

Storm in the Springtime

ANONYMOUS

THE MANY ENTRANCES of the school opened either into the dark basements of the city block or into labyrinthine fire towers. Young swing-shifters from the factories mingled with the students in the basement lunch-room, flagrantly smoking or inviting youngsters into crap games. Students from nearby senior high schools, on part-time school schedules for the duration, raced and yodeled through the fire towers. The windows, open to the heat of a merciless stretch of sidewalk, were easily negotiated by the more enterprising, who would appear gamin-like, grimacing from the sill upon a defenseless classroom.

Stretching for a solid city block within the heart of the city's industrial area, the school had become the happy hunting ground for the least desirable elements in the community. Faculty members drawn into service with the

armed forces had been replaced by others who, possessing unquestionably a knowledge of science or language, had, nevertheless, small interest in or understanding of the technique of keeping electric bulbs intact on dark stairways or detecting the presence of hard liquor in washrooms.

When I took over the principalship of this school, the situation was so desperate that the faculty was ready to welcome anyone who might bring help. I could not have looked like much help. In the first place, I am a woman; added to that, I am very small in size. But the veterans of the faculty were thorough-breds: I was all that had been sent them and they accepted me. The boys and girls sized me up more critically, and in the hearts of the trouble-makers there must have been some stirrings of the realization of the tyranny of small women. Obviously there could be little glory in doing battle with a half-pint. It was going to take no great trick to swing them from offense to defense.

The community invaders, however, presented a very different problem. They were not amenable to an appeal to school pride; they were contemptuous of petticoat rule. Youth loves to belong to "a tough outfit." Parochial students, swaggering in their aura of all-male faculties and corporal punishment, dropped in to jeer. Our organization needed teeth and muscles quickly.

One of the staff, a man who has been

At a time when conviction and prejudice run deep, when advice and tenet are facile and experience grim, it may be of value to review the cyclonic happenings within one unsung American junior high school. This true story of how teachers met an unusually difficult situation is significant in that these teachers displayed the courage and conviction necessary to find a solution to their problem. The way in which they worked might not necessarily be the means by which other teachers could resolve troublesome situations in their own schools, but certainly all of us can find inspiration in the will and fortitude with which these men and women faced their difficulties.

influential in the school for a number of years, suggested and organized a school patrol. Comprised of fifty of our brawniest boys—many nearly six feet tall, some slow of wit, but all loyal of heart—they promptly responded to the plea to replace the army-absent men at supervisory posts. Student government the school had long had, but it had been of a refined and intellectual sort that did not include the talents of these huskies.

Members of the patrol drilled and practiced commando tactics until they became the envy and admiration of every boy in the school. When these youngsters assumed charge of entrances and exits, our own student body stayed in and the intruders stayed out. For the first time we had a clear and undisturbed view of our own clientele. The patrol rounded up smokers and crap-shooters, and for the first time we could deal with them without fearing that, at the end of an earnest interview, they would gleefully reveal that they were bobbin-boys from the nearest mill. Peace and order settled on our block-long corridors.

As time went on we turned to more ambitious changes. Under the guidance of the patrol it became possible to permit our nearly 2,000 pupils to travel from their dismal basement lunchroom five flights up to the solarium, there to dance, sing, and play games. Any previous attempt would have resulted only in a five-flight trail of broken glass and a raucous disruption of classes. Now our roof-garden became a show place. A school dance orchestra sprang up. School pride took a great leap forward. The games enjoyed in the protected playground outside the solarium sug-

gested the inauguration of a softball tournament which soon got under way on a neighborhood sandlot.

At this point perhaps I should tell you a detail which has until now not seemed worth mentioning. The captain of the patrol was a young Negro. Five feet, eleven in height, slender, very, very dark, perpetually unsmiling, he bore himself with solemn dignity that gave weight to any occasion. There were few colored children in the school. No colored families lived in the neighborhood, but the school's district jutted into a territory occupied by Negroes from which children might elect to come to our school but seldom did. We were very much pleased with the disregard of racial lines in the selection of the captain. We were even more pleased when the captain showed an equal lack of racial bias and a genius for organization. Of the five Negro boys on the patrol, he soon dismissed two for "foolin'."

