

Banking on Sam

Or, How Miss Dyer, Otherwise "Schoolmarm," Undertook to Polish Up a District

By LILLIAN BEYNON THOMAS

IT was six o'clock when Ida Dyer reached her destination. It was her first venture out into the world and she did not feel very brave. It may seem a little thing for the initiated to go to a new district to take charge of a new school, but for the young girl who has her spurs to win it is a serious venture. Ida alighted from the train with a fluttering heart. There were a number of people on the platform, but no one spoke to her although they all looked at her with some show of interest. She stood with her valise in her hand for a few seconds wondering what she should do, when she noticed that the train was the big attraction. It was evident that no one had any intention of leaving the platform until it was gone. She felt that she would lose a friend when it pulled out, so she put her grip down and watched it with as much interest as the others.

When the train pulled out, a middle-aged man, who had looked very critically at her, sauntered up to where she was standing, and said, "Air you Miss Dyer, our new school marm?"

"I am Miss Dyer," Ida said. She could not accept the "marm" just yet.

"Give me your valise," he said, "I am Mr. Curson, the secretary-treasurer. I will take you to your boarding place."

"Thank you," Ida said, handing him the valise and falling into step beside him.

They walked along for some blocks in silence, Ida vainly trying to think of something to say. At last she said, "Have you a large school here?"

"Fair to middling," Mr. Curson said; "it is not so big just now."

"Have you children going to school?" Ida asked.

"No; I ain't married,"

Ida was confused and blushed as she said, "I beg your pardon."

"Oh, it's alright," Mr. Curson said, "I'm old enough, but none of the girls will have me."

As he said this he looked at her in a way that made her shiver. She did not blame the girls, but she wished to be polite, so she said, "No doubt your Gill will turn up some day."

"I'm always hoping," he said, "but I have a little to say in the matter, and I won't marry anyone but a school marm."

"I should not think that teachers would make good housekeepers," Ida said.

"They can learn," Mr. Curson said, hopefully, "and it's brains a man like me wants. I never had any schooling to speak of, but I know a few things about life. I want someone as can add the frills."

Wishing to change the subject, Ida said, "Are the children hard to manage?"

"They ain't no saints," Mr. Curson said, "the last teacher chased them around the school yard with the bell. He never managed to round them all up at once. We kept him until there were more outside than in, when he was teaching. We decided that didn't pay and we let him out."

"How did the teacher before that get along?" Ida asked.

"She cried when things went wrong, and they were generally wrong. We expelled half the scholars, but it didn't do no good. Then she got on the wrong side of old Sam Hughes, and she had to quit."

"Who is Sam Hughes?" Ida questioned.

"You'll find that out quick enough if you run amuck of his kids," Mr. Curson said. "He owns half the town and anyone that crosses him gets out, if he has to drive them with a horse whip."

"Is he on the school board?" Ida asked.

"Yes, he's on everything, and what he isn't on he runs anyhow. I advise you not to cross him."

"I'll do my work as well as I can," Ida said, "and if it does not please him, I cannot help it."

"You talk like a fresh one," Mr. Curson said, quite frankly; "we didn't want you, but two others were trying to get fell down on us. We wanted someone with experience, for this is not an easy school to manage. New ones all start out with high faluting ideas like yours."

"I do not know what you mean," Ida said, indignantly.

"You'll know quick enough if you don't keep on the right side of Sam," Mr. Curson said, "and here we are."

He stopped in front of a small house and pushed on the gate. A tall, thin woman opened the door and stood waiting for them.

"Mrs. Simpson, this is the new school marm," Mr.

Curson said; "you will be able to look after her and give her a few pointers about the place."

"Good evening," Mrs. Simpson said, extending a hard, cold hand. "Well I guess I should be able to if anyone could. Won't you come in, Mr. Curson?"

"No, I must be going back to the store," Mr. Curson said.

"I'll warrant the store won't see much of you for the next few weeks," Mrs. Simpson said, with a loud laugh.

Ida did not understand just what was implied, but she felt uncomfortable as she followed her landlady into the house and up to a plain, but clean, bed-room, which she was told she would have to herself, except when the eldest daughter, who was attending collegiate in a neighbouring town, came home for holidays.

"I do not want to keep the teacher," Mrs. Simpson explained, in a loud, piercing voice, "but the teachers just won't stay any place else. I said I would not take another when Mr. Pye left, but the trustees said to me, 'Mrs. Simpson, you simply must keep Miss Dyer when she comes,' and you see they brought you right here."

"If you do not wish me, surely I could get board at the boarding house," Ida said. She did not like Mrs. Simpson, she did not like the rough severity of the furnishings, and she did not like the idea of sharing her room. She hoped to get away without giving offence.

"No doubt you could get something at the boarding house," Mrs. Simpson said, in an ominously low voice, "and no doubt a nice name you would get living among all them men. But you can go if you want to, and I'll wash my hands of you. To think you'd treat me like this, after all the trouble I've been to, to fix this room up like a palace for you."

"I did not say I wished to leave you," Ida protested, "but I do not wish you to take me to board, if it would mean too much work for you."

