

MISS PUTTY FACE By Vingie E. Roe

Blue Sage Flat's Infant Terrible Helps the New Schoolma'am to Find Her Heart Under Strange Circumstances.

The brand new schoolma'am of Blue Sage Flat was in tears, frank, tearful tears. The 11 pupils—they had always been "scholars" before—were straggling down across the gray, gentle slopes in different directions, calling boisterously to each other in the exuberance of young spirits released from the first day's bondage in the little house on the flat. The new schoolma'am watched them through the miserable blur that was threatening to blot out the world in general and wondered how on earth she was ever going to stand nine months of them—and this.

A horrible panic was all inside her. Those youngsters had looked at her in blank amazement when she put the first orthographical test to the primary class, which consisted of the youngest two Babbles, and openly and without permission told her that kuhl-ah-tub did not spell cat! The eldest Crawford boy informed her patiently (and with condescension) that that feat was accomplished by sea-al-tee. They were a colossal wall raised against her and bound together by that quickest of all concepts, that of a child for a teacher whom it thinks is incompetent. How on earth was one going to break through that with the new method? How was she going to pierce the fog of ignorance let loose upon them by their former teachers who had, without a doubt, grounded them in spelling by letter instead of sound!

It was incredible! And they wiped their little noses frankly on their sleeves. They drank from a community dipper in the hall on the porch without regard for hygiene. They stared at her open mouthed when she told them, early in the day, that it was not sanitary to borrow each other's chewing gum.

So you can see, dear reader, that the new schoolma'am of Blue Sage Flat was 19, that she was a product of normal, that she was far—very far—away from her native health on this forsaken flat, and that this was the first day of the first term of her first school.

Therefore it is to be hoped you will excuse her when I tell you that the last straggler—the fat, square, bland faced Dinkelmeier in his hood and heavy stockings, though the time was only Indian summer—had hardly disappeared down over the slope into the fringe of sycamores about the prairie stream that hedged the flat, when she laid her head down on her unpainted, ancient desk and cried.

It was a pretty head, covered with thick, brown hair that had just enough curl in it to make it stand up and fluff, and there was a pinky white neck below the fluff. There were the tips of pink ears showing, too, for this schoolma'am did not believe in hiding those necessary adornments entirely. Neither were her sensible dress and skirt quite so short as those she had seen back at home, nor her neat blouse quite so low at the neck as those one met every day on the streets of the towns.

Score one for the new teacher. But now she had reached the jumping off place of her courage and endurance, right now, at the first getaway of her race in the new life! It had been coming all the night long, she knew that, down at Tom Atkins' house across the stream and down a mile. It had been started when she left her mother and all her friends in the little Kansas town so far—so frightfully far—away.

True, Mrs. Tom was kind and sympathetic, not without a certain tact, and the mile and a half had been covered quite so short as those she had seen back at home, nor her neat blouse quite so low at the neck as those one met every day on the streets of the towns. True, also, Blue Sage Flat paid the princely salary of \$120 a month for a teacher from "back east." These were assets. But the awful hunger of loneliness and the face of the 11 whom she feared utterly were liabilities that appalled her.

So she clenched her hands on the desk's edge and cried as she had longed to cry all that long week, with walling sobs that cut the silences unashamed. She was occupied completely and did not hear the soft thud of a horse's hoofs on the untrodden earth without, so that the rider who approached came to the open door of the schoolhouse unprepared to view the mean little aisle between the desks to that young brown head.

The rider, too, was young, and he had a cocksure face, ready to laugh at a moment's notice. Also he had a bet with two others of his ilk to meet the schoolma'am first. He was alert and a trifle nervous, and he rode in across the sage, for he knew good and well that he had a way with women, but that first glance into the house sobered him completely.

He drew rein and leaned sidewise in his saddle, and his merry, dark eyes became distressingly grave. This was a pretty how-de-do, he had heard all about Miss Ransome. All cowboys have heard of her, and he knew she had a way with women, but that first glance into the house sobered him completely.

So you can see it was somewhat of a poser to be handed a wallop like the spectacle here before him of tears and honest to goodness sobs. But it is to the credit of the newcomer that he forgot the disappointments in true anxiety and wondered what on earth he could do to turn off the shower. He removed his wide hat—it was his best, reserved for his trips to town, and decorated by a fancy spotted band—as a preliminary precaution, and cleared his throat.

In just about two seconds he got the pep all right. The brown head lifted with a jerk and a convulsed face, streaked with salt water, confronted him.

Two beautiful wide, gray eyes—beautiful even in their swollen and discolored lids behind their swimming tears—stared at him in half-crazed astonishment, and a quivering mouth was parted over genuine pearly teeth.

"Of all things!" snapped Miss Esther Ransome. "Do you spy on people's privacy out here? Go away from that door!"