In fact, we were just a little too well pleased with everything. Had we not been giddy with our success, we might have reflected that we were approaching that state of complacency which invites a storm.

The first danger signal I did not recognize at all. We had reached the stage at which we desired a color guard—not a pretty, little-girl color guard but a he-man troop. We had two whirlwind campaigns, one to buy a school flag, another to buy a service flag with 350 blue stars and two gold stars. The school already possessed two big silk American flags. Every parent, child, and teacher was proud of our display of flags.

The resourceful and indefatigable teacher who sponsored the patrol, him-

self a veteran of the first World War, took over the training of the color guard. The captain of the school patrol was in command. He carried an old musket and shouted the orders. The four flag-bearers were all white boys; the other musket-bearer was a white boy, too. I watched them drilling with pride bordering on excitement. They were in the auditorium late in the afternoon. The only audience was the school engineer and some of the cleaning women, good neighbors all. The engineer had been devoted to the school over a lifetime of service; he was a powerful influence in the community.

As I left the auditorium I glanced at this group of onlookers, sure of their ever-ready approval. The engineer beckoned me gravely. I went to where the group was sitting and he whispered, "There is criticism of this. People feel it should be a white boy giving the orders." I laughed with the light-heartedness of the uninitiated. "That is the American flag they are carrying," I said. I remember I even felt I had made a rather good reply.

A day or two after this, while the school patrol was drilling in the little frontyard, a jalopy ran up and down the street filled with young men who yelled, "Suckers." But so much happens around a junior high school in the course of a day no one has time to take account of all the things one should.

Late on the afternoon of Easter Monday the policeman assigned to traffic duty outside the school came smiling into my office, with the weighty tread of a man with important tidings.

"Well," said he, "they've got your big nigger locked up."

"What?" I cried. "What for?"

"Riotin' and incitin' to riot."

There were two men teachers in the office at the time, one of them the sponsor of the patrol, champion of the captain. Without a word, we dashed for my car, piled in, and went to the station house.

In a dark corner of the roll-room sat the captain of the color guard, changed almost beyond recognition. It was not just the black eye and the bleeding mouth; it was the sullen, glowering expression that disfigured and distorted him. In an opposite corner sat a young, red-headed giant. In the first glance I noted with satisfaction that he had two black eyes and that his mouth was bleeding with equal profusion. I learned later that he was a very likable chap of 18, training for a professional career in the ring.

The sergeant of police was monumental. He boomed at me, "This one of your boys, lady?" And pointed at the captain. "One of my best," I asserted firmly. The scorn of the sergeant was mingled with pity. "You're too good to 'em," he bawled. "You don't learn 'em no respect—" I interrupted him to demand the story.

Then an amazing thing happened. From this point on, the most revealing thing to me was that none of the captain's opposers seemed to feel any need to justify what they were doing. There was no difficulty at all in getting from the red-haired boy and the captain a clear picture of what had happened. The red-haired boy had been imported by some corner-idlers to call the captain names of various degrees of insult until he could be induced to fight. The inciters were ex-pupils of our school. They felt that the reputation of their

alma mater rested in their hands and they did not like the idea of a Negro in the "best job in school."

They specifically did not like the way the captain walked up the street as he left the building. "He never smiles; he thinks he's better than anybody." By the ready admission of the red-head, three separate epithets had been hurled after the captain on that Easter Monday, and others were being held in reserve. At the third insult, however, the fight was on. When the police intervened, the red-head was getting the worst of it.

In the disparaging atmosphere we worked on the two boys. The men who had accompanied me each took a boy and talked hard: the sure-fire line about how the boys might soon be fighting side by side, might either one save the life of the other. Eventually the boys came together and shook hands, promised to call the whole thing off, and were discharged at my request.

The next morning the smiling policeman walked into my office again. "You're wrong," he said. "The neighbors are against you this time. There aren't any colored folks living for squares around. The community won't stand for you coaxing them in." We talked for an hour and I got nowhere. The rights of the boy, his innocence, my responsibility to him as a member of my school community, did not enter the picture as he saw it. With friendly, solicitous firmness he urged, "Get rid of him."

