

## CHAPTER XLI

### A JOB THAT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE

Having decided to seek greater remuneration than that offered him at Wausau, Grandfather sent letters of inquiry accompanied by copies of his recommendations to several cities and received an invitation to come to West DePero for an interview. Here he met the School Board of three members - Mr. Weter, Mr. Hopkins and Mr. MacDonald, and a contract was signed to assume the principalship at a salary of \$90 per month.

The high school of about forty pupils and grades from primary to 8th grade, inclusive, were housed in a central building. An additional building in the French section had primary grades. The job seemed interesting and not difficult. Had Grandfather been experienced enough to note that for a number of years there had been a new principal each year, he would have sensed that there was some difficulty which did not appear on the surface.

Arriving in the Fall, Grandfather was introduced to one of the substantial citizens who bluntly said: "I must say you look too young and too small to run that school." Grandfather sensed that to be the general opinion, but was not disturbed by that as he was accustomed to being discounted at first acquaintance. However, he soon found that the school appeared to present an impossible situation. The diminutive school system had so many bosses that nothing could be accomplished.

Grandfather had been told when he was hired that the grade teachers had all been employed for a number of years and were capable of

conducting their rooms without much supervision. This he found to be more than correct, for each also felt quite capable of directing the affairs of the entire building.

One of the School Board, officially known as Director, was also janitor and in his dual capacity of Director and janitor, took his title of Director very literally.

The Fox River divided the little city of DePere into two sections about equal in population, connected only by a bridge about one-third of a mile in length. The two sections were combined under one city government, but had two separate school systems. The East Side had what was known as the city system with a "city superintendent" who issued certificates to teachers; the West Side had the county system with a "principal" in charge of the schools while the county superintendent issued certificates to the teachers.

The county superintendent was a fine young man of whom Grandfather became fond. It was clear from the start that he would make no trouble, but the superintendent of the East Side schools had just evolved a theory that by virtue of his title of City Superintendent he had some measure of authority over the West Side school. With so many bosses, the school had gotten in a bad way and the Board, to solve the situation, had in the previous year appointed a committee of lady visitors who had taken their duties seriously and became, so to speak, a board of lady managers.

You see this little high school had almost as many bosses as it had pupils which was, you can readily understand, quite the wrong proportion of bosses to pupils, the correct proportion, of course, being one boss to

all the pupils. So you see the school was out of luck.

Each principal in turn had muddled through for a year and then sought more congenial pastures. That it would be possible to muddle through another year seemed doubtful. It would be better, Grandfather thought, to return to the law school and if he were to do that, the sooner the better. But why not have some fun first - really run the school for one week, get fired and leave with the satisfaction which probably no principal of that school for some years had felt - namely, that for one week he had been the boss.

Just at that time Grandfather received a letter from the "City Superintendent" stating that the city schools would close for Christmas holidays beginning on a certain day, to which Grandfather replied that he had recommended to his Board of Education to close on a different day. He suspended the sister of the city's bully for "cribbing" her Latin and also suspended the brother of the most aggressive grade teacher because he was obstreperous. He told the director-janitor not to start breaking up coal for the furnace until school in the room above the coal bin was dismissed, he requested the Board not to reappoint the Board of Lady Visitors and he moved a few desks about in the grade rooms just to assert authority.

He expected all this to occasion an explosion, and in this he had no reason to feel disappointed. However, several circumstances combined to produce an unexpected outcome. Mr. Weter, scholarly, with a charming personality and a rare bump of humor, a man for whom Grandfather had a high appreciation and affection, had resigned from the Board after many years of honorable service and Dr. Gregory had been chosen in his place. Dr. Gregory

had a vigorous - in fact, a pugnacious temperament. He was regarded with some awe for his fearlessness and appreciated for his charitable service to the needy.

This unexpected assertion of authority on the part of the principal, who was everywhere discounted because of his youth and size, appealed to the doctor's imagination and although he had had no part in hiring the principal, he declared vigorously for the principal's program. When the bully whose sister was suspended threatened to "lick the principal at sight", the doctor locked him up and warned him that if he touched the principal, the doctor would kick the bully clear beyond the city limits. Since the doctor already had a record of having knocked down two men who had made remarks he did not like, the doctor had to be taken seriously.

When the grade teacher came storming down to get her brother reinstated, the doctor told her that until her brother promised a new line of conduct, he was out. He told the director-janitor that coal dust coming up through the floor was unwholesome for the children and that the principal was right in objecting to his breaking up coal while the room above the coal bin was in use, he got the Board to close school for the Christmas holidays, as the principal suggested, on a different day than that directed by the City Superintendent and expressed himself as vigorously opposed to a Board of Lady Visitors.

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school. However, having siezed the role of Czar, it was not easy to unbend and for the next three years Grandfather was more of a dictator than in any other period of his life.

