



a story about teaching
by Mary Agnes Thompson

STAR SIGHT

PROFESSOR John Martin walked to the door with his brother-in-law. Tim was impatient this time and Martin sensed it.

"You're not getting any younger, you know, Jack," Tim said, just as he always said at intervals through the years. "Around forty, aren't you? A couple of thousand dollars more a year would do a lot for Ann and the kids. She's my sister, you know. I've got a right to say this."

"I know she's your sister," Martin stiffened his defense. "And she's always wanted to visit Taxco. And the kids have always wanted to see Disneyland, and my eyes are certainly not getting any stronger."

He did not want to be reminded that Ann had not got to visit Taxco, nor the children Disneyland. Most of all he did not want to be reminded that his eyes had never been the same since the long stay in the prison camps of World War Two. But he was reminded of it every time his sight blurred after a long work schedule.

"You spend half your time helping the weak ones, the laggards who'd be kicked out of private industry in a minute. Don't you ever get tired of babying those guys? They're the ones who take the spark out of you, the fellows who'd be complete failures unless some other fall guy shoves them along." Tim shrugged and opened the door. "Well, let me know, boy. Surely this spring you'll get some sense and resign out there."

Tim left and Martin took a deep breath and settled in the chair by the lamp, the evening paper in his hand. The second semester would begin in a few days and the brief vacation had been good for the family. He always grew closer to Ann and the three children then. That was one of the

better points of teaching, the ability to spend free time at home. After all, he thought, I could have been a traveling salesman, working in the Orient. Then Tim really could have felt sorry for Ann!

The small heading in the paper caught his eyes and he blinked: *AMERICAN TURNCOAT RETURNS FROM RED CHINA*. Then later on in the fine print: "Jim Henderson plans to study engineering at one of the state schools, hoping then to accept employment in private industry."

Professor John Martin halted time in its flight for a brief interlude. The words floated across the page and turned his mind back . . . how many years? Fourteen? Fifteen? He had fled from the years as they had passed, trying to forget the Pacific camp where the only difference between a man and the beasts of the nearby jungle was the tiny flickering spark called conscience. He could recall vividly the faces of the men who had known Bataan and Corregidor, the flame in their weary faces; the conscience, yes!

He moved his tired eyes again to the small item in the newspaper. He remembered when Henderson had defected to Red China after his stay in the Korean prison camp, though he could not recall how the boy looked, except that he had been young. Sergeant Jack Martin had been fairly young, too, in World War Two. Young and heroic and possessing twenty-twenty vision. Right now Professor John Martin was not too young, owned a pair of eyes that had to be babyed and was not at the moment feeling very heroic.

"Rest your eyes, Jack," Ann said gently. She was standing in the doorway, and whether her brother wanted to admit it or

not, the passing years had not left a terrible mark on her. She looked as pretty as the day he'd married her. Or maybe his eyes *were* getting worse.

"O. K.," he nodded, tossing the newspaper aside. "I wasn't reading anyhow."

"You had the contemplative look," Ann smiled. "The Thinker look. I know. Tim's been heckling you again about the job in the plant, hasn't he?"

"He's raised the ante this time," Martin admitted. "Now you can not only visit Taxco, you can buy loads of tourist silver. Besides that, the kids can literally loot everything Disneyland has for sale."

"You're kidding, I hope," Ann sobered and turned back toward the dining room. "We can always go to Taxco when we retire. Then I'll know the true value of silver because we'll have so much of it in our hair."

He laughed and tried to forget about Taxco and prison camps and eyes that were a constant reminder of his war days. But somehow the flickering image of the newspaper item kept leaping in front of his vision, mingling with the tiny specks that danced before him when he was tired.

Henderson will come here if he wants to study engineering, he thought. It's the closest school to his hometown. He'll be overbearing and defiant, demanding his rights; and I'll have to see him go out of school and into a good job that pays him more than I'm making, probably. He swore and walked to the window. He could see the campus in the distance, the oval a patch of gray and the surrounding buildings dark splotches against the evening sky.

"You remember the Henderson boy who defected to the Reds?" he asked Ann fi-

nally at dinner. "Just out of high school."

"I saw the item in the paper," Ann nodded. "I knew you'd read it. Maybe he won't come here to school, Jack."

"He's going into engineering," Martin said. He was angry now that the matter was in the open. "He'll come here. What right does he have, flaunting his views about this country one minute, then coming home the next demanding the same country educate him so that he can make a mint of money from its resources?"

