

Theme Reader's Personal Experience

Recalling Incidents That Have Happened During His Term of Service

The Theme Reader brightened up as the reporter touched his weak spot, in requesting him to tell something of his own experiences during his long service in the English department. The eyes that had stared moodily out of the window, while the reporter was attempting to drain him of news facts, now lit up with a light that betrayed an inner feeling of satisfaction and gratification. His heel slipping down from the window-sill where he had stubbornly placed it, struck the floor with a bouncing whack, and folding his arms and assuming a contemplative expression, he settled down to work.

"Some curious pieces of work have come to my notice," he said, "since I have been connected with the English department, and all the freaks of writing and grammar imaginable have passed under my surveillance. Some phase of every style in existence—I might say—in some shape or other has wandered into my observation, and some highly amusing incidents—a few of which I am able to recall.

"I remember once when 'My Idea of a Gentleman' was assigned as a general subject, and most of the class took a serious view of it. But there were a few that didn't. One of them went through a long process of visualization culminating in a climax which proved the gentleman in question to be a tramp walking down the railroad track with his bundle suspended over his shoulder on the end of a stick.

"Another young literatus went at the subject something after this order: 'My landlord is a gentleman; that I'd have you know. He room's across the hall from me and always does his best to please. When he comes upstairs at night, he takes off his shoes so as not to disturb me. Sometimes on cold nights he takes and heats a flatiron and fetching it into my room he wraps it up in a blanket and tucks it under the bed-clothes at the foot of the bed, so that my feet wouldn't get cold. 'Upsey, upsey,' he says, and when he gets through he apologizes for disturbing me. When I don't get up in time for breakfast he fetches it up to me, and then takes my socks down and warms them at the grate. I told him once that my room was cold, and he put in another radiator. And he wouldn't take any rent, when I asked him to. If he wasn't a gentleman, what was he?"

"I am quite sure that this young genius had a correct conception of a gentleman in his mind. But I hardly think his landlord was a genuine character. However, he was not quite as erratic as the student who wrote: 'I think a gentleman is a man with good manners. The kind of a man who would lay down and let himself be kicked and then get up and apologize for taking up your time. The kind of a man who would lend a friend a quarter to get his dinner with and then go off to the free lunch counter himself. Not the kind that dresses in fine clothes, plays smash and goes in the hole to every business man in town. He breaks all the ladies' hearts and has every old fool woman in town dotting on him. He gets married and settles down, generally as a clerk in a dry goods store or an apprentice in some paint shop.'

"This student evidently believed in the negative process in showing what a gentleman ought to be like. However, he was altogether too rambling and I couldn't give him full credit for some excellent ideas.

"Upon one occasion the class was directed to write about some pleasure trip they had taken at some time during their lives. One of the class wrote an account of his grandmother's funeral but whether this was intentional or not I am unable to state. He may have misunderstood the subject. Upon another occasion one of the Freshmen students wrote an unbiased and impartial account of his visit to his mother at the insane asylum.

"Some experiences that I have had with students tried me quite sorely. Some of the students who indulged their young fancies with poor literary effect would come to me with complaints of unjust criticism, accusing me of marking them wrong, when they 'just knew' that they were right. Some of these were so ambitious in their

bigotry, that it was hard for them to be taught something new.

"I used to find myself overwhelmed with work at times. I remember several times when I allowed the papers to accumulate and had to sit up all night to straighten things out. One time I was rushed pretty near to death, and I finally concluded that in order to get through I would have to cut the reading short. And so, as I recognized all the names and the grade of work each was in the habit of doing, I graded the balance of the papers according to the reputation of the writers. In this way I made short work of my task, and secured an opportunity for some much needed sleep. Just before retiring, however, I noticed one of the papers lying on the floor, and picked it up. I was so sleepy, however, that I couldn't keep my eyes open, and as the name seemed good to me, I didn't take time to even open the paper. I simply wrote: 'This is a charming little sketch, but I think some of the points might have been brought out stronger.' I marked it A plus and let it go. Two days later the English teacher came up to my desk with a broad smile on his face. I looked at him inquiringly, but he simply handed me this sketch. I unfolded the manuscript and as my eyes fell on what it contained I was simply horror stricken. It contained a problem in trigonometry all worked out, and this was the charming little sketch. The boy had got his papers mixed, and of course I was a long-suffering victim of my own laziness.

