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Early school experiences of a Western Oklahoma eccentric

After Ralph Waldo

By Leroy Thomas

The main hall of Grimes Elementary School was very quiet during the noon hour because all the students knew that it was against the rules for anyone to be inside the building at that time.

Only the quiet jeering of two nine-year-old girls disturbed the calmness of the hour. "Do you know what I think, Birdie?" Myrtle Nelson asked her little friend.

"What, Myrtle?"

"I think those dirty little imps from Sleepy Hollow never should have been allowed to come to school here!"

"Well, I agree with that. Everything was just peachy-creamy in our room 'til this year. And then old Addie Harp and Marge Wade had to transfer here."

An onlooker would have thought that the two girls being discussed were on the playground somewhere, but that wasn't the case. Afraid of their new surroundings, Addie and Marge were hovering at that time near the door of the fourth-grade room where they had been run by the taunts of Myrtle Nelson and Birdie Blagg.

It wasn't that Birdie and Myrtle were the biggest girls in the fourth-grade class; they merely had the biggest mouths, and for some reason they wielded the most power over the other pupils.

Sleepy Hollow School was near the Wade and Harp farms, but recently so many people had moved away from the area that there were no longer enough pupils to hold school there. So Jonathan Harp and Morgan Wade had done the only logical thing they could do: they had made arrangements for their children to attend school in Grimes.

That had been a difficult decision for Wade because he had older children who had received all their schooling at Sleepy Hollow. To Jonathan Harp it was a wise move; he felt sure that his girls would get a better quality of education in Grimes. And if there was anything Harp was for, it was education. Besides, he owned Harp's Ready-to-Wear Store in town, and he had been consid-

ering the possibility of renting out his land and moving into Grimes anyway.

Content with their work for the time being, Myrtle and Birdie skipped joyfully to the playground. They had spotted the teacher, Miss Sedlow, and they wanted to be sure to be on her good side if trouble started.

"What's wrong with us, Marge?" Addie queried screechily.

"Maybe we have two heads?"

"Not the last time I checked."

"Is it our clothes?"

"I should hope not. We get our clothes from the same place most of the other kids do—from Poppa's store, except for the ones Momma makes."

"So what is it?"

"Do you think it's because we're too countryified?"

"My goodness, Girl! If that's it, I can put on the dog as well as anyone else."

"So can I!" giggled Addie, knowing that she would never do it as long as she was an Emerson devotee.

"But let's hold on, Addie. Let's just go back this afternoon and act our usual sweet, innocent selves and see what happens."

The two country girls had spent too much time talking; so when they went back into the room, Miss Sedlow had already started the spelling lesson. The teacher looked at the two girls askance, making both of them feel that perhaps she thought they had done something else wrong in addition to arriving late.

"Girls, did you hear the bell ring?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Who said 'yes ma'am'?" Miss Sedlow wanted to know.

"I did," answered Marge.

"I did," answered someone in falsetto.

"I did," answered someone else in falsetto.

"I did," answered still another child in falsetto.

By this time, Miss Sedlow was becoming flustered. Even when the girls arrived late, she was already unnerved by what Birdie and Myrtle

had told her during the lunch hour.

One of her supervising teachers had once told Miss Sedlow that there would be days like this one. She had said, "Now Ellen, the worst thing to do is to lose your patience in front of a whole roomful of children. Give yourself time to calm down. If there's a culprit, you'll find out who it is. Instead of trying to teach, let your students learn through game time."

A light bulb went on in Ellen Sedlow's mind. "That's it!" she thought. "We'll have a spelling bee. I'm going to see to it that the new girls are on one team with Birdie and Myrtle on the other."

With newly found composure, Miss Sedlow faced her class. "Class, we have worked very hard today. You're going to think that we never have any fun in my room. So now we're going to have a spelling bee. I've never known very many good spellers who weren't good students. So now I'm going to find out who my good students are!"

She had decided to choose the apparent non-leaders in the two factions as the captains. "All right, I want the captains to be Birdie Blagg and Marge Wade. Choose your teams, girls."

"Myrtle Nelson," Birdie began.

"Addie Harp," Marge followed.

The teams were soon chosen, and Miss Sedlow began the bee with easy words and advanced to harder ones.

Before long, everyone had gone down in defeat except Myrtle and Addie. Ellen Sedlow was coming close to the solution of her problem. Who were the troublemakers? Were they really the girls from Sleepy Hollow or the two town students? Throughout the bee, Myrtle and Birdie had been whispering taunts at Marge and Addie. They thought the teacher hadn't heard, but she had.

Thinking that she shouldn't, she had given out the word *pregnant*. It was Birdie's word, but Myrtle had guffawed and had taunted Addie quietly: "Pregnant! That's what your mother is—pregnant! So while I'm out playing,

you're going to be washing old dirty dummies!"

Miss Sedlow had noticed that Addie hadn't allowed Myrtle's tone to bother her. She had answered sweetly, "Yes. Isn't that nice? I'm so happy about the baby. I hope we have another girl. I just love babies. I hope I can have one of my own one of these days."

