

## Fun with a Stranger

All that summer the children who were due to start junior school in Miss Snell's class had been warned about her. "Boy, you're gonna get it," the older children would say. "You're really gonna get it. Mrs. Cleary's all right," (Mrs. Cleary taught the other, luckier class of new pupils) "she's fine, but boy, that Snell - you better watch out."

5 So it happened that the anxiety level of Miss Snell's class was high even before school began in September, and she did little in the first few weeks to improve it.

She was probably sixty, a woman with a man's face and clothes that seemed to smell of pencil shavings and chalk dust. She was strict and humourless, determined to stop the things she thought intolerable: "mumbling, daydreaming, frequent trips to the toilets", and the worst of,

10 "coming to school without proper supplies." Her small eyes were sharp, and when somebody sent out a stealthy alarm of whispers and nudges to try to borrow a pencil from somebody else, it almost never worked. "What's the trouble back there?" she would snap. "I mean you, John Gerhardt." And John Gerhardt, or Howard White, or whoever it happened to be, could only turn red and say, "Nothing."

15 "Don't mumble. Is it a pencil? Have you come to school without a pencil again? Stand up when you're spoken to." There would follow a long lecture on Proper Supplies that ended only after the offender had come forward to receive a pencil from the small hoard on her desk and to promise that he wouldn't chew it or break its point.

She seemed to have no favourites; once she even picked on Alice Johnson, who did

20 nearly everything right. Alice was mumbling while reading aloud, and Miss Snell went over and took her book away and lectured her for several minutes running. Alice looked stunned at first, then burst into tears.

Still, they could not hate Miss Snell because she was sometimes nice in an awkward way of her own. "Do you know," she said, "when school began this year you

25 were all strangers to me, but I wanted very much to learn your names and remember your faces, and so I made the effort. It was confusing at first, but before long I'd made friends with all of you. Because you can't very well have fun with a stranger, can you?" She gave them a homely, shy smile. When she said something like that it was more embarrassing than anything else, but it did leave the children with a certain vague

30 sense of responsibility towards her, and often prompted them into defending her when children from other classes demanded to know how bad she really was. "Well, not too bad," they would say uncomfortably, and try to change the subject.

John Gerhardt and Howard White usually walked home from school together, and often they were joined by two of the children from Mrs. Cleary's class who lived in their street - Freddy

35 Taylor and his twin sister Grace.

“Guess what we’re gonna do next week,” Freddy said in his chirping voice one afternoon.

“Our whole class, I mean. Guess. Come on, guess.”

But Freddy didn’t wait long for an answer. “Mrs Cleary says we’re gonna go to the Museum of Natural History and a whole lotta other places. Too bad you’re not in Mrs. Cleary’s class.”

40 “Doesn’t bother me,” John Gerhardt said. “I can go to those places any day, if I feel like it, and I don’t need any Mrs Cleary to take me.” Then he came up with a direct quotation from his father that seemed appropriate: “Anyway. I don’t go to school to fool around. I go to school to work. Come on, Howard.”

Towards the end of autumn, the long preparations for Christmas began. Every day

45 the halls and classrooms became more thickly decorated with Christmas trimmings, but Miss Snell’s class felt anxious because her room was unchanged. They noticed there was no decoration except for the grubby red letters spelling “Merry Christmas” over the blackboard. Finally, it was the last week before the Christmas holiday and still there was no sign of a party. “You gonna have a party in your class?” Freddy Taylor inquired one day.

50 “Sure, prob’ly,” John Gerhardt said, though in fact he wasn’t sure at all. Miss Snell had said or hinted nothing whatever about a Christmas party.

“Miss Snell tell ya you’re gonna have one, or what?” Grace asked.

“Well, she didn’t exactly tell us either,” John Gerhardt said nervously. Howard

White walked along without a word, looking at the ground and scuffing his shoes in

55 embarrassment.

“Mrs. Cleary didn’t tell us either,” Grace said, “because it’s supposed to be a surprise, but we know we’re gonna have one. Some of the kids who had her last year said so. They said she always has this big party on the last day, with a tree and things to eat. You gonna have all that?”

60 “Oh, I Don’t know,” John Gerhardt said, trying to sound convincing. “Sure, prob’ly.” But later, when the twins were gone, he got a little worried. “Hey, Howard,” he said, “you think she is gonna have a party, or what?”

“Search me,” Howard White said, with a careful shrug. But he was uneasy about it

too, and so was the rest of the class. As the end of term drew nearer, it seemed less and less

65 likely to them that Miss Snell was planning a party of any kind.

It rained on the last day of school. The morning went by like any other morning, and after lunch, like any other rainy day, the corridors were packed with chattering children in raincoats, milling around and waiting for afternoon classes to begin.

Miss Snell’s class pressed self-consciously against the corridor wall, mostly silent, hands in

70 their pockets. A second later, Miss Snell's door opened, and the first thing they saw was  
that on her desk lay a neat little pile of red-and-white wrapped packages. The gifts were all  
wrapped alike, in white tissue paper with red ribbon, and the few whose individual shapes  
John Gerhardt could make out looked like they might be toy  
soldiers. Maybe it would be toy soldiers for the boys, he thought and little miniature dolls for  
75 the girls. But that would be good enough - something to prove she was human after all, to  
pull out of a pocket and casually display to the Taylor twins, saying, "She gave us these little  
presents. Look." The little pile of gifts made everything all right. The children had only to  
look at them to know that there was nothing to be embarrassed about, after all. Miss Snell  
had turned out all right in the end.