"I remember another incident, when the class was required to write on the subject of 'Style,' and of course they were expected to express their own views on the styles of leading authors, and the individual elements entering in. One paper on this subject struck me as being decidedly peculiar. It ran something like this:

"Style is the way a person fixes up. Lots of people try to put it on when they ain't got it. Money and lots of it is essential to style, and if people ain't got any and try to put it on, they always look cheap. Lots of people do anyhow that have got money, because their looks are against them. Rich people sometimes send clear over to Paris to get clothes made up, just because it comes from there and is made by a Frenchman. Some people put on too much style and they generally bust up. I guess this is all I know on this subject.

"Yes, indeed," he said in reply to the reporter's question, "I have had a great many call on me on purpose to roast me. So many students, in fact, have such high opinions of their literary abilities, that any sort of a correction, no matter how evident or legitimate, comes as a severe blow to their pride. One day I was busy with my papers when a self-contained youth of about eighteen years of age stalked in and demanded an explanation.

"There ain't no sense," he said, 'in markin' a feller's paper up like this just because a few grammatical errors slips in. I'm pretty dead certain I can use as good grammar as most anybody, and I don't want no wise guy jumpin' on my paper with red ink. After a feller stays home from the show and cuts a date with his girl, it makes him feel like a four-cent piece when some blamed, kitin' tight wad of a reader butts in and knocks his writin's silly. Even if I don't get things straight sometimes, ain't you got sense enough to see what I mean? If you ain't then let some one correct my themes who has. It would probably cause you a blame lot of sufferin' anyhow, to treat feller decent.'

"I confess that I felt severely censured by this appeal to my finer feelings and I was often annoyed afterwards by his importunities. And there was a girl whom I remember in particular. She wrote terribly silly stuff, which she evidently thought was polished literary style, and I found plenty of opportunities to use the red ink on her papers. She constantly haunted my office, until I grew sadly tired of her.

"Why isn't this clear?" or "Why is this overdrawn," she would come in and say, and if I tried to explain she would regard me critically, just as if I was trying to convince her of a falsehood.

She never was satisfied with my explanations, and always went away feeling grieved. One day she sent in along with her theme, a special note, the contents of which ran something like this:

"I have tried and tried and tried to write the way you tell me to. You seem to think poorly of my style, but it is the kind that Mrs. Southworth uses in her writings. I don't think that you intend to mark me unfairly, but I don't believe that you understand me. I don't think for a moment that you would deliberately mark me down, and since it doesn't do me any good to talk to you, I'm not going to bother you any more and you can go ahead and do just as you please."

"I certainly admired her spirit of self-sacrifice, but she never showed any signs of improvement, and she finally changed to another division and to a new reader.

"This work is a great deal like any other. You can get used to it and may enjoy it, if you don't allow it to get piled up on you. If it ever does then it is a burden to get everything in a straightened condition. The supply is always constant and it is to one's best interests to keep up to date. Sometimes I get behind, and then I have a genuine cause for regret. There is something of an education to be acquired from reading the work, and noting how points are brought out and what corrections to make. But if you haven't patience and perseverance, and lots of both, I would advise you never to become a theme reader. For if you haven't these qualities your work will in nowise be a pleasure to you, but a burden grievous and even intolerable."

A Rare Treat.

One of the strongest attractions of the year has been booked for the big men's meeting to be held at the Oliver theatre Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock, when Mr. Alton Packard, the famous impersonator and cartoonist, will deliver a lecture illustrated with crayon sketches. Mr. Packard has occupied the lecture platform for several years, and has been unusually successful in his line of work. He comes with the highest recommendations, and will have something of special interest to college men. Prof. Wilbur F. Starr, formerly of the University School of Music and leader of the University Glee club during the past season, will furnish the music. All men are extended a very hearty invitation to attend.

Y. M. C. A. Afternoon Meeting.

Owing to the fact that the University and city Y. M. C. A. societies are jointly interested in the big men's meetings which are to be held in the Oliver theatre each Sunday afternoon during the winter the Sunday afternoon meetings at the University will be discontinued, in order that University men may actively engage in that work with the city association. The first meeting will be held there Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock, when Mr. Alton Packard, the famous impersonator and cartoonist will deliver a crayon lecture. College men are extended a special invitation to take advantage of this rare treat.

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