Birdie had giggled. "Addie Harp wants to have a baby! What man or boy in his right mind would take a second look at tall, lanky, ugly Addie Harp?"

Miss Sedlow interrupted. "Birdie! It's your word! How is it spelled--*pregnant*?"

Fidgeting, Birdie answered, *p-e-r-g-n-a-n-t-pregnant*."

Addie thought to herself victoriously, "Town dunce! Anyone should know that *preg* isn't *perg*!"

For once, Addie felt that a point had been scored for the country, especially when Marge spelled the word without a bobble.

But it was the word *tragedy* that tripped up Marge on Addie's side and Helene Glazer on Myrtle's team. Both girls made the mistake of spelling the first syllable *trad* instead of *trag*.

During the time she wasn't on the spot to spell a word, Addie began to look around for the possibilities of friendships. She knew that Marge would always be an ally; she and Marge had been close since the primer year. And then there was Helene Glazer. She hadn't been outwardly snooty on this first day of school. Maybe she was a possibility.

At least that was a start. And, looking around, she saw five or six more girls who hadn't stuck out their tongues at her or jeered at her on the playground.

She had made a mark for herself at Sleepy Hollow. Everyone--including the teachers--had considered her the smartest girl in the school. What she had lacked in beauty, she had made up in academic accomplishments. She had decided that her brains might help her make it through the rough times in Miss Sedlow's room too.

And now she had her chance. She was the only one left on Marge's team, and Myrtle was the only one left on Birdie's. Birdie! Even that frightened little duck would be easy to win away from Myrtle.

Miss Sedlow was speaking. "Addie, it's your time again. The word is *eternity-eternity*."

"E-t-e-r-n-i-t-y-eternity."

"Perfect, Addie! Now Myrtle, your word is *conformity, conformity*."

"C-o-m-f-o-r-m-i-t-y, conformity."

"Wrong, Myrtle!"

"Hummph!" screeched Myrtle.

"Now, Addie, you'll win the bee for your team if you can spell *conformity*."

"Oh, that's an easy one," Addie mused silently. "C-o-n-f-o-r-m-i-t-y, conformity."

"That's right, Addie. Your team wins. Now let's have a fifteen-minute recess before we start on math."

The victor was able to accept congratulations with finesse, but there were no good wishes from Myrtle Nelson.

On the playground Birdie Blagg slipped away from her group long enough to make an overture to Addie, "Addie, where did you learn to spell so good?"

"Oh, out on the farm sometime there's not much to do but read, and I think I learned to spell by reading." There was nothing snappy or flippant about Addie's answer.

But dragging her friend away, Myrtle snapped, "You don't have to take that from a country hick, Birdie. Let's go find Miss Sedlow."

Miss Sedlow already had plans of her own, however. Approaching Addie and Marge, she said casually, "Girls, may I see you in the room, please?"

The two girls from Sleepy Hollow obediently followed their new teacher into the classroom.

Once there, Miss Sedlow said, "Girls, I don't want us to be interrupted, so let's go into the cloakroom. There's sure to be no one coming in there on a hot day like this."

Inside the cloakroom, she asked the two girls to be seated.

"Now which one of you said that I have body odor?"

Marge looked at Addie, and Addie looked at Marge. Had Myrtle and Birdie actually sunk so low as to say something like that? Yes, it was entirely believable.

"Neither of you will own up to it?"

"No ma'am," the two answered almost inaudibly.

"Very well then. I guess I have my answer." But what does a teacher do about circumstantial evidence? Miss Sedlow's teacher hadn't told her that. She thought she knew who the culprits were--or maybe who the culprit was--but she had still another idea. She stood before her class after the brief recess and began to unfold still another plan.

"Class, the Master Teacher, the only sinless person who ever lived, said 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' We know that as the Golden Rule. We're wise if we try to live by that rule in all our dealings. Now that means in *all* areas of our lives--at home, at school, at play, at work. I wonder if some of you have some quotations that you think people should try to live by. After you give your quotation, why don't you tell why you think it's true."

Myrtle Nelson had grown up in school with the conviction that no matter how wrong she was, being first would make up for the error. As soon as Miss Sedlow finished the assignment, Myrtle began to wave her arms wildly at the teacher.

"Miss Sedlow. Miss Sedlow, pick me. I have one."

"All right, Myrtle. What is yours?"

"God is love."

"Why is that a true quotation, Myrtle?"

"Because it is!" Myrtle fumed.

"I have one, Miss Sedlow," Addie offered.

"What is yours, Addie?"

Myrtle Nelson hid her face behind her book, giggled, and stuck out her tongue.

"It'll be stupid since that country hick is giving it."

OK, Addie. Give it."

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds--adored by little statesmen, prophets, and divines."

"Good, Addie! Who said that?"

"It was Ralph Waldo Emerson, Miss Sedlow."

"That's right, Addie, and where did you find it?"

"Well, my poppa is the first one who gave me some of Emerson's essays and poetry to read. I think Poppa is just about the smartest man that ever lived. He's always giving me something to read or telling me about something he has read."