Now it is one thing to go troubadouring zealously up to a brand new interest with a weather eye out for future "fad" and "gimmick" and another to be at it like a cat and a caterpillar and a worm. The fairly good looking mouth of the young man in the saddle shut with a snap of its own and an imitation sunset drowned out his tan.

With slow insolence he brushed the rim of the expensive sombrero, set it back on his head at careful angle, straightened up on his horse, and rode away. When he was well out of sight beyond the poplar trees he spread an expressive hand palm down and delivered himself softly of some choice and carefully selected oaths.

"Not for mine!" he finished decisively. "Goodnight, nurse! Get along home, Pronto. Though damn it I know what I'll tell those long-legged poplins at the bunkhouse."

"You notice too damn much," answered the rider pointedly. "Ain't there any other place to ride in that direction of Blue Sage Flat?"

"Um," mused Cuff, rubbing his chin. "Guess not."

He turned and raised a stentorian call. "Boys," he yelled, "here's Babe, come in from th' Blue Sage Flat with a grouch stacked up a mile high. Come see."

A half dozen cowboys, all washed up for supper, came promptly with gimlet eyes ready to search Babe's "innards" shamelessly.

But they had their trouble for their pains. He unsaddled and turned the pony into the corral, grinning with assumed good nature.

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"No one noticed the Crawford boy. He was playing round the blackboard with a piece of chalk—innocent childhood amusing itself."

umphed and when the music struck up Babe found himself drifting with the little figure in his arms, its silken feel a new intoxicant. Babe made some rambling remark, but her reply was so cool that he did not repeat the effort and they danced out the number in a strained silence.

"What one earth's th' matter with Babe Cutler?" Mrs. Tom wanted to know as they rode home in the chilly dawn. "He only ast you once—an him th' greatest lady's man in all the country."

But the schoolma'am was half asleep and did not answer. She was not so far gone in dreamy slumber, however, that she could not catch Mrs. Tom's guileless meaning of Babe's intentional slight, and her inward soul stiffened with embarrassment.

Why on earth hadn't she? Just why hadn't she? Wait until the next opportunity—just so. But no such mortification was going on in the breast of the cowboy. In the country that felt so kind of light and straight and soft underneath. They were more solid, those other girls; you could grip them good and hearty and swing them wide on the corners. But this girl, now—holy smoke, you couldn't pull no rough stuff like that on her. Why, those little feet of hers would simply fly off the floor if you hung your hand on 'em to kind of loosen 'em, let her turn herself, and follow after—all sort of respectful and at your distance. And that wonderful soft, slippery feel of her—

The openly sung praises of the new schoolma'am which greeted his ears at the Lazy X made him weary. He who was supposed to be a cowboy on feminine charm snickered in pained aloofness and had no comment to make.

"A fine stab you made th' other night, Lothario," they jeered. "Regular frozen face party. I bet you said 'Good foot' an' she said 'Very'—and you said—"

"Oh, hell!" said Babe disgustedly. "Ain't there nothing in that poor boob's heads but wind? I'd tell a fellow."

Miss Ransome walked along the stream's edge. All the trees were flaming in their autumn livery. The high skies of this prairie country were blue and clear. She felt peppy, brisk, and businesslike as she stepped along. Life was on tiptoe now. No more tears, no panic.

The letters she wrote home to that Kansas town were full of references to her work and her methods, to her new friends and her ideas of uplift as applied to the outlying districts. The eldest Crawford boy trudged beside her. He did not have to come so far out of his way, but there was a devilish pertinacity of antagonism in him that still set him quivering upon every subject tried to instill in him. Today it had been the subject of wireless, and the lad had doggedly stuck to his query. "How can you talk on a wire if there ain't no wire? Huh?"

"I do wish, Henry, that you would go home now. You are far past the turnoff," she told him gently, but Henry persisted. He hung behind mumbling at intervals about "no wire" and "numb-kulls."

The teacher was busily thinking of her monthly examinations and almost forgot him. She was recalled violently by the boy's shrill squeak. "—ain't it?"

"—ain't, Henry not 'ain't, isn't what?" "Cawley from Lazy X, Babe," said Babe, sure's shooting! "What's he comin' this way for?"

The schoolma'am blushed furiously. She could have shaken the child. Little pest! Anger rose in her like a tide. She glanced ahead into the magic vista of leafy floor beneath the trees and beheld a common little range horse, caparisoned in saddle and rider.

However, this was Pronto, good as gold and favorably spoken of wherever cow horses were mentioned hereabouts, and he carried his dearly beloved master gaily forward at a canter. They did make a gallant picture had any cared to look for beauty in them, for Babe was lean and

That was it. He was a goner—he, poor fish, who only offended her every time he opened his foot mouth!

