

*My Memories and
Miseries As a
Schoolmaster*

by

Stephen Leacock

Illustrated by

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MY MEMORIES *and* MISERIES

As a SCHOOLMASTER

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

Author of "The Hohenzollerns in America," "Further Foolishness," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY C. W. JEFFERYS

For ten years I was a schoolmaster. Just thirty years ago I was appointed on to the staff of a great Canadian school. It took me ten years to get off it. Being appointed to the position of a teacher is just as if Fate passed a hook through one's braces and hung one up against the wall. It is hard to get down again.

From those ten years I carried away nothing in money and little in experience; indeed, no other asset whatever, unless it be, here and there, a pleasant memory or two and the gratitude of my former pupils. There was nothing really in my case for them to be grateful about. They got nothing from me in the way of intellectual food, but a lean and perfunctory banquet; and anything that I gave them in the way of sound moral benefit I gave gladly and never missed.

But school boys have a way of being grateful. It is the decent thing about them. A school boy, while he is at school, regards his masters as a mixed assortment of tyrants and freaks. He plans vaguely that at some future time in life he will "get even" with them. I remember well, for instance, at the school where I used to teach, a little Chilian boy who kept a stiletto in his trunk with which he intended to kill the second mathematical master.

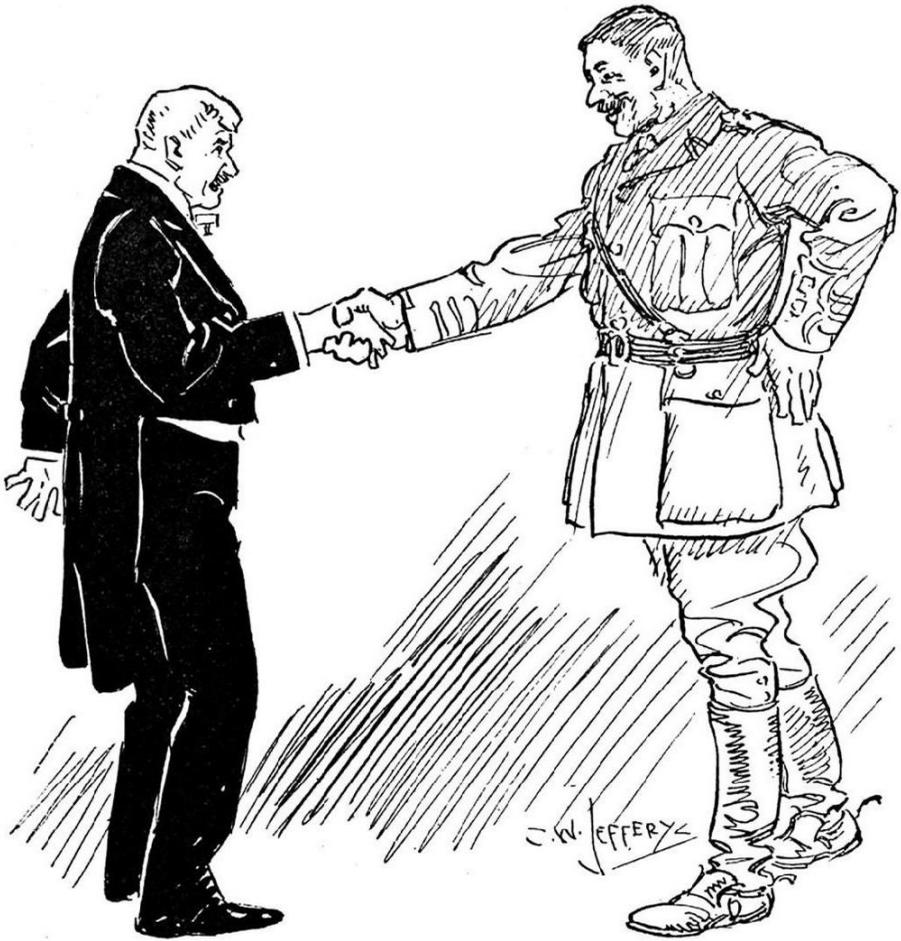
But somehow a schoolboy is no sooner done with his school and out in the business of life, than a soft haze of retrospect suffuses a new color over all that he has left behind. There is a mellow sound in the tones of the school bell that he never heard in his six years of attendance. There is a warmth in the color of the old red bricks that he never saw before; and such a charm and such a sadness in the brook or in the elm trees beside the school playground that he will stand beside them with a bowed and reverent head as in the silence of a cathedral. I have seen an "Old Boy" gaze into the open