At time for dismissal that day the street outside the school was suddenly a sea of humanity. A few minutes before, no one had been in sight; now there was a surging mob. Panic-stricken

at last, I sent men searching for the captain to prevent his leaving the school. I was too late. Even as I spoke, I saw him making stately progress out into the waiting crowd. Six colored boys surrounded him. Across the wide street other Negro boys suddenly appeared. Silently the captain and his train mingled with the waiting mass and all moved directly as to some pre-appointed spot.

I flung myself into my car and started after him. Two squares up the street they had all come to a halt. The police were there. There was a moment of uncertainty—the red-headed boy's mother had refused to let him keep the rendezvous. I was able to get through to our colored boys. Sullenly they refused to let me drive them home but promised that they would not fight. The police were making fighting at the time very improbable.

I saw the crowd reluctantly disperse. Then it was that I heard the things which disturbed me most. In the first place, some boys assured me that a public square far from the school had been agreed on for a fight-to-the-finish that night. But even more convincing in their probability of creating trouble were fast-circulating stories told me by older boys in the crowd, boys who eagerly introduced themselves as alumni of the school. One said his younger brother had been beaten up by the captain for some infraction of rules, another that his little sister had been shoved. One boy even said that the captain had tried to make a date with his sister. Suddenly I knew that riots and lynchings were not far-away things of which one reads in the papers: they were lurking on my very doorstep. A few stories

about girls being mistreated and I could shout into the high heavens without a hearing.

I returned to the school and called the police. "There is going to be rioting tonight," I told them, and named the square. "Lady," said the sergeant, "if you'd let us handle this in our own way you wouldn't have this trouble." "What is your way?" I asked. "Let us lock that big nigger up for three months." "But he hasn't done anything." "You're too soft-hearted." The receiver was banged down.

That night there was no policeman near the square. I know because I took my dog and car and went. For two hours I cruised round and round. The colored boys were there; it was their neighborhood. They came, as they freely admitted later, armed with lead pipes. When they saw my car, they slunk away from sight, pretending not to have seen. No white boys ventured into their bailiwick.

The next morning I knew I faced the crisis, for the stories must be dealt with. I had good advisers in my loyal faculty, especially in the men who sponsored the patrols. We had two patrols now, one for traffic, one for safety. The latter was the one of which the colored boy was captain. "Disband both patrols," one of the sponsors said. "Don't mention race or color. Just disband patrols."

We packed the entire school into the auditorium. Many had to stand. Amid dramatic silence the sponsor of the traffic squad announced the dissolution of his squad. There happened to be no colored boy on the entire squad. Then the sponsor of the safety patrol followed suit. It was a stunned and motion-

less audience I faced when finally I took the microphone.

I talked briefly. I said, "We are facing, as you may gather, a great emergency. Therefore, I have called you to your first town meeting to discuss it with you.

"This year we formed certain patrols, whereby you pupils might participate in the safe conduct of the school and might enjoy certain privileges. You have enjoyed those privileges. But something has gone wrong. With privilege goes responsibility. Someone has failed in responsibility. Either you have failed to support the officers of your patrols, or they have failed in service to you.

"There are stories of abuse of power going around the neighborhood. I do not know why I should have to go out into the neighborhood to hear these things. Our neighbors are your families. They know only what you tell them. If the stories are true and you have told them without telling me, you have failed in loyalty. There is no one of you who does not know by this time that any officer guilty of misdemeanor in office would be immediately removed by the proper machinery. My office is always open to you, and there is a mail box on the door into which you are accustomed to drop notes if I am busy.

"If, on the other hand, these stories are not true, it is up to you to disprove them. You are the ones to whom your parents listen.

"I shall be in my office all day today for no other purpose than to hear what you have to say about this matter. In the meantime the members of the faculty will, to the best of their ability, resume

all supervisory responsibility of the school. Their time is, of course, limited. We cannot open the solarium, we cannot honor passes to leave the building at lunch-time, we cannot supervise the street leading to the ballground. Therefore, all these activities must be discontinued until such time as it may seem wise to re-establish our patrols. If the patrols are re-established, it must be under their former leaders unless those leaders are proved unworthy. The school term is late; we cannot train new leaders without most urgent reasons for so doing."

