

The Hoosier Schoolmaster

By EDWARD EGGLESTON

CHAPTER III—(Continued)

"WHAT a quare boy Shocky is!" remarked Betsy Short, with a giggle. "He just likes to wander round alone. I see him a-commin' out of the sugar camp just now. He's been in there half an hour." And Betsy giggled again; for Betsy Short could giggle on slighter provocation than any other girl on Flat Creek.

When Ralph Hartsook, with the quiet, dogged tread that he was cultivating, walked into the school-room, he took great care not to seem to see the trap set for him; but he carelessly stepped over the board that had been so nicely adjusted. The boys who were Hank's confidants in the plot were very busy over their slates, and took pains not to show their disappointment.

The morning session wore on without incident. Ralph several times caught two people looking at him. One was Mirandy. Her weak and watery eyes stole loving glances over the top of her spelling-book, which she would not study. Her looks made Ralph's spirit sink to forty below zero, and congeal.

But on one of the backless little benches that sat in the middle of the school-room was little Shocky, who also cast many love glances at the young master; glances as grateful to his heart as Mirandy's ogling—he was tempted to call it ogging—was hateful.

"Look at Shocky," giggled Betsy Short, behind her slate. "He looks as if he was a-goin' to eat the master up, body and soul."

And so the forenoon wore on as usual, and those who laid the trap had forgotten it, themselves. The morning session was drawing to a close. The fire in the great old fire-place had burnt low. The flames, which seemed to Shocky to be angels, had disappeared, and now the bright coals, which had played the part of men and women and houses in Shocky's fancy, had taken on a white and downy covering of ashes, and the great half-burnt back-log lay there smouldering like a giant asleep in a snow-drift. Shocky longed to wake him up.

As for Henry Banta, he was too much bothered to get the answer to a "sum" he was doing, to remember anything about his trap. In fact, he had quite forgotten that half an hour ago in the all-absorbing employment of drawing ugly pictures on his slate and coaxing Betsy Short to giggle by showing them slyly across the school-room. Once or twice Ralph had been attracted to Betsy's extraordinary fits of giggling, and had come so near to catching Hank that the boy thought it best not to run any further risk of the beech switches, four or five feet long, laid up behind the master in sight of the school as a prophylactic. Hence his application just now to his "sum" in long division, and hence his puzzled look, for, idler that he was, his "sums" did not solve themselves easily. As usual in such cases, he came up in front of the master's desk to have the difficulty explained. He had to wait a minute until Ralph got through with showing Betsy Short, who had been seized with a studying fit, and who could hardly give any attention to the teacher's explanations, she did want to giggle so much! Not at anything in particular, but just at things in general.

While Ralph was "doing" Betsy's "sum" for her, he was solving a much more difficult question. A plan had flashed upon him, but the punishment seemed a severe one. He gave it up once or twice, but he remembered how turbulent the Flat Creek elements were; and had he not only resolved to be as unrelenting as a bulldog? He fortified himself by recalling again the oft-remembered remark of Bud, "Ef Bull wunst takes holt, heaven and yarth can't make him let go." And so he resolved to give Hank and the whole school one good lesson.

"Just step round behind me, Henry, and you can see how I do this," said Ralph.

Hank was entirely off his guard,

and, with his eyes fixed upon the slate on the teacher's desk, he sidled round upon the broad loose board misplaced by his own hand, and in an instant the other end of the board rose up in the middle of the school-room, almost striking Shocky in the face, while Henry Banta went down into the ice-cold water beneath the school-house.

"Why, Henry!" cried Ralph, jumping to his feet with well-feigned surprise. "How did this happen?" and he helped the dripping fellow out and seated him by the fire.

Betsy Short giggled.

Shock was so tickled that he could hardly keep his seat.

The boys who were in the plot looked very serious indeed.

Ralph made some remark by way of improving the occasion. He spoke strongly of the utter meanness of the one who could play so heartless a trick on a schoolmate. He said that it was as much thieving to get your fun at the expense of another as to steal his money. And while he talked, all eyes were turned on Hank—all except the eyes of Mirandy Means. They looked simperingly at Ralph. All the rest looked at Hank. The fire had made his face very red. Shocky noticed that. Betsy Short noticed it, and giggled. The master wound up with an appropriate quotation from Scripture. He said that the person who displaced that board had better not be encouraged by the success—he said success with a curious emphasis—of the present experiment to attempt another trick of the kind. For it was set down in the Bible that if a man dug a pit for the feet of another he would be very likely to fall in it himself. Which made all the pupils look solemn, except Betsy Short, who giggled. And Shocky wanted to. And Mirandy cast an expiring look at Ralph. And if the teacher was not love-sick, he certainly was sick of Mirandy's love.

When school was "let out," Ralph gave Hank every caution that he could about taking cold, and even lent him his overcoat, very much against Hank's will. For Hank had obstinately refused to go home before the school was dismissed.

Then the master walked out in a quiet and subdued way to spend the noon recess in the woods, while Shocky watched his retreating footsteps with loving admiration. And the pupils not in the secret canvassed the question of who moved the board. Bill Means said he'd bet Hank did it, which set Betsy Short off in an uncontrollable giggle. And Shocky listened innocently.

But that night Bud said slyly: "Thunder and lightning! what a manager you air, Mr. Hartsook!" To which Ralph returned no reply except a friendly smile. Muscle paid tribute to brains that time.

But Ralph had no time for exultation; for just here came the spelling-school.

CHAPTER IV

Spelling Down the Master

"LOW," said Mrs. Means, as she stuffed the tobacco into her cob pipe after supper on that eventful Wednesday evening: "I 'low they'll app'int the Squire to gin out the words to-night. They mos' always do, you see, kaze he's the peartest ole man in this deestrick; and I 'low some of the young fellers would have to git up and dust ef they would keep up to him. And he uses sech remarkable smart words. He speaks so polite, too. But laws! don't I remember when he was poarer nor Job's turkey? Twenty years ago, when he come to these 'ere diggin's, that air Squire was a poar Yankee school-master, that said 'pail' instid of bucket, and that called a cow a 'caow,' and that couldn't tell to save his gizzard what we meant by 'low and by right smart. But he's larnt our ways now, an' he's jest as civilized as the rest of us. You would-n know he'd ever been a Yankee. He didn't stay poar long. Not he. He jest married a right rich girl! He! he!" And the old woman grinned at Ralph, and then at Mirandy, and then at the rest, until Ralph (Continued on page 27, Column 1)



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