door of an empty class room and ask, “And those are the same old benches?” with a depth of meaning in his voice. He has been out of school perhaps five years and the benches already seem to him infinitely old. This, by the way, is the moment and this the mood in which the “Old Boy” may be touched for a subscription to the funds of the school. This *is* the way in fact, in which the sagacious head master does it. The foolish head master, who has not yet learned his business, takes the “Old Boy” round and shows him all the *new* things, the fine new swimming pool built since his day and the new gymnasium with up-to-date patent apparatus. But this is all wrong. There is nothing in it for the “Old Boy” but boredom. The wise head master takes him by the sleeve and says “Come”; he leads him out to a deserted corner of the playground and shows him an old tree behind an ash house and the old boy no sooner sees it than he says:

“Why, Great Caesar! that’s the same old tree that Jack McEwen and I used to climb up to hook out of bounds on Saturday night! Old Jimmy caught us at it one night and licked us both. And look here, here’s my name cut on the boarding at the back of the ash house. See? They used to fine us five cents a letter if they found it. Well, Well!”

The “Old Boy” is deep in his reminiscences examining the board fence, the tree and the ash house.

The wise head master does not interrupt him. He does not say that he knew all along that the “Old Boy’s” name was cut there and that that’s why he brought him to the spot. Least of all does he tell him that the boys still “hook out of bounds” by this means and that he licked two of them for it last Saturday night. No, no, retrospect is too sacred for that. Let the “Old Boy” have his fill of it and when he is quite down and out with the burden of it, then as they walk back to the school building, the head master may pick a donation from him that falls like a ripe thimbleberry.



"You licked me at Upper Canada College."

And most of all, by the queer contrariety of things, does this kindly retrospect envelop the person of the teachers. They are transported in the alchemy of time into a group of profound scholars, noble benefactors through whose teaching, had it been listened to, one might have been lifted into higher things. Boys who never listened to a Latin lesson in their lives look back to the memory of their Latin teacher as the one great man that they have known. In the days when he taught them they had no other idea than to put mud in his ink or to place a bent pin upon his chair. Yet they say now that he was the greatest scholar in the world and that if they'd only listened to him they would have got more out of his lessons than from any man that ever taught. He wasn't and they wouldn't—but it is some

small consolation to those who have been schoolmasters to know that after it is too late this reward at least is coming to them.

Hence it comes about that even so indifferent a vessel as I should reap my share of schoolboy gratitude. Again and again it happens to me that some unknown man, well on in middle life, accosts me with a beaming face and says: "You don't remember me. You licked me at Upper Canada College," and we shake hands with a warmth and heartiness as if I had been his earliest benefactor. Very often if I am at an evening reception or anything of the sort, my hostess says, "Oh, there is a man here so anxious to meet you," and I know at once why. Forward he comes, eagerly pushing his way among the people to seize my hand. "Do you remember me?" he says. "You licked me at Upper Canada College." Sometimes I anticipate the greeting. As soon as the stranger grasps my hand and says, "Do you remember me?" I break in and say, "Why, let me see, surely I licked you at Upper Canada College." In such a case the man's delight is beyond all bounds. Can I lunch with him at his Club? Can I dine at his home? He wants his wife to see me. He has so often told her about having been licked by me that she too will be delighted.

I do not like to think that I was in any way brutal or harsh, beyond the practice of my time, in beating the boys I taught. Looking back on it, the whole practice of licking and being licked, seems to me mediaeval and out of date. Yet I do know that there are, apparently, boys that I have licked in all quarters of the globe. I get messages from them. A man says to me, "By the way, when I was out in Sumatra there was a man there that said he knew you. He said you licked him at Upper Canada College. He said he often thought of you." I have licked, I believe, two Generals of the Canadian Army, three Cabinet Ministers, and more Colonels and Mayors than I care to count. Indeed all the boys that I have licked seem to be doing well.

I am stating here what is only simple fact, not exaggerated a bit. Any schoolmaster and every "Old Boy" will recognize it at once; and indeed I can vouch for the truth of this feeling on the part of the "Old Boys" all the better in that I have felt it myself. I always read Ralph Connor's books with great interest for their own sake, but still more because, thirty-two years ago, the author "licked me at Upper Canada College." I have never seen him since, but I often say to people from Winnipeg, "If you ever meet Ralph Connor—he's Major Charles Gordon, you know—tell him that I was asking about him and would like to meet him. He licked me at Upper Canada College."

