

CHAPTER FIVE

“Grown-ups!” said Mark Jahorski, when the janitor chased him and his twin sister Maria off the fire escape.

Maria, as usual, was undisturbed. “That’s just his job,” she commented. “When you have a job to do, you say and do things you may not mean, like when you have a part in a play in school, and you have to say lines you don’t mean.” 5

Mark said nothing. His sister was always explaining things to him. He usually disagreed with her, but he seldom knew why.

Harry Stottlemeier came over. He was eating some chocolate-covered raisins. He offered some to Mark, and then, almost as an afterthought, offered some to Maria. They ate the candies in silence. 10

Then Mark spoke up again: “That history course is for the birds! I’m bored to death in there!”

Harry wasn’t inclined to argue. “Some courses in this school are good, and some aren’t,” he answered. Suddenly there popped in Harry’s mind the picture of Mr. Spence writing on the blackboard: 15

Some courses are interesting.

Some courses are not interesting. 20

But he waited while Mark went on. “There’s not one that’s any good,” Mark said, “They’re *all* bad.”

“Mark,” said Maria, with just a note of annoyance in her voice, “just because some courses are uninteresting to you, that doesn’t mean that they’re *all* uninteresting.”

“It doesn’t *mean* it,” answered Mark. “They just *are*.” 25

But Maria continued as if she hadn’t heard him. “In fact,” she said, “if some courses are *uninteresting*, then it must be that there are other courses that are *interesting*.”

Harry looked at her with an expression of disbelief. “Wha’?” he asked, finally.

“I *said*,” Maria began, and then she repeated her remark. “And I’m not making

anything up,” she added. “Go figure it out for yourself.”

Mark put a book on the ground, and using it as a cushion, began practising standing on his head.

5 “It doesn’t follow, Maria,” Harry objected. “Look,” he said, taking from his pocket the bag of candies, which was still almost full. “Suppose you didn’t know what kind of candy was in this bag. And then you saw me take out three pieces of candy, and they were all brown. Would it follow that there were other pieces still in the bag that weren’t brown?”

10 “You mean would I know what color the others were without seeing them? No, I guess I wouldn’t,” Maria answered.

“That’s *right!*” Harry exclaimed. “If all you know is that *some* of the candies in the bag are brown, you can’t say what color they *all* are, and you certainly can’t say, because some *are* brown, that some must *not* be!”

15 Maria said she didn’t know what Harry was talking about *at all*, but by that time Mark was back on his feet. “So if some Martians were to land here on the school yard this very minute, and we saw that they were very tall, what would it mean about whatever other Martians there might be?” Mark asked.

“It wouldn’t follow that the others *were* tall, and it wouldn’t follow that they *weren’t*,” Harry answered. “You just couldn’t tell one way or the other.”

20 Maria looked thoughtful. “But people are always jumping to conclusions. If people meet one Polish person, or one Italian person, or one Jewish, or one Black person, right away they jump to the conclusion that this is the way that *all* Polish people are, or all Black people, or all Italians or Jews.”

25 “That’s right,” said Harry. “The only exercise some people get is jumping at conclusions.”

“Or in jumping on other people,” commented Maria.

Mark, however, was still thinking about their earlier topic of conversation: “I still think the history class is awful. In fact, *all* the classes in this school are awful. It’s an

awful school.”

“Are there better ones?” asked Harry.

“No,” Mark replied, “there probably aren’t. I know kids in private school and I know kids in parochial school, and from what they tell me, the schools are awful everywhere.”

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“What makes them so bad?” Harry wanted to know.

“Grown-ups,” was Mark’s prompt answer. “They run the schools to suit themselves. As long as you do what you’re told, you’re okay. But if you don’t, you’re dead.”

Both Maria and Harry were a bit upset by what Mark had said. But Maria sat perfectly still, while Harry paced up and down. Finally he picked up a stone and threw it at a telephone pole. It missed by two or three feet.

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“Mark,” Maria began quietly, “They’re only trying to do what’s good for us.”

“Yeah,” said Mark, “and you can be sure they’ll *call* it good, no matter what they do.”

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“Well, but *someone* has to run the schools, and so it has to be the grownups, because they know more than anyone else. It’s the same way with other things. You wouldn’t want to fly on an airplane where the pilot was just a little kid, would you? And you wouldn’t want to go to a hospital for an appendicitis operation where the surgeons and nurses were just little kids, would you? So what else is there to do but let grownup people run the schools because they’re the only ones who can do it right?” Maria took a deep breath. It was a lot of talking for her to have done.

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Mark looked very glum. “I didn’t think up the idea that kids should run the schools—you did. Of course—I don’t know—maybe if they did, things wouldn’t be any worse than they are now.”