One other fact helped. The big school event of the year was Commencement. There was only one opera house and that was located on the East Side. The East Side schools had their Commencement one night and West Side schools had theirs the following night. The East Side schools drew more pupils who had cultured parents and heretofore the East Side graduates had been given better coaching for Commencement, with the result that the East Side was accustomed to "outshine" the West Side.

Now it happened on a couple of occasions that Grandfather had been invited to take some part in a public program and had pleased the audience. A new idea struck the town - maybe under the coaching of the young principal, the West Side schools might at Commencement time come into their own.

There was some exceptionally good material in the school. "Jamic" Weter, who afterward won a joint debate in University of Wisconsin and graduated from Harvard Law School "cum laude" and became a prominent attorney in Seattle, was in the graduating class and in the next class was Warren Persons, who later was professor in the Harvard School of Business and developed for them their index of business conditions and later had a meteoric career in Wall Street with investment trusts.

Soon everyone had forgotten their troubles when the pupils were known to be enthusiastically at work on Commencement. At training youthful orators Grandfather did not disappoint his patrons - in fact, he gave the

town a real thrill - the West Side schools were universally conceded to have won the competition by an unmistakable margin, a feat which they repeated for the two following years.

One unusual feature of Grandfather's last Commencement deserves mention. In the class was a girl, Helena Foxgrover, above the average in ability but with an impediment in her speech. At frequent intervals, often in the middle of a word, apparently her throat would tighten up and she would have to wait for it to relax. She could play the piano and Grandfather suggested that she play for the Commencement program. But nothing would satisfy her but to speak - a feat she had never attempted in public.

So she started daily rehearsals on one paragraph of Sparticus to the Gladiators. It appeared that some progress could be made if certain consonant combinations were avoided.

So a paragraph was written on Snow - a word which never occasioned trouble. Finally after much rewriting and rehearsal, Helena could say one paragraph without a hitch. Then she attended a Catholic Mission (Revival) got wrought up and had a relapse. However, she started once more. She was to give the salutatory and with much care and daily rehearsals for weeks Helena could get through a three-minute speech quite perfectly.

Commencement evening arrived, and when Helena stepped out before the big audience, Grandfather held his breath. What would happen? Almost everyone in the audience knew she had an impediment in her speech, and when she started off boldly, speaking loudly yet with smooth and well modulated inflections, the audience was amazed, and when she finished with a good

climax and without a hitch, you should have heard the applause.

Several years later Grandfather met Helena by chance. She had graduated from Oshkosh Normal and was teaching and spoke fluently. At last Grandfather inquired: "How did you succeed in overcoming the trouble we worked so hard to correct?" "It seems strange," she replied, "but I never had any trouble after Commencement night." Apparently confidence was all she needed.

Meanwhile Grandfather had become the city's public speaker, speaking at a great variety of meetings on a wide range of topics. One night he was hastily initiated into a secret order because they needed a speaker for a convention next day.

An account of one of these addresses may entertain you. The Civil War veterans invited Grandfather to address them on Memorial Day at a big outdoor meeting. Grandfather accepted and immediately some of the veterans began to beseech Grandfather to make them hear. "We used to have good speakers," they complained, "but of late years the speakers just mumble their words and we cannot understand them. Some people say we are getting hard of hearing. It's all nonsense - we hear as well as we ever did. The trouble is with the speakers. If you just speak up, we'll hear you all right." Grandfather determined that all who were not stone deaf should hear him. He knew that the problem of making people hear is not volume so much as clear enunciation with a "kick" behind each important word. This time they should hear.

The park where the meeting was held was on the bank of the Fox River. People on the other side of the river sitting on the porches a



quarter of a mile away said they heard Grandfather perfectly. At first he thought this a jolly, but the river was calm and apparently the sound traveled across the surface of the water and it amused as well as amazed those who sat on porches near the river to hear the speech.

The veterans were delighted. "We knew we were not deaf," they said. "Sure, we heard every word, we can understand anybody who speaks in a reasonable tone of voice. The other speakers - oh, they just mumbled their words."

But to get back to the story about the bosses. With it decided that the principal be humored in his notion that he alone should run the school, difficulties vanished and the school was found to have a number of interesting pupils. There was Bertha Jones - Bertha was bright enough, but words in Latin seemed to make her dizzy and her translations were strange and curious. A couple of samples from Virgil's Aeneid will illustrate.

"At pius Aeneas, per noctem, plurima volvens" I 305 (But pius Aeneas turning over many things in his mind during the night) she translated: "But pius Aeneas rolled over many times throughout the night." In the prize fight in Fifth book - "Constitit in digitos extemplo arrectus uterque, Brachiaque ad superas intorritus extulit auras" V 425-6 (each stood erect on his toes and raised his arms toward the sky) she translated: "Each stood erect on his fingers and extended his arms toward the sky."