But enough of “licking.” It is, I repeat, to me nowadays a painful and a disagreeable subject. I can hardly understand how we could have done it. I am glad to believe that at the present time it has passed or is passing out of use. I understand that it is being largely replaced by “moral suasion.” This, I am sure, is a great deal better. But when I was a teacher moral suasion was just beginning at Upper Canada College. In fact I saw it tried only once. The man who tried it was a tall, gloomy-looking person, a university graduate in psychology. He is now a well-known Toronto lawyer, so I must not name him. He came to the school only as a temporary substitute for an absent teacher. He was offered a cane by the College janitor whose business it was to hand them round. But he refused it. He said that a moral appeal was better: he said that psychologically it set up an inhibition stronger than the physical. The first day that he taught—it was away up in a little room at the top of the old college building on King street—the boys merely threw paper wads at him and put bent pins on his seat. The next day they put hot beeswax on his clothes and the day after that they brought screw drivers and unscrewed the little round seats of the class room and rolled them down the stairs. After that day the philosopher did not come back, but he has since written, I believe, a book called “Psychic Factors in Education”; which is very highly thought of.



"I've just given Jimmy fifty dollars."

But the opinion of the "Old Boy" about his teachers is only a part of his illusionment. The same peculiar haze of retrospect hangs about the size and shape and kind of boys who went to school when he was young as compared with the boys of to-day.

“How small they are!” is always the exclamation of the “Old Boy” when he looks over the rows and rows of boys sitting in the assembly hall. “Why, when I went to school the boys were ever so much bigger.”

After which he goes on to relate that when he first entered the school as a youngster (the period apparently of maximum size and growth), the boys in the sixth form had whiskers! These whiskers of the sixth form are a persistent and perennial school tradition that never dies. I have traced them, on personal record from eye-witnesses, all the way from 1829 when the college was founded until to-day. I remember well, during my time as a schoolmaster, receiving one day a parent, an “Old Boy” who came accompanied by a bright little son of twelve whom he was to enter at the school. The boy was sent to play about with some new acquaintances while I talked with his father.

“The old school,” he said in the course of our talk, “is greatly changed, very much altered. For one thing the boys are very much younger than they were in my time. Why, when I entered the school—though you will hardly believe it—the boys in the sixth form had whiskers!”

I had hardly finished expressing my astonishment and appreciation when the little son came back and went up to his father’s side and started whispering to him. “Say, dad,” he said, “there are some awfully big boys in this school. I saw out there in the hall some boys in the sixth form with whiskers.”

From which I deduced that what is whiskers to the eye of youth fades into fluff before the disillusioned eye of age. Nor is there need to widen the application or to draw the moral.



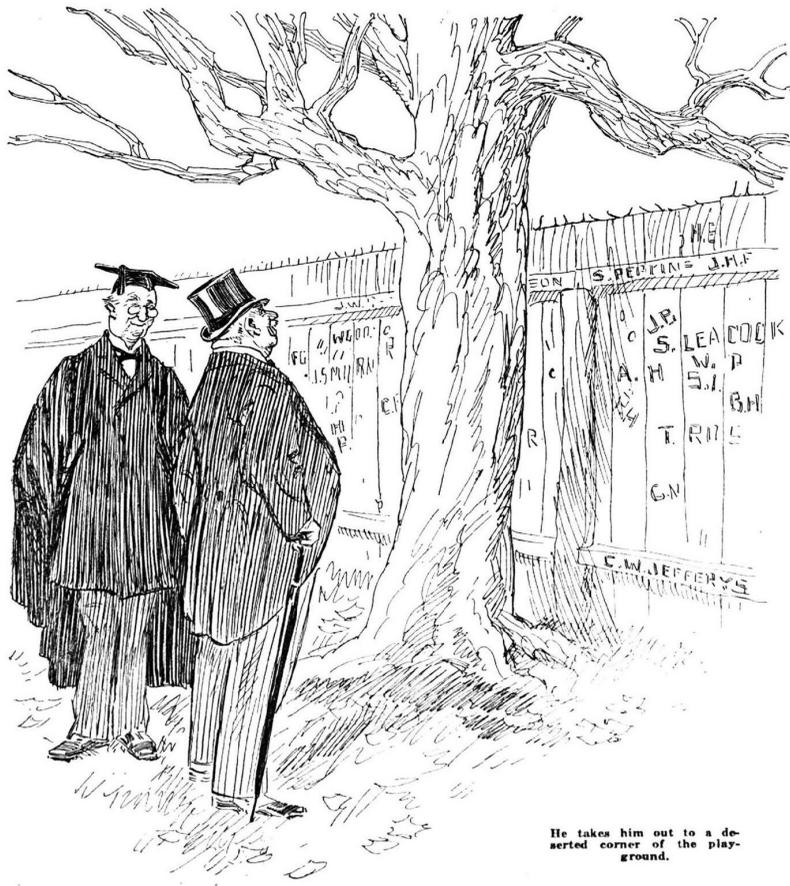
Jimmy can be led,
if led gently.

