

The Red-Headed School Teacher

By G. L. Redmond

Mrs. Green was baking biscuits when a breathless perspiring boy catapulted into the kitchen and attacked the water pail. "Well Bud Green, what in the world have you been doing to get het up so?" "Playing baseball," he said, and buried his face in the dipper. "New teacher's coming to-day," he announced, between gulps. "Who told you?" "Chesty Williams. She's going to board at Williamses." "Is it a lady teacher they're getting?" "I guess so. It's a woman anyway. Miss Graham, her name is." With these words he disappeared through the open door as impetuously as he had come. Half an hour later he sat with Chesty

Williams on the edge of the station platform, chewing plug licorice and expectorating freely.

"I'm getting all worked up," admitted Bud.

"So'm I."

"I hope she ain't one of them there religious kind, like Miss Parker. 'Member Miss Parker that was here before old Baldy?"

"I guess I do. She was 'a corker—wasn't she? 'Member the time she asked you what you was going to do when you growed up, and you said 'Chaw tobacco', and she licked you for it?"

"Yes, and 'member the time she whaled you for calling old man Rollins an old geezer?"

"Yes, but she never made me cry." "Her? She couldn't make anybody cry. She couldn't hurt a flea. Look at all the times she licked me, and I never cried."

Other boys began to arrive, among them Gumy Smith. Gumy (alias Montgomery) was a good little boy who wore glasses, and loved his teachers, and never wanted to stay home from school or Sunday school even when he was sick. He was regarded by the other boys as hardly human. Gumy carried a huge bouquet of roses, for the teacher. At sight of him the other boys broke out into shouts of derision.

"Look at the sissy."

"Look at the softy."

"Going to give a bokay to the teacher so she won't lick him."

Gumy rather welcomed these attentions. It was the way things happened in the Sunday school books, and it made him feel like a hero. He knew that retribution would some day overtake these boys, in the form of sickness, and then he would come and stand at their bedsides and speak gently to them, forgiving them for all the cruel wrongs they had done him; and they would feel awfully mean and small, and promise that if they ever got well again they would try to be good and kind and noble, like he was. So far retribution had hung fire, and he himself had corralled most of the sickness in the neighborhood, but his faith in the books remained strong and unshaken.

Little girls in stiffly starched dresses began to appear; young ladies with parasols strolled over to the station, and stood around in groups, discussing the important subject of dress; matronly persons with fans came and sat on benches in the shade of the station house; the adult male population could not be expected until the train was in the yard. Then they would come rushing over in their shirt sleeves to stand around in breathless and expectant attitudes, as if awaiting the arrival of friends.

When the train pulled in, there was a taking of hands from pockets, a straightening of backs, a smoothing of dresses, a craning of necks that must have amused the newcomer, if she had seen it.

She descended the steps alone. At sight of her the crowd involuntarily gasped. Red hair! undeniably red; it was the outstanding feature of an otherwise uninteresting exterior. The face was that of a school girl, with pale blue eyes, and a chin that seemed undecided whether to advance or retreat.

Mr. Williams made himself known, and took charge of her luggage; the other members of the school board came forward to be introduced, but with no noticeable enthusiasm; and the general crowd dispersed feeling that in some underhand way Providence had taken advantage of them.

Bud and Chesty retired to a private place to smoke tea leaves and review the situation.

"There ain't nothing religious about her, I reckon," Bud said.

"No, but look at her hair. Ma says people with red hair always have fierce tempers. She must be a holy terror."

Bud nodded gloomily. His mercury had dropped several degrees since train time.

"Did you see Gumy give her the bokay?" he asked.

"Yes, and she took a holt of his hand and talked to him for quite a while. I bet he don't get a licking or anything all year. I wisht I'd thought of a bokay."

"So do I. That little rhinoceros always things of them things."

