

Miss Dainty Race

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, ignoble tears. The eleven 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 orthographic test to the primary class, which consisted of the youngest two Ballies, and openly and without permission told her that kuh-ah-tuh did not spell cat! The eldest Crawford boy informed her patiently (and with condescension) that that feat was accomplished by re-arranging the letters. They were a colossal wall raised against her and bound together by that quickest of all contempt, that of a child for a teacher whom it thinks incompetent. How on earth was one going to break through that with the newer methods? How was she going to pierce the fog of ignorance that loomed upon them by their former teachers who had, without 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 porch 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 in that state of mind—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 Dinkelmair 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 street when she 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 dark skirts 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 more for the new teacher. But now she had reached the jumping off place of her courage and endurance, right now at the first get-away of her race in the new life! It had been coming all the nightmare week she had been 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 far—so frantically far—away.

True, Mrs. Tom was kind and sympathetic, not without a certain tact, and the mile and a half walk through the tall trees that spread along the stream was more than delightful. 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 faces of the eleven whom she feared utterly were liabilities that appalled her.

So she clinched 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 silence 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 abreast of the open door with an unobstructed view up the mean little aisle between the desks to that young brown head.

The rider, too, was young, and 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 overconfident as 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 do-do. He had heard all about Miss Ransome. All crowd lads thereabouts had. He knew she had brown hair, that her eyes were not blue but gray, that she had worn a brown tailored suit with low shoes and silk stockings, all topped off by a snappy brown hat turned back from her face and lined with brown stitched pink.

ment in true anxiety and wondered what on earth he could say to turn off the shower. He removed his wide hat—it was best on 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 pop 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-scared astonishment. A trembling 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 gaily up to a brand new interest with a weather eye out for future friendships, and quite another to be sat upon like a toad 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 nips!" he finished decisively. "Good-night, nurse! Get along home, Pronto. Though damn I know what I'll tell those long-legged popinjays at the bunkhouse."

Pronto, eager eyed and shuffling, told off the miles that lay between the Blue Sage Flat and the Lazy X in all too short a time.

"Well, Lothario, did yuh meet th' little princess?" inquired Cuff Benson, stopping half way to the water trough with a wash basin in his hand.

"I notice you come from that direction."

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

"Um," mused Cuff, rubbing his chin; "paved, eh?"

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. Com' on, a half dozen cowboys, all washed up for supper, come promptly with gimlet eyes ready to search Babe's 'innerds' shamelessly."

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

"What folks don't know won't hurt 'em," he said, "an' this bunch's pretty all-fired healthy."

Babe Cutler rode no more toward the Blue Sage Flat, and he paid his bill to Cuff and Sid Carroll with a pensive readiness that did not escape the Argus eyes of those worthwhile and which roused in them a desire to know its reason.

But if Babe had ill luck in his initial attempt to meet the schoolma'am, there were others who were more fortunate. Sid, for instance, who came home one day a week later grinning fatuously and full of the schoolma'am's praises.

"Gray eyes," he stated positively, "gray for sure—gray as smoke. An' 'er curly an' thick as Silver's mane!"

"Look here," interrupted Charlie Spikes, "why will yuh compare a lady to that flea-bitten skat of yours?"

At another time such reference to Silver, slim, willing, tough, and pretty enough for any cowman to straddle, would have brought instant fight on the part of his master. Now, however, Sid was too full of his subject and passed the insult over.

"An' th' little neck under th' hair is white, like a candle when it comes out th' box."

"Yuh make me tired!" said Babe disgustedly. "There's a shade of pink in her skin."

A great and sudden silence fell on the group. They regarded the speaker gravely. Sid put both hands on his hips and leaned forward.

"Is—that—so?" he inquired drawlingly. "An' where, and when, Lothario, did you find that out? I thought you'd never met her?"

"Paid that bet pretty prompt, too, didn't he?" some one else wanted to know. "Seems indifferent to sort of."