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Harry shook his head. “It isn’t a question of whether the grownups should run the schools, or whether the kids should. That’s not the question at all. The real question is whether the schools should be run by people who know what they’re doing, or by people who don’t know what they’re doing.”

“What do you mean, ‘know what they’re doing?’” Maria asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Understand, I guess,” he answered. “Whoever runs the schools should understand kids, for instance. I think Mark’s right. Lots of times they don’t. But the most important thing they need to understand is why we’re in
5 school in the first place.”

“We’re in school to learn.” Maria said.

“Are we?” Harry asked. “What are we supposed to learn?”

“Answers, I suppose.” Maria wondered what Harry was driving at. Then she thought she caught on. “No, no, I take that back. We’re supposed to be learning how
10 to solve problems.”

Mark looked at Maria, then at Harry, then at Maria again. “Should we be learning how to solve problems,” he said finally, with an air of wondering, “or should we be learning how to ask questions?”

Harry thought he had the answer: “We should be learning how to think,” he said.

15 “We do learn how to think,” was Mark’s response, “but we never learn to think for ourselves. These teachers don’t want to admit it, but I have a mind of my own. They’re always trying to fill my mind full of all sorts of junk, but it’s not the town junkyard. It makes me mad.”

“Well, what kind of school would you like to go to?” Harry asked.

20 Mark looked for a long time at some pigeons on the grass, and then replied, “What kind of school would I like to go to? I’ll tell you what kind of school I’d like to go to. You wouldn’t have to go to class unless you wanted to. So they’d have to make the courses real interesting in order to get you interested enough to attend. And, just like in the museum, anytime you wanted to know more about something, all you’d have
25 to do is press a button, and a movie would go on, or a teaching machine would start up. And all the science courses would be taught like science fiction ...”

“The trouble with what you’re saying,” Harry interrupted, “is that a lot of stuff that you’re taught in school just *can’t* be made interesting.”

“Sure it can,” replied Mark. “Look how they make stuff interesting in TV

commercials. The commercials are really great, and all they're advertising is a lousy bar of soap!"

Harry grinned. "But that's all phony, Mark, and you know it."

"Sure," said Mark, "you're right. But the advertisers take something unimportant and jazz it up and make it seem glamorous, while here in school they take subjects like 5 history that are really very interesting, and they teach it to you in such a way as to make it seem boring and dull."

Harry shook his head. All he could say was, "I don't know, Mark. I just don't know what to say about it."

"Me neither," Maria chimed in, "but I've got to get home. It's getting chilly out 10 here."

The boys went over to the other side of the playground, where a softball game was in progress. They joined the outfielders, then later they each had a turn at bat. After a while the game was over, and it was getting to be late in the afternoon, time to be home. But Harry and Mark still lingered, lying on a grassy slope, chewing clover and wild 15 onion, and looking up at the sky. The sky was clear and blue, except for a huge white cloud which was moving slowly overhead.

Suddenly Mark exclaimed, "Harry, it's North America!"

And so it was. There was Alaska, and Hudson's Bay, and Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico. Only, Mexico and California seemed rather blurred and indistinct. The boys 20 watched fascinated as the great continent swept majestically past into the blue Pacific.

"That was great!" Harry said, when the cloud was now just a blur in the distance.

"Yeah, cool," Mark replied. Then he added, "But you know, it was *our idea*."

"Whadd'ya mean our idea?" Harry wanted to know.

"I mean," said Mark, "it was a wonderful cloud. But also, when you come to 25 think of it, it was pretty wonderful for us just to lie here and see it as North America sailing across the Pacific. You gotta admit that part of it, too."

Mrs. Halsey's comment crossed Harry's mind again, the way a news flash comes on

across the bottom of a TV screen: “No matter how wonderful something in the world may be, *understanding* how it works is something just as wonderful.” It wasn’t quite the way she’d put it, but it was the same idea.

“I guess,” Harry remarked, “you don’t have to fly to the moon or travel under
5 the Pacific in order to have adventures or see wonderful things. Sometimes they’re right there in front of you for you to see.”

“Sometimes I get real excited by my own ideas,” said Mark, “and I pace up and down in my room, or I punch my punching bag, or I do all sorts of crazy things until I calm down.”

10 They were silent for a moment. Then Harry remarked, “Hey, Mark, who do you suppose tried to pop me with a rock the other day?” and he told Mark in an off-hand way what had happened.

“Was that Tuesday after school?” Mark asked.

“Yep,” Harry replied, “Tuesday after school.”

15 “I’m not sure,” said Mark, “but I came out of school before you did, and I remember seeing that new kid, Bill Beck, standing behind a tree near the side door.”

“Bill Beck! Why should *he* want to pop me?” thought Harry. “But for that matter, why should Tony want to either?”

As Harry walked home, he paid close attention to what might be behind trees or
20 waiting around corners. Whoever it was that threw the stone on Tuesday might not miss the next time.