

A delightful old man, who ruled his scholars as a father might his children, he had always entered with as much zest into their holiday enjoyments as into their studies.

The academy was one of the best of its kind west of the Mississippi River. The majority of its scholars came from a distance, but a few resided in Ridgeland and its vicinity. For several weeks youthful enthusiasm had been evoked over the coming vacation, for it was known that the Professor meditated some excursion for his school on a scale that would cast the expeditions of former years completely in the shade.

"I'd give my best ball and bat to know what the Professor's plans are," cried Dick Wilson above the babel of confused discussion about him.

"It's going to be a regular excursion, and no mistake," remarked Ernest Blake. "For over a week I have been receiving extra money and clothing from home, and my parents wrote me that they would not expect me there this vacation, but told me that I would be under the charge of Professor Ballentine for the next eight weeks."

"The same with me, boys," interjected another voice. "Eight weeks! It means a long journey."

"If they only make it eighty days, it would give us time enough to go around the world," suggested Dick.

"We won't do that," smiled Ned, "but we'll go farther than last year, when we had such a glorious vacation camping out at Lake Clear."

"Or the year before, when the Professor took the whole school to the dells of Wisconsin," remarked Dick. "I had a peep into the Professor's laboratory yesterday."

"What did you see?" demanded a dozen curious voices.

"Maps and charts, and all marked off as if for a long journey."

"And the railroad agent was closeted with the Professor for an hour yesterday," said Ernest Blake. "The orders are out to pack up at once."

"I say, boys, was there ever such a jolly old fellow as Professor Ballentine," broke in Dick Wilson, "and his good-natured clerk and brother, Mr. James? There's a satisfaction in learning lessons. Don't you find it so, Ned?"

Ned Darrow flushed with conscious modesty. He had that morning received the first prize for scholarship, and his friend's allusion made him the admiring centre of the group.

Not an envious emotion was visible in a single face. Ned Darrow, accommodating and courteous, had been their acknowledged favourite and leader for many a month.

But Professor Ballentine's grammar school had a rival faction, and the lively personal gossip was silenced as a party of four boys slowly sauntered towards the spot.

The eldest and centre of the approaching group was a lad older and taller than Ned Darrow, and much better dressed than any of his companions.

His name was Ralph Warden, and although he had attended the school only a few months, he had during that time established an element of dissension and rivalry among the hitherto friendly classes of the academy.

The spoiled, haughty scion of an aristocratic family, he had made himself intensely disagreeable on many occasions, and was generally avoided, except for a few chosen companions. He seemed to possess an especial dislike for Ned Darrow, and his ill-timed sneers and quarrelsome disposition had a tendency

to repress the vivacity of the group as they saw him approaching.

His face showed its usual haughty expression of assumed superiority, and as he passed Ned Darrow by with a glance of indifference, it was manifest to his companions that the prize Ned had received for scholarship rankled in Ralph Warden's heart.

"What's going on?" demanded the latter of Ernest Blake. "You're making noise enough to welcome the President."

"We're worked up to the highest pitch of curiosity as to the Professor's intended trip to-morrow," responded Ernest heartily.

Ralph smiled contemptuously.

"Humph! Going wild over some penny trip of ten miles," he ejaculated.

"You'll find it a pleasant trip if it resembles that of last year," ventured Ned Darrow, refuting Ralph's slur on their yearly expedition.

"You have the advantage of knowing that, perhaps," sneered Ralph, turning a glance of dislike on the speaker.

"Why should I?" demanded Ned.

"Because you're in all the old foggy's secrets."

"What old fogy?"

"The Professor."

"Shame!" murmured several voices.

"Oh, don't play the hypocrite," cried Ralph in a bullying manner. "The Professor gets paid for all he does for us. Don't mistake his kindness of heart for services. I said you were in his secrets. You are; everybody knows that. You ain't thick with your crony, his brother, Mr. James, for nothing."

There was no comment on Ralph Warden's words now. A dead silence had fallen over the group. In Ralph's disagreeable manner the boys traced an incipient quarrel, and stood mute, fixedly regarding Ralph and Ned as they faced each other aggressively.

"Ralph Warden," Ned said steadily, after an ominous pause, "there is not a boy here who echoes your ungentlemanly sentiments against the kind Professor we all love and respect, nor do I believe one can be found who believes your unjust accusation against myself. You want to quarrel with me."

"You're too much of a coward to fight," taunted Ralph, clenching his fists menacingly as a murmur of approval of Ned's words reached his ears.

"I'll save my courage for something better than a play-ground brawl," replied Ned calmly. "Come, boys, we won't mar a happy day by keeping up this useless contention."

Ned turned on his heel with quiet dignity as he spoke. Ralph Warden flushed with anger as he observed the willing desertion of a majority of the boys to Ned's cause.

"You imagine you own the school and the boys in it because you took a prize in scholarship," cried Ralph spitefully after Ned. "You are rather high-toned for a charity scholar."

Ned Darrow turned as though stung by a serpent. The declaration was a startling one. His face paled quickly, and in a voice a trifle husky with emotion he demanded sternly—

"Ralph Warden, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I say."

"You call me a charity student. I do not choose to allow a statement like that—"

"Beggars should not be choosers," interrupted Ralph savagely, in a reckless tone of voice. "My father, as a trustee of the academy, sees the books, and your tuition has not been paid for six months."

"I do not believe you are telling the truth."