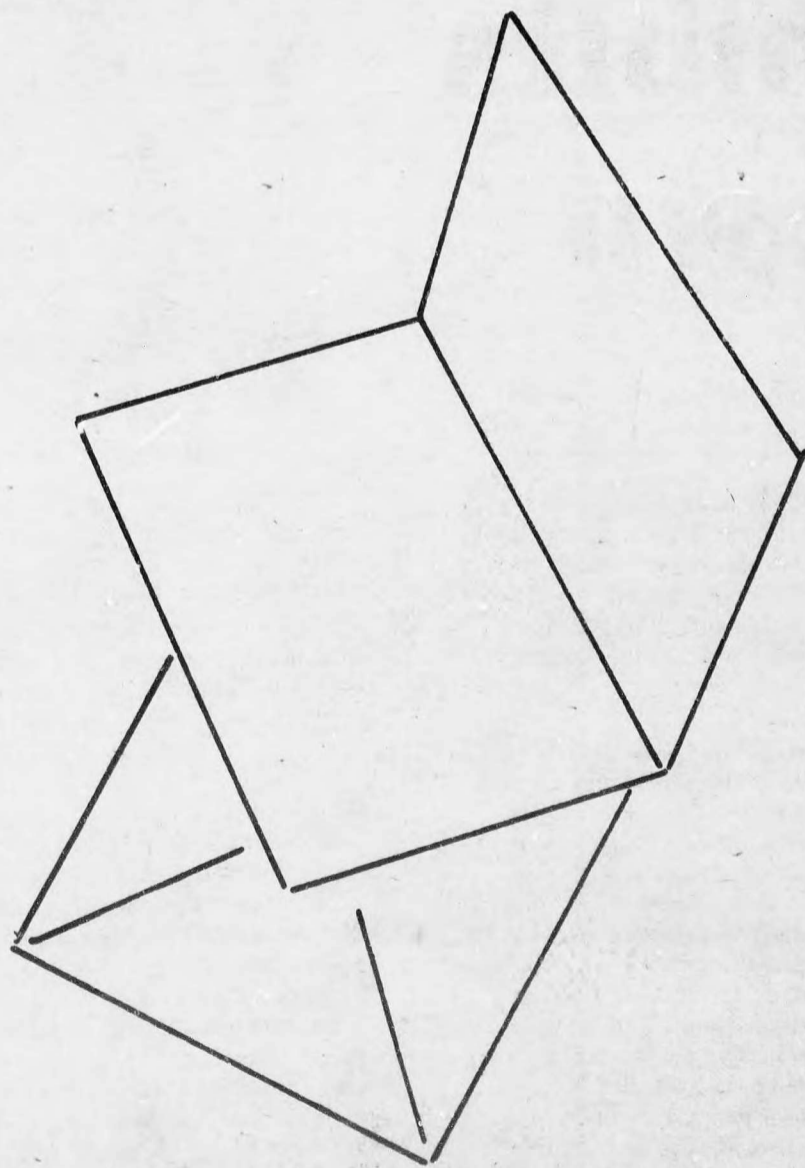


brian bartlett's "the note"



Layout and graphics by Blues Roberts

1

Everyone called Miss Dermott Miss McDoormat because you could walk all over her. She clutched her open Civics text as if it were stuck to her hand. Her eyes were big and troubled and often jerked as if from an electric-stock, and not the electric-shock demonstrated in Shop, when everyone was enlightened and braced.

You could walk all over Miss McDoormat, but the class was to pick on her less. Her first week was not the term's first week, Civics starting after other subjects. On their first day of junior-high her students-to-be had survived a muggy chairless assembly, the principal expounding on school-rules and quoting from a general he'd been under in the War, then reading out the class lists, at one point a girl in a pleated skirt collapsing and being advised over the public-address system to put her head between her knees.

That first day the newcomers had spoken to one another only about such things as the novelty of lockers and swing-up desk-tops. Yet when Miss McDoormat arrived two weeks later, barriers had fallen, bonds had formed. After seeing she was no taskmaster the class began rocking the boat--Bob Wilbur blew chalk-dust at Tammy Thomas, Todd Brown unscrewed a desk-leg and lifted it over his head like a legislature-mace, Lydia Tucker murmured elephant-jokes to Alice Holyoke, Billy Hamilton mimicked farts with his arm-pit, and Eric Eagles tested how many windows ahead he could throw balled-up paper through.

Eric Eagles was one of the first to have qualms. Civics was only twice weekly, but after two weeks he saw in Miss McDoormat's bleached face, besides trepidation of the first year teaching, horror of the following years. She always walked as if on the deck of a lurching ship. She knew that, of the three subjects not counting on report-cards--Art, Music and Civics--Civics was taken least seriously.

Eric started putting up his hand to answer her questions, only to keep it grounded again when Billy Hamilton began taunting him. Billy Hamilton never stopped pranking, once when Miss McDoormat was down the hall he stood on his desk and hopped desk-to-desk down the row.

After a month in Civics Eric ached with boredom. It was because of his reluctance, both to rankle and cooperate with Miss McDoormat, and the suspension could not last forever. He took up chucking eraser-bits and writing notes.

He nicknamed Lydia Tucker, sending a note down the row and watching and she opened it with her doughy hands in her wide waist: *Hey, Lardia*. He was not the first to call Miss McDoormat Miss McDoormat, that was the glory of Ann Rammage, the quiet one who had fainted on the first day. She had quipped the teacher's new name one noon, as if it were her one contribution to the class saga, returning into her shell.

Though he wrote notes, and fired eraser-bits in reply to Billy Hamilton's spitballs, Eric did so only when he was sure Miss McDoormat would never know it. It dispelled the boredom, yet it did not hoist the flags of guilt.

2

3 a.m. that Friday Dr Eagles answered the phone and dressed quickly, then felt his knees give in at the foot of the stairs: His wife heard a moan and found him hugging the banister-post. Minutes later, weakness still bent him over when he stood. He stumbled back upstairs and Mrs. Eagles phoned to ask Dr Holyoke to substitute.

Eric's mother told him about it when he reached the kitchen, sleep-seed scratching the corners of his eyes. Ellen, one of his younger sisters, took a breakfast-tray up to their father, smiling tight-lipped, pretending she was a court-waitress. The two other sisters chattered, seemingly thrilled, seemingly finding it funny that a doctor about his business had fallen sick. Eric winced at them and winced when his mother said "You used too much sugar, Eric."

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