"He does have the right though, Jack," Ann reminded him gently. "Any other time you'd be the first to defend his right to it. Maybe he won't come here. And if he does maybe you won't have to teach him. Maybe Scott will draw him, or Andrews. Scott is older and Andrews never had to go into the army."

"Jim Henderson will be a freshman," Martin said. He enunciated each word, as though not only to impress it upon Ann's mind but upon his own. "Scott and Andrews both teach Advanced. I'd say maybe the other students would ostracize him and scare him away from class, only freshmen don't remember World War Two." The thought horrified him and he rose slowly, pushing his chair back from the table. "Do you know that, Ann? Freshmen don't even remember World War Two. Most of them barely remember Korea!"

"Ostracize him?" Ann sounded shocked. "What's come over you? You know how you take on over incidents like that at other schools! You're tired. Come on. Eat your roast beef."

Yet he knew what was nauseating him most. He, John Martin, would have to hold firmly to his creed as an instructor, Socrates in the market teaching the young to open their eyes, while his own vision dimmed; asking questions and demanding answers while his own questions went without reply.

He felt strangely old, yet he was barely forty. But into those years he had packed the memories of two wars and terms of struggling through endless economic pressures in order to earn his master's degree. For what? To help teach an arrogant young turncoat how to go into a world he had once rejected and earn a mint of money!

But he went back to the table, though he could not even have said what food he ate. Then he slipped into his topcoat and went out into the night air. It was warm for January, with only a touch of crispness in the air, and he walked slowly, his mind a vortex of emotions, all of them centering on the new resentment. He thought of the job in private industry and his brother-in-law's generous offer and he tried to blot out the image of the postponed visit to Mexico.

The new job would offer no demands other than service. No babying laggards, no coaxing the slow worker. A small spark of himself would not have to go into every piece of Tim's product. The teaching profession was a self-consuming monster. He had always felt a glow of pride in knowing that if he had to burn himself out to ignite the flame in only one student a year, it had been worth it. He would sacrifice that small portion of himself.

But not for this Henderson turncoat who expected life to be an eternal gravy train paid for by someone else's blood.

He saw the figure of Bill Andrews, who taught advanced math, and he hailed him. They had gone through school together and had usually been located in the same

About the Authoress

Mary Agnes Thompson, the vivacious Kingfisher-born authoress whose short story begins on Page 19, sold her first story to Saturday Evening Post in 1952 while enrolled in O.U.'s Professional Writing School. Since then she has sold Post four additional stories, which puts her in the over-\$2000 bracket (Post increases authors' pay checks by \$200 for each additional story sold to them). Her most spectacular sale was the movie rights to a slick magazine story which ended up as Elvis Presley's second movie, Loving You. Mary Agnes recently has moved to Norman where she meets house payments with steady sales to newspapers and religious and confession magazines.

town except for the war years, when Bill's childhood bout with rheumatic fever had left him ineligible for army duty and he had utilized the years by teaching math in Air Force schools.

"Tim's been after me again about the job in the plant," he told Andrews casually as they neared the Administration Building. They halted to light cigarettes and Martin could sense Andrews' keen inspection in the dim glow of the lighter.

"He's always been after you, hasn't he?" Andrews asked.

"This time he's pressuring me," Martin admitted. "All this competition in the rocket business has made the man lose his mind, apparently."

"You've never been uncertain before. You sound unsure this time. Why?"

Yet he could not give the real reason, even to as close a friend as Andrews. He smoked for a while in silence.

"I don't think it's that I don't have

the courage to quit teaching," he said then. "Sometimes it takes a lot more nerve to stay with a job than it takes to quit it. It takes a lot of nerve to go on signing a contract year after year when your wife's brother is criticizing you for doing it."

"Are you trying to find an out for something?" Andrews asked.

"I don't think so," Martin said slowly. He contemplated the sky. "I think maybe I've just started wondering how long a man can light a spark in another man's soul before he burns himself out completely."

"Boy, you need a recharge," Andrews laughed. "You need a good hassle with a problem your math text doesn't cover." He hesitated, then plunged into it: "For instance, this one. Henderson will be attending school here at the start of the second semester, Jack. The chances are you're going to have him in one of your classes. He's a lot younger than you are and he's probably got twenty-twenty vision. You're going to have to sit there and teach him math. Is that what's eating you?"