"And what does that quotation say to you, Addie?"

"It says to me what Poppa told me this morning before I came up here to start to school."

"And what was that, Addie?"

"It tells me that I could have come up here and just conformed to what everyone else was doing or saying or that I could try to be myself. Poppa said, 'Now, Addie, just be yourself. People may not like you at first, but it'll be better on you in the long run if you just act natural and just be Addie Harp.'"

"That sounds like good advice, Addie. It just proves that there is a whole new world waiting for us if we become readers. Good day, Class. I'll see you tomorrow."

As her fourth-graders trekked out, Miss Sedlow discerned that she knew who the sheep and goats were.

Marge and Addie walked to Mr. Harp's store that day in silence, which was uncommon for those two friends. They felt that they had scored a victory and that talking about it would ruin it. Bertie, Addie's older sister, and Marvin, Marge's younger brother, had walked on ahead. The four of them would be riding home with Poppa in his fine carriage later.

At supper that night, Poppa Harp asked, "How was your first day at your new school, Girls?"

"Fine, Poppa," answered Bertie. Bertie had an uncanny ability for tuning out the world around her. While everyone else--including Addie--was falling apart, Bertie could be oblivious.

"Not so fine, Poppa," answered Addie.

"Oh, and what was wrong about it, Miss Addie Elizabeth Harp?" mimicked his second child--the one who was supposed to have been a boy.

"Well, it all centered around Birdie Blagg and Myrtle Nelson. Do you know them, Poppa?"

"Oh, I've seen them in the store a few times, and I know their folks."

"Well, what's the problem, Poppa? Why are they so terrible?"

"Well, Honey, I think it all goes back to the home. I don't know much about the Blaggs, but I have a feeling that Birdie is just being led by Myrtle."

"So what's Myrtle's trouble, Poppa?"

"Well, Addie, tell me. How would you feel if you knew that I was a thief and that everything you had came from something I had stolen?"

"Is that the way it is with Mr. Nelson?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's the way it is with Lige. For years he tried to hold his head up after he made his bad marriage."

"To Myrtle's mother, you mean?"

"Yes, he has been married just one time, and he had the misfortune of marrying a whiner and complainer. And now she has begun to dabble in some kind of offbeat religion."

"What is it, Poppa?"

"I don't know what it is, Honey. But Mrs. Nelson has always had a problem with overweight; and she went into it for help."

"Well, even with all those problems, Myrtle has no excuse to treat me the way she did today. She called me a country hick, and she announced to the fourth-grade class that my mother is pregnant."

The fulfilled-looking Mrs. Harp, aglow with her condition, had been silent but now she spoke: "And what did you say, Addie?"

"I said that I was glad because I am and that I hoped we had another girl."

"Good girl!" intoned Mrs. Harp. "Addie, do you suppose Myrtle feels cheated that she's an only child? Maybe she would like to have a nice sister like yours and know that she'll soon have another brother or sister."

"Yes," murmured Bertie, "Maybe she's jealous of you."

"Well, after all," clowned Addie, "who wouldn't be jealous of us beautiful, wealthy, charming Harps?"

"Feel better, Honey?"

"Yes, Poppa. Thanks."

The next day held more of the same, but there seemed to be some shifting in the camps. Even Myrtle's allies seemed to be tiring of Myrtle's innuendoes concerning country hicks.

The day ended with Myrtle walking home alone. Birdie and Helene had decided, along with four or five other town girls, to walk down to Harp's Ready-to-Wear Store and look around with Addie and Marge.

As she walked up to the front door, she could hear them--her parents, Lige and Nellie--quarrelling. And her mother was crying.

"Woman, my patience is just about worn thin! All I can make goes for food and clothing and now you do this, and we don't have any extra."

"Make, Lige? Did you say *make*?" Didn't you mean *steal*?"

"Living with you, woman, would drive any good man to stealing or drinking or fornicating or anything!"

"Blame me, Lige!"

"Yes, I'll blame you, Nellie! I didn't have all these problems before you came along, and now you've added to them!"

"You're not being fair, Lige! I'm just trying to find the Light!"

"Why don't you try to find the Light by being a wife to me and by being a mother to that child of yours?"

"You leave Myrtle out of this. She's all right."


"Sure, she's all right, Nellie, if it's all right to be a bully and a gossip spreader. I've seen how she operates."

Myrtle was completely unprepared for the scene that she encountered on walking into the kitchen. Her mother was seated at the table before a half-eaten chocolate cake. In her left hand, Nellie Nelson held a bloody butcher knife. All that remained at the bottom of her right arm was a stub.

"Mother, what happened? Why? Why, Mother?" The child was crying hysterically.

"Well, Myrtle, Honey, the Word says, 'If thy right hand offends thee, pluck it out.' You know I didn't need that chocolate cake!"

"Myrtle, run next door to the Russells' and call Dr. Gates. Tell him your mother has had a bad accident."

As the troubled child hurried next door, her thoughts were about everyone already knowing her father was a thief and now her mother had tried to kill herself. Anyway, that would be the story. 

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