

TEACHER'S PESTS

By John S. Halbert

November, 1958:

"Hey, John!"

My classmate Andy called out to me as I huffed up to Odell's Store on that chilly morning in November. As usual, I was cutting it close getting to eighth-grade homeroom, and had just enough time to buy a pack of notebook paper before the bell would ring. The teachers had told us to always get "Penworthy" or "Write-Right" paper (their wrappers had coupons), but we boys usually ignored them and instead brought the "Nifty" brand to school. The teachers never caught on to the real reason "Nifty" was our favorite writing paper: we had learned from experience that, compared to the other brands, it produced higher-caliber, more aerodynamic spitballs for us to throw at the blackboard.

Since it was Friday, some friends and I had planned to celebrate the last day of the school week by smuggling a supply of "lick-wish" sticks into the building to chew when the teachers weren't looking. If we had a few extra coins, we would also ante-up for "Dubble-Bubble" gum---sweet, pink stuff that blew really big bubbles, and, for good measure, had a tiny color "Uncle Bud" cartoon strip along with our fortune in each package.

We boys had developed a foolproof, in-class technique for chewing the gum to blow-readiness without being noticed. Then it became a contest of nerve among us to see who could produce the biggest, fastest bubbles while the teacher's back was turned. The trick was to blow the bubbles, then suck them back into our mouths without making a "pop". Thanks to lots of before-school practice at Odell's, out of literally hundreds of attempts, no one was ever caught with a "bubble-gum" face. As we deemed the in-class contraband candy and gum to be absolutely essential in order for us to maintain our strength and vigor, we reasoned it was our natural right and duty to outwit the authorities at every turn. Licorice and "Dubble-Bubble" gave us plenty of enjoyment (and headaches for the teachers)---for only a penny a pack.

"Come here . . . got somethin' to show ya!"

Andy and a couple of other fellows from homeroom, Larry and Ike, were huddled around a cardboard container about twice the size of a cigar box that was on the sidewalk in front of the popular little corner curb market. I waved at the trio, then ducked into the store and flipped a quarter to Odell for a pack of "Nifty" paper and a fistful of the chewy black licorice sticks. Stuffing them into my book satchel, I hustled back outside.

Andy motioned for me to come over. "Get a load of this!" he grinned, tugging at the top of the pasteboard container, "whattaya think?"

I dropped my book-bag and knelt down. "Oh, man!" I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "Where in the world----?" This was going to be the best-ever practical joke on the teachers----if we could pull it off. The four of us looked down into the box and giggled.

Just then, Odell stepped outside with a bagful of trash and glanced in our direction. At once, Andy slapped down the box-top. In a few seconds, when the storekeeper had trudged around the

corner and we were sure he couldn't see anything, Andy lifted lid and the four of us stole another look.

At that moment, Odell came back and Andy quickly re-covered the container. The trim, dark-haired merchant, whom one of the girls once told us she thought looked like Gregory Peck, stared hard at us, and from his quizzical expression, it was obvious the man was wondering what mischief we were up to. He went back inside, shaking his head.

B-R-R-I-I-N-G! came the brassy bell from across the street. Andy grabbed the box and our quartet dashed across the playground. When we reached the building's entrance, he thrust the carton at me. "Do something with it 'til school's out this afternoon!" He and the others then turned and vanished up the stairs to the homeroom, leaving me holding the incriminating evidence. Blanching at the thought of being caught red-handed with it, I stuffed it beneath my coat and scurried to my locker that was located (inconveniently for our purposes) straight across the hall from the principal's office.

As I glanced around to make sure no one was watching me, through a couple of doorways I spotted the principal, sitting at a console in his inner office, hunched over a microphone. From the looks of things, he was preparing the morning's announcements. For a split-second, I spotted his infamous wooden paddle, with its drilled-out holes, that was laid across the corner of his desk. Swallowing hard and hoping my face didn't betray my intentions, I bundled the box into the locker, closed the door, then scrambled upstairs to the third-floor homeroom.

At recess, Andy sidled up to me with his head hunkered-down in his upraised coat collar. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," I muttered, tight-lipped.

Just then, the other two members of the conspiracy, Larry and Ike, skulked past us with inquiring eyes. Andy and I nodded at them, and they shuffled off, their hands deep in their flannel-coat pockets, suppressing grins. So far, our plot was working perfectly!

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That afternoon, when the final school bell of the week rang, I elbowed my way through the hallway hubbub to the locker and retrieved the box.

Just as I was congratulating myself for successfully concealing it underneath my coat without being noticed----someone suddenly whopped me on my back! I whirled about to confront Paul, a red-headed classmate, who was standing there grinning at me. "Let's see that box!" he winked.

"Box?" I blinked, trying to erase the guilty look etched on my face. "What box?"

"Come on . . . Ike told me you had a box of them in your locker!"