Then there was Blanche Van Galder, the fat girl. Blanche could not be fitted into a school seat and had to have a chair by herself in an adjacent room, euphonistically called the library. Blanche was not only

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of unusually ample proportions; she also was more than normally fidgety, with the result that she broke the chair and wore out the library carpet and for a time had to retire from school to recover her composure. Some years later Grandfather saw Blanche. She was married and had three fine looking boys, one of whom had been patterned from the same blueprint as his mother.

Next year an inspector from the University of Wisconsin visited the school and wrote Grandfather: "Permit me to express to you the pleasure I found in my inspection of your work at DePere High School. The excellent general order and the interest and good work shown in your classes was striking." All the members of the Board of Education signed a recommendation which read in part: "This is to certify that C. C. Parlin has been principal of our schools for nearly two years and has been one of the most successful teachers we have had. He has been a good disciplinarian and there has never been any friction between him and the Board. We have offered him for next year more than has ever been offered a principal of our school for the third year." Grandfather will modestly refrain from recording just what that amount was.

But while pupils and parents had ceased to be disturbed about the age of the youthful principal, a scene, amusing to spectators but sometimes painful to Grandfather, occurred whenever a stranger came to the building. A couple of stories will illustrate. A representative of a school book house called while Grandfather was teaching a class in geometry in the main room. Grandfather, hearing a knock, stepped out into the hall, leaving the door open. A middle-aged gentleman said: "Can you

tell me where I can find the principal?" "Oh," said Grandfather, as the school began to titter, "the principal is busy now, he will see you later." "Where is he?" persisted the man. "The principal has a class in geometry," insisted Grandfather, waving his geometry book as an S. O. S. while the merriment of the school grew apace. "But," insisted the man, "will you not give the principal my card and ask him when he can see me." The issue could not be dodged. "I will see you in fifteen minutes," said Grandfather. The man was standing at the head of the stairs and, startled, he stepped back a step and stumbled down the steps while the school laughed. Thereafter Grandfather always took precaution to close the door behind him when meeting strangers.

One day, hearing a noise in the hall, he stepped out from the laboratory and saw an overgrown farmer lad and his father coming down the hall. "Hi, Mike," says the father, "here's a young fellow who might tell us where to go. Say, can you tell me where to go to find the principal?" "I am the principal," said Grandfather. The old man straightened up and with mingled surprise and disappointment exclaimed: "Air you the principal?" "Yes," replied Grandfather, "can I do anything for you?" "Wall," said the old man, "I had intended to leave my son Mike at this here school, but I don't know about it now."

It was decided that Mike should remain - he did not learn much, but he distinguished himself by raising a large mustache. This added to Grandfather's embarrassment, because when to the inevitable question of "where can I find the principal," Grandfather would reply, "I am the principal," the stranger was apt to say: "But I see someone in there with a

mustache." Grandfather could have had a lot of fun passing book agents on to Mike, except that Mike was too dumb to carry the role.

Just one more. A rural teacher by the name of Miss Smith wrote about taking a special course in high school. Grandfather had written favorably, but had heard nothing further. One day his landlady told Grandfather that a lady who had just moved to town would call that afternoon to see about entering her children in the school. Just before afternoon recess there was a rap at the door and Grandfather stepped out and met a middle-aged lady. The lady was quick enough to get in the first word. "Where is the principal?" she asked. "I am the principal," said Grandfather. The lady looked startled. In his most reassuring manner Grandfather proceeded: "You are Mrs. Robinson, I presume. Mrs. Wight said you would call this afternoon. You wish, I presume, to see about entering your children." "No," said the middle-aged lady, "I am Miss Smith." It was Grandfather's turn to faint. He excused himself and stepping back into the room, leaned heavily on the desk, while he dismissed school for recess and wondered whose move it was to speak next and what the next topic of conversation was likely to be. After both Miss Smith and Grandfather recovered sufficiently to talk the matter over, Miss Smith decided to remain and although she was a misfit in years, yet she proved to be a satisfactory student.

Speaking of rural teachers reminds Grandfather that every Saturday he used to drive out in the county with County Superintendent Kittell and help him conduct a day's teacher institute for the rural teachers of the section, coaching them on their studies for a higher certificate and

helping them with some of the practical problems of the school. It was hard work, since they had to drive with horses over bad roads in cold weather, but was quite a lot of fun and added something to Grandfather's income. This, in turn, reminds Grandfather of some of the replies rural teachers gave in their examinations for certificates. To the question: "What is the office of the lungs?" one teacher replied: "The chest."

A list of writings were given for the teachers to name the authors. After the Sermon on the Mount one teacher wrote McGuffey. Apparently she had read the Sermon on the Mount in McGuffey's Reader.

Well, the three years in DePere were busy ones, filled with enlivening experiences and with some sense of satisfaction in overcoming handicaps which for a time threatened success. Before leaving the subject of DePere, however, Grandfather must tell you a couple of odd tales.