"And do you think I can't do as much work as the next one?" Mrs. Simpson said, rolling up her sleeves and showing her bony arms. "I ain't afraid to work alongside of any woman I know, and as for you, you have a muscle like a chicken."

TO prove her point she caught Ida's arm and squeezed it until she winced. Anxious to change the subject from boarding houses and muscles, Ida asked whether she was likely to have a large attendance at school.

"You may and you mayen't," Mrs. Simpson said, setting her feet wide apart and placing her hands on her hips, the elbows well out. "It all depends on how they like you. You ain't bad looking," she continued, examining Ida critically, "and that may bring the big boys out earlier than usual this fall. Just now only the small children are attending. They'll come pretty regular if they like you, or if you let them run the school. If you lick them when they need it, like as not none of them will attend."

"Then I suppose they will say I am no good," Ida said.

"It all depends whether you keep on the right side of old Sam Hughes and Jack Curson," Mrs. Simpson said, shaking her head. "If they back you up you can do most anything. If they don't you might as well quit at once."

"Do you mean to say that the kind of teaching I do will not count?" Ida asked.

"I spose it makes some difference," Mrs. Simpson said, "but it takes more than a good teacher to hold this job. Oh, I can tell you I don't envy the person that gets this school."

"How can I keep on the right side of these men?" Ida asked.

"Well," Mrs. Simpson said, thoughtfully, "Curson will want to marry you. If you can kind of pretend you are considering it for a month or two, he will get over it and think he is tired of you, and you will have his sympathy, in having missed the chance of such a good husband. It won't hurt you and it will appeal to his vanity. You won't likely have any trouble with Hughes until his eldest boy Sam starts to school. If you cross him, and the old man hears of it, you'll have to get out, and you won't take any character worth speaking of with you."

"But surely people know him," Ida said.

"Yes, they do," Mrs. Simpson acknowledged, "but

it's queer how a bit of scandal lives and travels no matter the place in which it was bred."

Ida was thoroughly discouraged with the prospect before her. If she had not needed the money so badly she would have returned home by the first train. She did consider the matter, but when she thought of her long wait for a position, she determined to stay just as long as she could.

Her first month at school was quite encouraging. The children appeared to like her, and she had no difficulty in controlling them. They learned quickly and the attendance was fairly good. Indeed, she began to feel that the children were her best friends, but she was not allowed to think that her work would always be so easy. Everyone warned her that her trouble would begin when the big boys started to school.

MR. CURSON visited her quite regularly, but she managed to make his visits a family matter, and avoided seeing him alone. She knew that sooner or later the test must come, and it made her half sick to think that she hadn't the courage to meet him and tell him what she thought as she would any other man under the circumstances.

"Why should I toady to him?" she said to herself over and over again. "I am doing my work well, and it is degrading that I must sell myself for this wretched position. I owe it to the world to be pleasant and do my work well, and I'll not pander to the sickening conceit of an old man, and the money of an ignorant boss." But while these fine sentiments sounded well, and appealed to her sense of womanliness, whenever she saw either of the men she had learned to fear, she shrank from any conflict with them. She had never in her life come in contact with men of their stamp, and she had not thought it possible that she would ever need to be on speaking terms with them. She feared their coarse, rough brutality, while she thoroughly despised them. They were people with whom she felt she had nothing in common.

She knew matters had reached the climax, when one evening, after the children left the school, she saw Mr. Curson coming through the gate. Two little girls were going out at the time, one of them the child of his youngest sister. She ran to him and he took her in his arms. Ida was surprised to see the gentle way in which he stroked her hair, and she was close enough to see the hungry look in his ageing eyes as he kissed her pretty, pink mouth. In that glimpse she saw a Mr. Curson she had not known. She saw an old man hungry for love which for some reason had been denied to him. He wasn't a creature belonging to a different sphere, he was just a lonely old man feeding on the husks of life. She felt sorry for him and all her fear was gone.

She met him at the door and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Curson, did you come to ask me to marry you?"

Mr. Curson looked surprised. He stammered and looked uncomfortable, and said, "Well, not exactly."

"They told me you would ask me to marry you, and then in a couple of months you would be tired of me," Ida said.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"The people around here," Ida said, indifferently.

"Did you believe them?" he asked.

"Yes," she said; "but, do you know, I think you are not playing fair."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They told me I must keep on the right side of you and Mr. Hughes if I hoped to get away with a decent reputation as a teacher."

"They said that, did they?" Mr. Curson asked.

"Yes, they did," Ida said, "and they told me to pretend I was considering your proposal, and to favour Hughes' children."

"THAT was the advice you got, was it?" Curson asked, stroking his chin.

"Yes, and I was tempted to follow it, for I need the money, and, as you know, this is my first school, and I must get experience; but the more I thought about it, the more I hated the idea, and when I saw you playing with your little niece out there, I made up my mind to tell you just how things are. Now, I think I am doing pretty good work in the school, but I don't wish to marry you any more than you wish to marry me. Can't we be friends and play fair and square?"

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