

The Importance of People

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Illustrations by Alvin E. Sugarman

"EVERYBODY TOLD ME—"

"I'M JUST A FAILURE," she said miserably. "I've been scared to death since the day I came to Winthrop Junior High."

Paul Duncan knew what she meant, remembering his own apprehensions when he had been assigned as principal of Winthrop. He had certainly expected Betty Dawson to find difficulties. Young girls who have seldom ventured from the "right" side of the tracks have adjustments to make in a school where the majority of the population represents a minority group.

"Maybe things aren't so bad. It's been traditional since King Tut to try out the new teacher. I've tried to look in your room often. So far I've seen nothing out of the way."

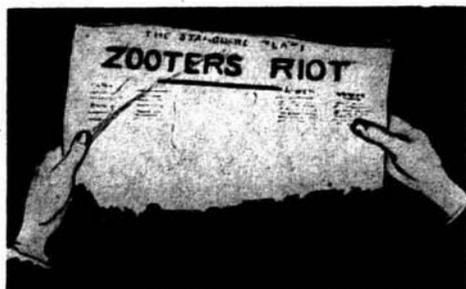
"No, they haven't done anything as bad as people said they would. One day they all dropped books at a given time, but we did that when I was in school. But they look so threatening—as if they hated me. I remember all the stories I've heard about gang fights and I get so nervous."

"How did you start out the first day? Were you friendly?"

"Oh, no! I meant business. Everybody told me if I let them get away from me the first week I'd never have discipline. Maybe later on I can be less strict."

"What else did people tell you?"

"They said all the juvenile delinquency came from this district, and they quoted those awful stories about the riots that were in the papers last year. Everybody says to expect trouble from the Spanish-American children."



"I'd like to tell you more about those newspaper stories, Miss Dawson. They were greatly exaggerated. It was the kind of stuff people like to read because it confirms their prejudices and half-thinking.

As a matter of fact, only five boys from Winthrop were implicated. They were the kind who follow any signals called by the older fellows. As the papers told the story, all the Winthrop children were stigmatized. My heart ached for fine kids who lost their after-school jobs and were subjected to daily humiliation. Now, in your classes, are there any evidences of new violence? Are there specific children who are behaving dangerously?"



"No, it's just pushing and shoving and calling names. Unless I threaten them all the time they never settle down."

"Do they act that way because they are Spanish-American?"

"I don't see what you mean."

"It's my guess that the goings on you think are evidences of unusual tension are merely evidence of adolescence. These children seem rougher than average because their families haven't enforced the polite inhibitions your parents insisted upon."

"Even if they're quiet that Sammy Garcia gets them all stirred up. He makes funny faces behind my back and asks silly questions. He doesn't do any of the assignments. And when I try to discipline him he looks innocent and says, 'I dunno what you're talking about. I ain't done nothing.'"

Mr. Duncan grinned, "Sammy isn't exactly the scholarly type. His mother has ambitions of a white collar job for him, but Sammy has other plans. You haven't seen him in his element. Drop in on the social after school and watch Sammy. It's an experience you shouldn't miss."

Disappointed, Betty turned to leave the office. "But aren't there books I can read on the minority problem, or something really important I can do?"

"There are hundreds of books, but you aren't ready for books yet. You go on to that social. And, Miss Dawson, don't let any more of these 'everybody' and 'people' talk to you between now and then."

The social was, to put it mildly, in progress when Betty entered the gym. The noise seemed sinister, but observation showed that it was merely the combined sounds of adolescent enjoyment plus the efforts of the school dance band. Quite a crowd was gathered around the stand beating time and applauding the trumpet soloist who was a twisting, writhing, grimacing imitation of the "big time" trumpeters. This star was Sammy, resplendent in his best and loudest sport jacket. He acknowledged the applause like an old trouper, mentally counting encores. Suddenly, spying Betty in the audience, he bowed with less relish. She had told



him to come in after school. Would she shame him here? Betty waved, pantomimed applause, and walked away to the refreshment table, seemingly unaware of Sammy's escape from punishment. At the table two girls broke into surprised grins when they saw her.

"Gee, I'm glad you came, Miss Dawson. You didn't ever come to the socials or movies before. Do you want doughnuts or cookies?"

Children going by waved at her as she ate. Joe Moore, the boy's counselor, asked her to dance. They danced well and groups on the sidelines rewarded them with applause and shrill whistles. Betty stiffened.

"Take it easy," Joe said through a fixed grin. "The kids don't mean any harm. They just think you're a good sport."

As they passed the bandstand Sammy outdid himself, adding "hot licks" that confused the other musicians. Say, Miss Dawson was O.K. even if she was an old crab in class like all teachers. Maybe teachers just couldn't help getting burned up over that spelling and stuff.

When they stopped they saw Mr. Duncan. Betty went to him and said, "I think the afternoon is a success. Sammy begins to think I'm a little bit human. Is that what you meant when you said the social came before the books?"

"Something like that. Meanwhile, have another doughnut."

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