Bud was sent to bed early that night, as usual; and as usual he hung out of the bedroom window smoking a short clay pipe and looking at the stars. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful out of doors; the frogs were singing down in the creek; the soft night-wind fanned his face and carried away the smoke of the burning tea leaves; it would be a delightful world, he thought, if school had never been invented. After six weeks of glorious freedom, of daily visits to the old swimming hole, of baseball games against the Rockland nine, of wonderful adventures with Happy Rollins on the farm, where there was a lake with an island in it; after six weeks of real living, it was enough to break a boy's heart to go back to a poky old school-room to wrestle with fearful inconsistencies in the spelling of the English language and worry over the troubles of those perennial nuisances A. B and C with their "certain piece of

work." Bud sighed as he knocked the ashes from the pipe and drew in his head. He wondered if it was the policy of the new teacher to administer punishment on the hands or on other parts of the person.

School opened on Tuesday morning. It was not at all the kind of morning when a person free to choose would have elected to stay indoors, and Bud on his way to school was tempted to turn aside to other pursuits. Only a mixture of curiosity and fear of consequences prevented his leaving the straight and narrow path.

However, he dawdled along, went for a ride with the drayman, and managed to be late for school. His entrance attracted little attention. Miss Graham was telling a story, and every eye was fastened on her with absorbing attention. Bud caught only the closing words of the story, but his curiosity was aroused. He heard the boys talking about it at recess, and drew near to listen.

"Wasn't that a peach of a story?"

"I bet it was. And maybe she don't know how to tell a story."

"And wasn't that great where the fellow just give his wrist a little twitch, like that, and the other fellow's rapier flew about fifty feet. I wisht I had a rapier."

"So do I."

Bud wondered what a rapier was, but he was too proud to ask. That night when he went home from school he asked his mother about it. She said: "I'm sure I don't know, child, what a rapier is. Who did you hear talking about it?"

"Happy Rollins."

"Then like enough it's a swear word. I wouldn't play with Happy if I was you."

"No, it ain't a swear word, because Miss Graham told about it in a story."

"And didn't she tell you what it was?"

"This was thin ice."

"Why—she—no, not exactly."

"What did she say about it?"

Bud was losing interest in the rapier.

"Oh, she said lots of things. I guess I better get a pail of water, hadn't I?"

It was a long time since Bud had volunteered to get a pail of water, and Mrs. Green was puzzled. She was more puzzled next morning when he rose at an early hour, without being called and seemed anxious to get away to school in good time. She wondered if he had got religion again. Just the year before, a sweet-faced lady evangelist had come to town, and Bud, attracted by her sweet personality, and wishing to please her, had lived a painfully righteous life for two weeks, and then relapsed. Mrs. Green remembered what a relief it was when, at the end of the two weeks, Bud was caught running a tick-tack on the church windows on prayer-meeting night. She watched him now for symptoms of religion, but it seemed to her that he was too cheerful. This thought gave a new direction to her fears. She had heard that persons in the last stages of consumption often showed an unnatural cheerfulness. Bud did not look at all like a consumptive, but then you could never tell; sometimes the strongest looking people were really the weakest inside.

In the midst of these disquieting thoughts Mrs. Williams appeared at the back door; ostensibly to borrow a cupful of baking powder, but really to refresh her soul with a season of gossip.

"I can't think what ails Chesty," she said. "This morning he got up without a word from me, and went off to school as if he liked going to school."

Somehow Mrs. Green felt relieved. "My Bud did the very same thing."

Mrs. Williams smiled knowingly.

"It looks to me," she said, "as if the new teacher has got the children witched. Do you know, I never was so mistaken in a person in my life. When I seen that red hair that day at the station, I says to myself, well God help them poor children; but mind you, she's got a way with children that you'd be surprised at. Our two twins thinks the world and all of her. She's always got to kiss them good-night or they can't go to sleep proper. The other night, just for fun, she says, no, I can't kiss any little boys good-night unless they let me spank them first; and mind you, them two youngsters turns around without a word and backs up to her for a spanking. You should have seen her grab them and hug them. She certainly does know how to handle children."

"And I will say this for her—I've boarded a good many lady teachers,

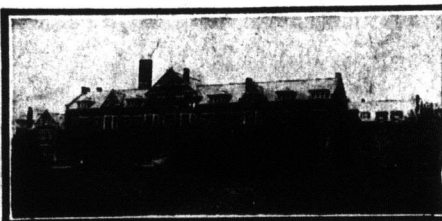
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