Babe snapped the ash from his cigarette and walked away, but the back of his neck was red. Every one of the bunch behind him saw it. Each one laid it up as suspicious evidence of something untoward and discomfiting, if possible, of their mate.

And in the meantime Miss Esther Ransome had, metaphorically, shaken her slim shoulders and gathered up the rains of her new life as if that first terrible panic had never been. She was cool and collected and soon rallied her spiritual resources.

She was already fitted into Mrs. Tom's modest household as one of the family, and the beautiful walk through the trees along the stream had cast its spell upon her. She had conquered the youngest Dinkelmair positively, had coldly informed the Crawford boy of his colossal ignorance in regard to the antiquated value of letters as compared to sounds, and had battered down their wall of opposition like a soldier. There she was cool and collected, and was already feeling herself mistress of her destiny.

She had also relegated the bucket from the back stoop to a shelf and instituted a system of individual drinking cups by means of some thick paper, scissors, and a bit of glue, sitting up half a night at Mrs. Tom's to accomplish that end. She was feeling that virtuous self-satisfaction that comes with all uplift movements when we are the uplifter.

That thus elevated don't seem to get the same effect.

At any rate she was that most delectable product of the whole world, a young girl just beginning a life work, for the first time self-supporting, interested in her particular sphere, and—the only one of her peculiar kind within a radius of many man-infested miles.

It was odd how many male riders found it imperative to seek straying cattle in Blue Sage Flat—how unac-

countably thirsty they became just about the time they reached the seat of learning. Half the rangeland knew about the individual, collapsible, brown paper drinking cups before two weeks. The Lazy X knew all about them—except Babe.

He displayed a cold, not to say frozen, indifference to everything connected with the improvement of a state of affairs entirely foreign to his former habit.

When Miss Ransome had been a month at the Flat cowland felt a sudden desire to dance. Dances were few and far between, but the urge to shake a foot seemed to take the outfit simultaneously, and word went flying about the ranches that they were to "come one, come all" to the store at Biller's Crossroads, the time-honored scene of all festivities for 40 years.

Esther rode beside Mrs. Tom, and her gray eyes were bright as the stars themselves. And you may well believe that there were masked batteries on every side as she entered the young man's corral. Comely matrons with their offspring in rows beside them, buxom girls in ruffles and ribbons, their natural cheeks a trifle too bright, their figures a bit too sturdy for extreme grace, but young and sweet withal, viewed her with eyes as sharp as needles.

"She's got on brown again," they opined. "It's crepe de chine, ain't it? An' it's trimmed with coral. My, ain't it a swell combination!"

"She does her hair like a bob-rolled bun, ain't it, Lizzie? Curly—'tis so."

"Yes, an' her slippers are brown satin, an' land sakes, there's a run in one of her stockin's! Clear up th' side, I do declare! Great goodness—there's one in th' other one, too!"

"No! Lizzie, an' you sure! Ain't it one of them clock things th'ye puttin' in the stockin's now—there's a little arrowhead at top."

A sigh of relief followed as it was discovered that the damning runs were clocks and no mistakes.

Taken altogether the new schoolma'am was as different from the general run of her sex present as an exquisite autumn leaf is different from a push-covered platform rocker.

At first glance she seemed disappointingly plain. Her slim, trim dress of brown with its slight touches of coral, her little sleek head with its rolled-under hair. Then, as lively masculine eyes took her in avidly, there was something different about her—yes, that was it, different. They didn't know what, but it was there, a difference.

And how sweet and approachable she was!

Those who had nonchalantly passed through the Blue Sage Flat and "knew her well" presented themselves with bows and smiles, to be accepted one and all for a wait or one-step. The girl found herself swamped with partners. The Lazy X was large and prominent on the list—there almost to a man.

"Great Scott, Babe, if you don't hurry," warned Sid, "you won't get a chance before morning!"

