

## CHAPTER XLIV

### ▲ SERMON STARTS A LARGE RUMPUS

The leading Protestant church of DePere was the Congregational Church. The church was located on the East Side, but the pastor lived on the West Side and was a neighbor of Grandfather. It is beside our story, but a bit entertaining that in a friendly call one day, he wished to point out some pleasant resemblance between Grandfather and his mother. Now, as a matter of fact, Grandfather closely resembled his father in appearance and had no points of likeness to his mother. But the preacher, not to be balked in his search for resemblances, remarked that he thought Grandfather's teeth looked very like his mother's. It seemed that it might prove embarrassing to explain that mother's teeth had been furnished her by a dentist, and the remark was allowed to pass without discussion.

But to get started with the story - it is the practice in most Protestant churches for the pastor to preach a sermon once a year on education. Rev. Keene, wishing to give a bit of local color to the sermon which he delivered in Grandfather's last year in DePere, asked various school people what things should be corrected. Grandfather and County Superintendent Kittell each suggested some conditions they were trying to correct. The East Side principal, Miss Alden, and the East Side superintendent of schools, refused to give any information. There was nothing wrong over there. So Rev. Keene visited the East Side schools for a day, making observations for himself.

When Rev. Keene delivered his sermon, few were present, and scarcely anyone a few days later could remember what he had said, and the sermon would have gone the way of most sermons on education except for the fact that one person took an especial interest in the sermon. Miss Alden did not attend church that morning, but one of her assistants did, and in the following issue of the city's weekly paper this assistant had an article over her own signature but presumably written in consultation with Miss Alden. The article was witty and readable, but was a severe criticism of the sermon. "Rev. Keene's knowledge of Botany," said the article, "is a recollection of the scent of pressed rose leaves."

When the Rev. Keene read this article, it would not do to say that he got angry - it certainly would not do to say that the revered gentleman got angry - but it is quite within the facts to say that the righteous indignation which the article stirred within him had not entirely subsided by the next Sunday morning. The next Sunday morning his sermon began. "In my sermon last Sunday I carefully refrained from making any criticism of the management of any of our local schools, but this morning I wish to state that in my opinion, bad as are the school conditions in Wisconsin in general, the personal management of the East Side schools is worse."

With that as a running start, what he said about the East Side schools was granted by all to have been plenty. Several of the congregation were reported to have missed their Sunday morning nap and all could remember much of what he had said. Now it happened that among those who listened with emotion to his stirring sermon were a couple of leading

citizens who were at the same time deacons in his church and members of the East Side school board. What were they to do about it, when their pastor and their high school principal - both of whom they had hired and must again soon either hire or fire, got to fighting in public like a couple of Kilkenny cats? They forbade their school employes to write communications for the paper and they bade their pastor to deliver no more Phillipics on education.

Meanwhile, not being able to recollect what Rev. Keene had said in his first sermon, they suggested that he print it in the paper. What neither they nor Rev. Keene knew was that hidden in this sermon was a large stick of dynamite. As a matter of fact, when the town read the sermon, they could see nothing in it for anybody to get excited about. It was a statement of overcrowded rooms and inadequate equipment and the need of better popular support of the schools.

These are the age-long troubles of public schools everywhere and the sermon was only such a speech as a school man might have given in almost any city. However, in commenting on the rural schools, Rev. Keene, using material furnished by County Superintendent Kittell, said that "in one school district, the Board of Education put the teacher's position up at auction and knocked it down to the lowest bidder, a Canadian carpet bagger, at \$13 per month." (It may be added parenthetically that a carpet bag is a large traveling bag made of material resembling a carpet. These bags were in vogue after the Civil War and a Northerner who went south after the war to make money off of the Southerners with no intent to stay there permanently was called a carpetbagger.)