Since this was not the time or place to argue, I grabbed his coat sleeve and tugged him down the hallway toward the stairwell. "Let's move!" I hissed, as we trundled down the steps to the ground floor, "the others are waiting for me!"

The two of us ducked into the boy's restroom and turned behind a partition where Andy, Larry, and Ike were already on the scene. "Got the box?"

I nodded.

Andy took a quick look outside the door to make sure no one was coming, then hurried back. "Okay, let's see them!" I opened my coat and set the carton on a thick window sill. Everyone held his breath as I pulled up the top, revealing what was inside.

"All r-i-i-ight!"

"Perfect!"

"Oh, man!"

Paul gaped in wonder at the contents. "I knew it! I knew it!"

To tell the truth, I was a bit surprised they had survived being cooped-up inside the locker all day. Guess they were more hardy than I had thought.

Larry poked his head outside the door. No one was in sight, so we all crept back up the stairs to the main-floor hallway. Ike trotted ahead of us and looked around the corner, then gave us the high-sign. "Okay," he mouthed, motioning. "Go! Go!"

In a jiffy, the five of us pushed through the auditorium's stage door. After another quick look-around to make sure no one was watching us, I pulled the door shut, then we climbed up a few steps to the back of the darkened stage, where we knelt around Andy and the box. Excitement was running high.

"Well, here goes----" he whispered, turning the cardboard container upside down. At once, there was a rustling beneath the curtain. Andy stuffed the box back inside his coat. "Let's get out of here, quick!"

Ike eased the stage door open a couple of inches----and quickly shut it.

"The janitor!" he gasped, "he's right outside!" With our hearts in our throats, we bunched without breathing behind the door on the musty stage-steps for what seemed an eternity. At length, when the rasping squeal of the mop-cart finally faded away, Ike again cracked open the door and peeped out. The custodian was down at the far end of the corridor, headed away from us. When the man at last turned the corner and disappeared, Ike motioned to us that the coast was clear.

Without a sound, the rest of us tiptoed out into the hallway. Andy took out a bandana and wiped the doorknobs. "No fingerprints!" he whispered, "they'll never be able to trace us!"

"Good idea." We slithered in silence down the back stairs to the rear door of the building.

Although the faculty parking lot was full of cars, incredibly, there was still no sign of the teachers. A rumble of voices coming from the direction of the cafeteria suggested they were in a meeting, or something.

We knew we were pushing our luck as we clambered single-file down the steep concrete steps to the playground. There, a tall concrete wall concealed us as we made our escape from the school grounds.

In an alley two blocks from the school, laughing, we shook hands all around and slapped each other on the back. Then, still giggling, we struck out toward our homes.

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On Monday morning, the "Fearless Five", as we now called ourselves, assembled at Odell's Store. The first order of business was to fill our pockets with "Dubble-Bubble" gum. Already looking forward to a big celebration, we went ahead and popped the gooey confections into our mouths and began chewing rapidly.

The bell rang and we headed across the way toward the big brick building, laughing and giggling in anticipation of what was about to happen. Assuming our scheme had played-out during the weekend like we hoped it had, this would be a day to remember! We went up to the homeroom and took our seats. I glanced around at the others, who were, for once, managing to keep straight faces. The wads of gum were securely stuck to the roofs of our mouths, ready for action. Now, if things went according to plan, the next few minutes would tell the story.

Right on time, the teacher bustled through the doorway with her standard armload of books and plopped them onto her big wooden desk. I held my breath as the prim woman pulled open the center drawer and reached for her classroom roll-book.

"Uhh!" the lady gasped.

Thud! Her shoe kicked the wastebasket as she back-stepped into the blackboard. *Z-z-i-i-i-i-i-p-p! Flap! Flap! Flap!* Her flailing elbow dislodged a wall map that shot upward and slapped around the spool several times.

"Ohh!" she choked, wide-eyed. With outstretched arms, the whimpering, discombobulated schoolmarm felt her way sideways down the blackboard wall. Groping for the doorknob, in frantic haste she flung the door open and stumbled out into the hallway.

As we students sat in open-mouthed astonishment, there was a shriek from somewhere, then shouts and yells from adult vocal cords. Then came loud bumps and thumps as more doors whacked open up and down the corridor, then a rush of footsteps and a babble of voices---teacher's voices.

Squinting, I focused on the teacher's desk. Yes, there they were---on her upturned class-roll book, sat two of the box's hundreds of inhabitants we had freed behind the stage curtain last Friday after school. From the looks and sounds of things, over the weekend, they and their companions had thoroughly infiltrated the building. Their tiny throats bobbed up and down. The duo of green baby frogs hopped to the edge of the desk and turned to face us.

We "Fearless Five" looked around at each other, holding our sides in silent laughter. On an animated count of "one, two, three", the conspirators blew gigantic bubbles----the biggest and best ever----and as the bedlam outside the door became ever louder, we let go at the same time with a resounding and supremely satisfying "POP!"

It was Monday morning----and the start of another week at school.