To my surprise, the boys and girls were eager to talk. Many of them did not realize the real issues at stake, but they fought for their patrols. They were eloquent in praise of both captains and all lieutenants. They were inclined to blame stories of misconduct of office on the disgruntled few who had been disciplined for smoking or caught cutting classes. It was difficult to bring the meeting to a close. Everyone wanted to talk; the speeches were all one-sided.

All day the children poured into my office, denying stories they had heard. The little girl who was supposed to have been pushed cried as she protested she had never been near the captain. Miraculously they appeared, the owners of every name I had heard in the rumors. The tale was always the same: "I don't know how I got mixed up in this thing. Everybody's blaming me. I never got in any trouble with him. He don't bother with anybody."

At two o'clock the corner-idlers came in, the champions of the red-head. For one hour, I and a half-dozen faithful teachers who had come to help me

in the talking marathon went round and round verbally, trying to penetrate the trouble-makers' thought processes. They had been rocked by the course of events; instead of benefactors, they found themselves regarded as the ones responsible for the loss of precious privilege. But they were as convinced as ever that theirs was a noble cause—the protection of community and alma mater.

At length we called in the captain. He was no more unbending than they. The outsiders were still inwardly smarting over the early defeat of their red-head and his failure to appear on the two subsequent occasions. They demanded that there be one good, big, decisive fight. They maintained that the affair was none of my business. It would not be on school property. I maintained that it was very much indeed my business. Even the captain wanted to fight; I could see his pride suffering at my attitude. Neither side would promise not to fight; each said plainly it was a matter of saving face, no more, no less. Either would be taunted for yielding first.

Suddenly I took a mean advantage of my size and sex. I said, "You're talking about who's going to get hurt! I'll tell you the first person who's going to get hurt—and that's me. I was there last night; Richard, you saw me. And if there'd been fighting I would have been right between you. Wherever you fight I'll know it, and I'll be there, and I'll see that I get hurt. So you can tell all your precious friends and constituents that you have a darn-fool woman between you who insists on getting herself killed."

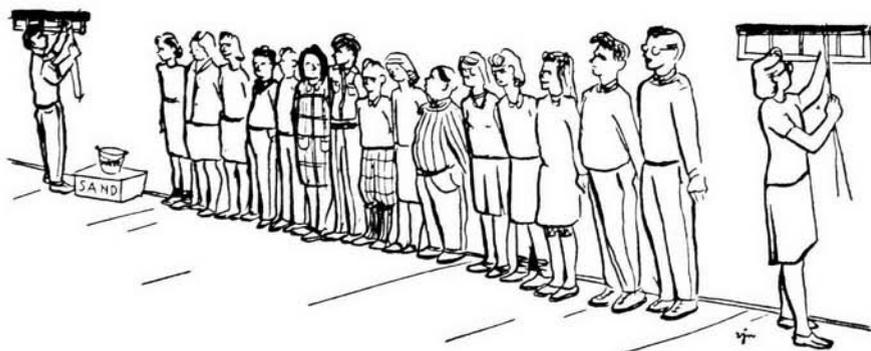
Unexpectedly they all laughed, even

the solemn captain. I said, "You see there, he's laughing for you." And they shook hands and went out. As he left the building, the captain signaled the opposite terraces and some twenty young Negroes obediently appeared from behind hedge and stone fence and took themselves away.

The next morning we had another town meeting; we reinstated the patrols; we pledged allegiance to the flag. It was very thrilling. But there was never a day in the ensuing weeks that I breathed quite freely. I had looked

too closely down the throat of terror. At first, fearful of harm to the boy, I suggested that he enter a defense training course, with all privileges of graduation from junior high assured. He looked steadily in the distance and replied that it was his ambition to finish at our school.

On the day of our simple graduation exercises the Negro boy led his patrol onto the stage to receive the thanks of the school. The auditorium was packed with neighbors, and the applause was all right.



Sketch by Vera Nelson
Courtesy of Manitowoc (Wis.) Public Schools

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