"Why," drawled Babe coolly, "I don't know's I care a—whole lot."

"Eh? Say, wise boy, you losin' your mind? Ain't no one died an' left yuh a legacy, was it?"

But Babe was already bowing elaborately before a bunch of blouses and pink ribbons and didn't seem to hear.

This was a great dance. Lights and lanterns glowed in rivalry to the youthful faces of the spaces of the rafters and gables, but the "shuff shuffle" of the gliding feet, and young hearts beat high.

"Dearie," beamed Mrs. Tom, "you've got th' whole bunch loosed! How many times has Sid Carroll ast you?"

"Five," said the schoolma'am, modestly. "He comes to be accepted."

"An' Babe Cutler?"

"I don't know."

Now, she knew well that the tallest, straightest, handsomest boy in the house—the one with the blackest eyes and hair, the most indefatigable dancer—was Babe Cutler. Sid had seen to that—and that he did not ask her for a single step. She knew also that he had looked down the aisle of the Blue Sage schoolhouse once to behold her in ignoble tears. There had been, on sober second thought, nothing criminal in that. Any one might ride by the Flat—in fact, many of these youngsters hadn't! But there was in her consciousness an uncomfortable sense of shame for her own hot words, and that was sufficient to make her hold her head a trifle higher when she passed him on the floor, to give her an added air of superiority toward him.

As far as Babe was concerned, there might have been no new girl in the country. He just didn't see her, so to speak. But now, as he passed his comrades did, and took in all the glimpse.

"There's somethin' happened," Cuff told a couple of the Lazy X boys in whispered confab when the night was half over. "Never saw his nibs so plumb cold stored in my life. Can't tell me he ain't seen no more." And they went in solemn file to find him.

"Babe," said Sid, "we're wia. You're scared to ask her for a dance. Bet you Silver against your Pronto you don't dare."

Now, what healthy male of 24 ever took anything like that?

Babe flushed, and scowled.

"If you're so all-fired smart," he said, "introduce me."

There was a crowd about Miss Ransome, as usual, but it fell apart for the boys from the Lazy X, and when the girl looked up the man the same dark eyes she had seen before, though they were as distant as moons.

For one heady moment she meant to refuse his stiff invitation. Then her good sense triumphed, and when the music struck up Babe found himself drifting out 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 on earth's th' matter with Babe Cutler?" Mrs. Tom wanted to know as she rode home in the chilly dawn. "He only ast you once—an' him th' greatest lady's man in all th' 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. She wished violently that she had refused him, as she had at the dance.

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 head of the cowboy.

His grandiloquent renunciation of the downward spread palm that day at the Flat seemed, since the dance, somehow vague and unimportant.

The feel of the little, sleek, brown-clad body in the bend of his arm had filled him with fabled comparisons. Wasn't a "skirt" 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 swung her hard. You had to kind of support up her turn herself, and follow after—all sort of respectful and at your distance. And that wonderful soft, slippy 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 connoisseur on feminine charm smoked in pained aloofness and had no comment to make.

"A fine stab you made th' other night, Lothario," they jeered. "Reg'lar frozen face parity. I bet you said 'Good floor' an' she said 'Very—and you said—'"

"O, hell!" said Babe, disgustedly. "Ain't there nothin' inside you poor boob's heads but wind? I'd tell a tale!"

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 clean. 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 sent him arguing upon any subject she tried to instill in him. Today it had been the subject of whiskey 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 around mumbling at intervals about "no wire" and "humbskulls."

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 it, Henry, not 'ain't.' Ain't what?"

"Cowboy from Lazy X. Babe. 'At's Babe, sure's shootin'! 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 down the magic vista of leafy floor beneath the trees and beheld a common little range horse, caparisoned in saddle and bit.

