earlier he had seen this terrace, a mess of yellow clay. Now it was a neat green lawn.

"How did that grow so fast?" Michael asked.

"I think they must have cut blocks of grass from a lawn somewhere else," I said, "and laid them out here like paving stones."

Michael knelt to see if this was true. "Here's the join," he said. "Look, Mrs Locke, come here and look! They brought the lawn in blocks. I'll tell Mum."

"She'd like that," I said. "We'd better hurry. It's time we went inside. The foyer was filling with people and looked very jolly. But Michael and I didn't take much notice because now we must get to our seats. We entered the auditorium by door number 6, the number on our tickets, and were shown to our places. Soon there would not be a single empty seat. People were waving to their friends or looking up at the galleries, at the sound panels above them, and at the high ceiling with its lights like distant stars.

The orchestra was on the stage. The choir seats were filled with men in dark suits and women in white or dark green.

"Where's Mum?" asked Michael.

"She said she'd be above the big drums," I said. We looked along the row of green dresses and then Michael saw her. He nudged me excitedly: "There's Mum, look, there she is!" Her face was turned towards us and we knew she had been looking for us too.

When the conductor came on, the audience clapped and made ready to listen.

Michael loves music. He has been taken to concerts since he was very young. Sometimes he whispered to me, "Those are the violins" or "Listen to the flutes." Sometimes he copied the conductor with his hands. During the first short half of the concert, the orchestra played, and the choirs sat listening, as we did.

At interval, the orchestra went out and Michael jumped up full of energy. "Come on! Walk around!"

We went out to the promenade, which Michael had been told was made for walking in. It goes in a circle round the auditorium. People were standing in groups, talking, or drinking coffee, or sitting on the wide seats along the windows, or walking like ourselves.

I saw a couple I knew and introduced them to Michael, who loves to meet people. My mother's in the choir, he said at once. "She's getting married tonight." But we didn't stay talking long. Michael soon tugged at my arm, saying, "Come on! Walk around!" and we kept on walking around the promenade and greeting other people we met.

By the time we returned to our seats, Michael was really excited. He clung tight to my arm and cuddled up to me like a very little boy. I found it hard to remember that he was a man, taller than myself, but I noticed the two young girls beside me looking at him with interest.

"This is Michael," I said. "His mother's in the choir."

"You enjoyed the orchestra, didn't you, Michael?" said one of them.

"This is my Town Hall," said Michael.

"He came often to see it being built," I said.

"They made a wonderful job of it," said the girl. "Somehow it comes alive when the people come into it. How do you like the lights, Michael?"

"Big lights, big building," said Michael. "I like the mural-" He lifted his hands to show its shape.

We had hardly noticed the conductor coming on stage. Suddenly the auditorium was filled with great chords of sound. Michael's hands fell on his knees. He had forgotten the mural and the girls and everything else. His mother was standing with the four hundred singers, the orchestra played more softly and the human voices went soaring to the stars of the ceiling.

They were singing the Bible story of Beishazzar's Feast. Now the music was wild with rejoicing; now it was sad and tender; now it was angry and savage. Some of the time Michael held on to me. Then he relaxed and smiled. We were all living, for an hour, in faraway times and places, among great events.

It was over. The audience clapped and cheered and stood up. Then slowly we all made our way out to the foyer, not saying much because our heads were filled with echoes of the music. I steered Michael to the place where we had arranged to wait and we watched the people go by.

Here I am! said his mother's happy voice after a few minutes. "Did you both enjoy it? Did we sound better in the new auditorium?"

"I've never heard anything better," I said. I didn't know how to describe the feelings that came with the music. But Michael expressed it by throwing his arms around his mother's neck and hugging her.

We did not go straight to the car. "Come on, see the lawn, Mum," said Michael. "They brought the lawn in blocks. I'll show you."

* * * *

WHEN we got home, Jack had supper ready, with buttered spice buns, coffee for us and hot chocolate for Michael.

"My Town Hall is lit up now," Michael said. "Big lights. Two fountains, a new one and an old one. And a mural. And a lawn brought in blocks from another place."

He was still full of words when his mother said, "We'd better go home. You must be tired."

"Not tired. Don't have to go."

"Mr and Mrs Locke are tired and so am I. So come now."

Michael thanked me, not in words, but with a warm hug. Then he went to stay the night with his mother: Next day he would return to the hospital with his story of red carpets, golden fountains, silver lights, and all the other wonderful things he had seen. Only he would never be able to find words for that which touched him most deeply - the music.