Conditions in that school district were certainly deplorable and the facts had been expressed somewhat sensationally, but public school conditions in certain sections of Brown county were known to be bad and no one got excited about the statement except one man. This one man surely did "boil over" when he read that sentence. It happened - a fact that neither Superintendent Kittell or Rev. Keene knew - that this "Canadian carpetbagger" was a niece of the political boss of DePere and had received the position on his recommendation! What a circumstance! When the political boss read that sentence, what he said was reported to have been much more than plenty.

In the dizzy whirl into which this school rumpus had now gotten itself, this sermon appeared to have been an insult to a fine young lady, a reflection on the Irish and an attack on the Catholic church. Meanwhile, the church deacons who were on the school board were political appointees and they found they had jumped from the frying pan right into the fire. What now were they to do about it?

In the next issue of the weekly paper appeared an article signed by all the school board members of the aforesaid rural district which began - "We have read the sermon of the Rev. A. A. Keene, we have read said sermon carefully." The article did not deny that they put their school up at auction and knocked it off to the lowest bidder - they did not deny that they had hired a Canadian nor that they were paying \$13 per month. They did state that their teacher was an "estimable young lady who had not only a certificate but also a recommendation." They demanded that the Rev. Keene make an apology in the paper for his statement.

The following week the town was startled to read a reply signed by Rev. Keene offering to pay \$25 to any member of this school board who would take oath before a notary that all the statements in their communication were true. The town perhaps was surprised to learn that the poorly paid preacher had \$25. At any rate, they were astonished that anyone could be rash enough to offer \$25 to anyone of these three school board members who would take oath that their teacher "was an estimable young lady who had not only a certificate but also a recommendation," for according to all reports the character of the young lady was above reproach and the County Superintendent granted that he had issued her a certificate and that she had a recommendation.

But it seems that Rev. Keene had inquired around and found that no one of the three Board members of this district could read or write, hence no one of them could take oath to the statement - "We read the sermon of Rev. Keene, we read said sermon carefully." In the following issue, the Board replied to Keene's offer, disdaining to take his money, but repeating their demand for an apology.

Apparently the deacons had forbidden Keene to write further contributions to the paper, and the public phase of the controversy had run its course. However, before the lightning ceased to strike and the storm had passed over, it was announced that Miss Alden and her assistant and also the East Side City Superintendent of Schools had decided to accept positions elsewhere, that Rev. Keene had accepted a call to a church in Illinois and that John Kittell had decided not to run again for the office of County Superintendent, but would study law.

Meanwhile Grandfather sat on the fence and laughed at the grandest school row the city ever had - the first one in three years in which he had not been at the storm center. Grandfather was offered his contract for the following year at an increase in salary, but an unsolicited offer looked better to him. His friend Karl Mathie had returned from the principalship of Wausau High School to become assistant pastor of the large Congregational Church at Appleton, Wisconsin. Grandfather went to visit him for a weekend. "How are you getting along in the ministry?" Grandfather asked. "Not at all," replied Mr. Mathie. The answer amazed Grandfather, for Mr. Mathie was remarkably versatile, had a very sincere interest in religious work and was always enthusiastic about whatever he undertook.

"The people in this church," Mr. Mathie went on to explain, "may be divided into three groups - the first is so good I can do nothing for them, another group is so hypocritical that it is not worth while to try to help them, and the group in between is too small in numbers to be worth my time. I am going back to school work where I can influence hundred of young lives. There is a project on at Wausau to make me superintendent of schools, and if I become superintendent, I want you for my high school principal. The first year, due to the fact that Superintendent Moss is now both superintendent and principal, it will be necessary for me to take both titles and we will have to call you Vice Principal and cannot give you much increase over what you can get in DePere, but the following year we will give you the title of Principal and a salary commensurate with the title." So Grandfather notified the West DePere Board of his intent not to return.

Shortly all those who had stirred up DePere on its school affairs for the past three years were gone and the little city settled down to the former placid tenor of its way. Some said the city was happier. Some said it was more dull - all agreed it was different.