However, this was Pronto, good as gold and favorably spoken of wherever cow horses were mentioned hereabouts, and he carried his dearly beloved master gayly forward at a canter. They did make a gallant picture, his gray mare looking for beauty in them, for Babe was lean and graceful and his blue shirt set off his dark eyes and the hair that shone black beneath the tipped sombrero's rim.

Nobody was looking, however. They stopped respectfully and the hat came off.

"Howdy, Miss Ransome," smiled Babe as if there had never been a thought of coldness between them.

"How do you do, Mr.—er—what did they say your name was?" asked Miss Ransome innocently. "I—think I met you, didn't I? So many, you know—excuse me."

"See here, Miss Ransome," he said frankly, "you're so sweet an' friendly with everybody else. Why won't you be friends with me?"

There was open and boyish yearning in his eyes.

The schoolma'am, being 19 and feminine, caught the note and in spite of herself thrilled to it. That thrill made her more angry with herself.

"Friends," she said with dignity, "are people you care most. I—think I met you, didn't I? So many, you know—excuse me."

"You could trust me," swore Babe eagerly, if somewhat diffidently; "if you want some one to trust, why, I'm a shinin' mark in that line. Cuff an' all me he ain't seen no more." And he trusted—really trust—they come to me. On secrets I'm a Maxim silencer."

"I have no secrets," said Miss Ransome coldly.

"No," hastened Babe, "of course not. No really nice girl has—"

"Ah!" the gray eyes widened and shone beautifully. "And yet you suggest them to me?"

The cowboy groaned. Could you beat it? Wasn't he the poor fish prophet, always bungling!

"I beg your pardon," he said, stiffly, "I didn't mean."

"Good night," said the schoolma'am, and if there was the slightest possible inflection on the second word she was innocent of intentional slang.

As she stepped out to pass the little horse and the tall boy standing bare-headed beside it there was a patter of feet in the dry leaves and a derisive voice behind.

"Yah!" it jeered. "Babe Cutler an' teacher! Teacher an' Babe! Babe's stuck on teacher! Yah!"

Miss Ransome turned furiously.

"Henry," she called in cold anger, "if you don't go straight home I shall punish you tomorrow, very severely!"

"Gosh darn my luck!" said Babe savagely as he swung back on Pronto and left that place on a run. "What do I want to hang around for, anyway?"

But that was more than he could answer.

What youth has ever been able to answer that question when his inamorous brows?

He would put out of his mind all memory of light, little feet and a slender, silken form. At the very next dance a miracle happened.

Babe Cutler stayed at home!

For the first time since he had appeared on the horizon of that particular rangeland some seven years back as a stripling boy the best dancer in the region was not present.

And it must be said in justice that if the new girl noticed his absence she gave no visible sign. She nipped down her former advantage with more smiles, more democratic kindness, and by daylight she could have had just about anything she asked for in that part of the country—from the male half of the population.

The Lazy X was loud in its adoration and lifted up its voice and sang. This eulogy was drivel to Babe, yet exquisitely interesting.

He smoked and listened.

"White this time, her dress was,"

offered Sid, "all softy like an' fine, and she had a bow of ribbon, little bit of ribbon, gold colored, somewhere underneath in front. Shone through."

Babe's right arm felt suddenly bereft. He was jealous of that "soft feel," could have smitten Sid for noticing it.

Right there Babe Cutler met his Waterloo, acknowledged his defeat in the lists of love. He turned sickly green around the lips and got up and left the idiotic group.

Yes, sir, he was in love. Honest to goodness in love! He knew it for truth. He'd heard of this kind that took sudden, just a look, maybe, or a handclasp—not to mention a whole long dance number—and wove! you were a goner.

That was it. He was a goner—be, poor fish, who only offended her every time he opened his feel 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 electric word flashing 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 news to plunge him into the nethermost depths of gloom, but it did so plunge him.

"Gee-whillikins!" exclaimed Cuff, spraking eyed, "imagine th' little girl on that there platform sellin' th' boxful of 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, an' j his head

(concluded on Page 6)

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