The parents of the boys at school naturally fill a broad page in the schoolmaster's life and are responsible for many of his sorrows. There are all kinds and classes of them. Most acceptable to the schoolmaster is the old-fashioned type of British father who enters his boy at the school and says:

“Now I want this boy well thrashed if he doesn't behave himself. If you have any trouble with him let me know and I'll come and thrash him myself.

He's to have a shilling a week pocket money and if he spends more than that let me know and I'll stop his money altogether." Brutal though this speech sounds, the real effect of it is to create a strong prejudice in the little boy's favor and when his father curtly says, "Good-bye, Jack," and he answers, "Good-bye, father," in a trembling voice, the schoolmaster would be a hound indeed who could be unkind to him.

But very different is the case of the up-to-date parent. "Now I've just given Jimmy fifty dollars," he says to the schoolmaster with the same tone as he would to an inferior clerk in his office, "and I've explained to him that when he wants more he's to tell you to go to the bank and draw for him what he needs." After which he goes on to explain that Jimmy is a boy of very peculiar disposition, requiring the greatest nicety of treatment; that they find if he gets in tempers the best way is to humor him and presently he'll come round. Jimmy, it appears can be led, if led gently, but never driven. During all of which time the schoolmaster, insulted by being treated as an underling, (for the iron bites deep into the soul of every one of them), has already fixed his eye on the undisciplined young pup called Jimmy with a view to trying out the problem of seeing whether he can't be driven after all.



He takes him out to a deserted corner of the playground.

But the greatest nuisance of all to the schoolmaster is the parent who does his boy's home exercises and works his boy's sums. I suppose they mean well by it. But it is a disastrous thing to do for any child. Whenever I found myself correcting exercises that had obviously been done for the boys in their homes I used to say to them quite grandly:

"Paul, tell your father that he *must* use the ablative after pro."

"Yes, sir," says the boy.

"And Edward, you tell your grandmother that her use of the dative case simply won't do. She's getting along nicely and I'm well satisfied with the way she's doing, but I cannot have her using the dative right and left on every occasion. Tell her it won't do."

"Yes, sir," says little Edward.

I remember one case in particular of a parent who did not do the boy's exercise but, after letting the boy do it himself, wrote across the face of it a withering comment addressed to me and reading: "From this exercise you can see that my boy, after six months of your teaching, is completely ignorant. How do you account for it?"

I sent the exercise back to him with the added note: "I think it must be hereditary."

In the whole round of the school year, there was, as I remember it, but one bright spot—the arrival of the summer holidays. Somehow as the day draws near for the school to break up for holidays, a certain touch of something human pervades the place. The masters lounge round in cricket flannels smoking cigarettes almost in the corridors of the school itself. The boys shout at the play in the long June evenings. At the hour when, on the murky winter nights, the bell rang for night study, the sun is still shining upon the playground and the cricket match between House and House is being played out between daylight and dark. The masters—good fellows that they are—have cancelled evening study to watch the game. The headmaster is there himself. He is smoking a briar-wood pipe and wearing his mortar-board sideways. There is wonderful greenness in the new grass of the playground and a wonderful fragrance in the evening air. It is the last day of school but one. Life is sweet indeed in the anticipation of this summer evening.

If every day in the life of a school could be the last day but one, there would be little fault to find with it.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *My Memories and Miseries As a Schoolmaster* by Stephen Leacock (1869-1944)]