He rode far that day on the boss' business, but the boss' business suffered. He passed three unbranded calves in Deep Coulee and never saw them.

For the next two weeks the boy was genuinely miserable. Then came the regular ward fishing round the ranches that Miss Ransome, still keen on the uplift, was going to give a box supper at the schoolhouse on Blue Sage Flat for the express purpose of providing a library for the use of all the country!

They all do this along in their first or second terms.

Now, there was nothing in that good new to plunge him into the neathermost depths of gloom, but it did so plunge him.

"Goeshillikins!" exclaimed Cuff, sharking eyes. "Imagine th' little girl on that there platform sellin' th' boxes! Mistress of ceremonies! An' won't her box come high? Say, boy! If th' rest feel like I do about it, she'll just have to move a whole Carnegie right out here, she'll have so much money to spend!"

Babe rode far again, and his head felt like the cook's scrambled brains from overmuch thinking.

Could he go to that box supper? Why not? He did certainly want to go.

None. He recalled too vividly those widening gray eyes that day by the winding creek. They were sure cold and fightin' mad. She just wouldn't see him if he did go—and could he stand that? To see those grinning monkeys, Cuff and Sid, hoppin' about her—damn! Probably have her box spotted, too.

No, sir! He dug his spurs into Pronto needlessly and gasped at his sudden leap. No, sir! He'd stay at home again. Regular old hermit.

The night of the box supper was cold and clear. There were stars above the rangeland, the creek of coming wagon, a fire in the schoolhouse stove, and not room enough by half.

However, every door and window was full of faces, the compact benches that replaced the seats a solid pack of humanity. There was the pleasant hum of expectancy. There were neatly combed and gala clad children in conspicuous evidence. The 11 had been drilled to a man, for there was to be a program.

There was a mountain of paper covered boxes on the platform.

What flutter of feminine finery along the benches! What edging in of prospective purchasers! What scanning of fair faces, as this or that box went up, to catch a betraying blush!

It was all simple, tentative, happy. To Sid and Cuff and all the rest of the Lazy X boys were there and on tiptoe, all that is, but one.

Out in the cold night, like a pariah beyond the fence, sat that erstwhile careless knight, that most confident Lothario Babson, his leg over his saddle horn and his black eyes pensive with that sadness which ever attends the sickness of the heart called unrequited love.

In his left breast pocket reposed something which filled him alternately with pride and misgiving, which had caused him laborious days and sleepless nights—namely, a real, true love letter, and the best thing of its kind he could produce.

It was fine drawn, like a draftsman's elevation, on good paper, done with a Spencerian pen. It had been copied and recopied, changed, abridged, and amplified, a good 15 times.

It was poetic, with that subtle insinuation and reference dear to a woman's heart, so thought its author; it was firm and strong with a man's undying passion. Once read it must find its mark in the heart behind the soft brown dress, or there was no truth in the old adage of the brave and fair, "he who hesitates," or any of the rest.

Babe and opportunity sat in the dark and waited—and they were not denied. Just before the pile of boxes was entirely gone one of the Babbles, puffed with oratory, came out to take a breath of air. Him Babe shamelessly whisked off the step and man and boy held a whispered confab which ended with the magic passing of silver, the zatin slip of paper.

The tide was cast. Babe wet his lips and leaving Pronto to stare alone went to the leady thickly fogged window to watch the stealthy progress of his plan.

Miss Ransome was on the platform, her rounded arms uplifted to the better display of the box she held. What adorable little wrists! What pink-tipped fingers! Babe's hungry black eyes caressed them.

He saw the Baby boy edge up, innocently important, and stand in the crowd, the tall-tale bit of white in his pudgy fingers.

"See!" cried Miss Ransome laughing, her cheeks flushed, her gray eyes sparkling, "the biggest box yet! It has paper lace and one-two-three-five roses! What am I offered for this one?"

"Two dollars!" "Two fifty!" "Three!" "Gone!" she said and reached for the money, as she leaned down to deliver. Just here the oldest Crawford boy's gimlet eyes caught the glint of a letter in his mate's small hand and with the seven of the bully snatched for it.

"And this," called the schoolma'am, "pink and plain, with a ribbon on top!" "Five dollars!" cried Sid Carroll, with a prophetic foreknowledge.

"Ten!" doubled Cuff and instantly a murmur ran like fire among the bidders that this was hers.

Soon Miss Ransome was all blushes, for this box threatened to insult every one sold previously by its arrogant expensiveness.

Outside in the night Babe Cutler clenched his fists and swallowed—he was past swearing—for he saw that little archfiend, the Crawford boy, disappear in the crowd with the epistle!

The plain pink box with the ribbon on top was the last and sold to Sid Carroll for \$21. Partners were finding each other and settling on the benches for that most delectable event, the "lap supper." The murmuring voices rose to happy bedlam.