Martin was silent, and they left it at that. They stood by the Administration Building looking at the sky. The stars etched themselves against the blackness, spelling out the lines of Carl Schurz against Martin's mind: "Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny."

They sounded old and trite and unrealistic in an age when too many values were gauged by money. Maybe on Bataan they had sounded good because men, like the seafarers Schurz had spoken of, had to cling to something, and anything was better than nothing.

"That is it, then isn't it, Jack?" Andrews asked. "You don't want to teach a turncoat. But you can't figure out how you can refuse without shortchanging the other students."

"Listen to me, listen," Martin said, his voice suddenly harsh. "I haven't beefed too much about the deal I got, have I? All right, so I haven't had good eyes since the prison camp days. I haven't asked for special quarter because of it, have I? But I know this, Bill. It's on the days the ROTC fellows come to class in their uniforms that I do remember. I remember everything all over again every time I see a uniform. I remember all the stink and filth and the faces of kids no older than Henderson was when he defected. They had young faces at first, but day after day they got a little older. Yet through it all they kept some kind of ideals. They were scared. All of us

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Union Activities attempts to rear its own guiding lights by giving the freshmen the experience which will develop the personal leadership they in turn can pass on to others.

Annually the Board must decide what is to be done with the nearly one-thousand applications for committee posts. Interviews with each applicant and applicants' consequent dedication and ability (or lack of it) usually thin out the staggering ranks of applicants. But since few are chosen for the Board itself, the playing-favorites charge is bound to follow.

THIS is probably the sulking source of most of Union Activities criticism, and Director Caldwell's greatest contribution has been to make Union Activities elastic enough to considerably cool the jealousies and encourage the ambitions of its ever-increasing list of Board hopefuls.

But even bigger and better committees draw criticism nowadays. If the activity revolt among collegians gains momentum, Union Activities may be in for some rough sledding. Its past success, however, suggests that its critics will find themselves beguiled into joining a Union Activities Critique committee which will award cups for its most eloquent critics.

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STAR SIGHT

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were. But they didn't show it. And they didn't jump the first freight out of the country, and then try to ride a gravy train back in when the going got rough somewhere else. Am I supposed to be some kind of god, just because I've got a degree? Or do I have the inalienable right of being just a human?"

"At ease, Sergeant," Andrews laughed to lighten the tension, then turned to go home. "Rest up for the next couple of days."

Martin watched Andrews' slight figure until it disappeared out of the halo thrown by the streetlight, then he himself headed home. The gray branches of the trees along the campus walks cobwebbed a winter sketch. Soon the jonquils would bloom. Maybe spring would bring the recharge Andrew had said he needed. And maybe Tim was right, too. Maybe this would be the last spring here on campus.

The new semester began the following Monday and Martin did not face it with the same sense of challenge with which he had usually greeted a change of term. He was sullen, almost resentful and was almost tempted to wire Tim that he was ready for the job in the plant. His personal identity had been annihilated by a young man who was just a name to him. Even before they had clashed, Martin had been defeated by him; and when the time arrived when Professor John Martin could no longer regard a student as just a name in search of knowledge, the only possible solution was resignation from the staff.

He walked into the classroom and sat down. Without looking at the faces, he ran his eyes over the names on the sheet of paper. Adams . . . Brown . . . Blair . . . Forrest . . . Henderson. He could not bring himself to look at any of them. He knew how most of the faces would look . . . young, with that air of confidence that is a gift nature has given youth to hold in escrow against the day when he meets his first Bataan face to face. Even without looking at them, Professor Martin knew which one was Henderson. He sat alone, deliberately, leaving a chair between himself and the others.

Martin had started to open the text when it occurred to him that young Forrest had not yet arrived. He glanced at his watch. He was almost afraid to speak, fearing the angry resentment would loose itself.

The door opened and young Forrest walked in. Professor Martin turned his head to look at him and the old feeling so akin to sickening terror closed in on him. It was ROTC day. Forrest was wearing his

army uniform. It had always been this way. Professor Martin would forget which day of the week the uniforms would show up in class, then suddenly there they were and there, too, was the old trapped feeling.

Martin closed his eyes for a moment, shutting out the long days and nights that spelled Bataan and prison camps and the gradual weakening of his eyes. He swallowed hard and fought the black film that seemed to shimmer in front of him.

But the small cry from Henderson brought him abruptly back to the classroom and he turned and for the first time looked at the turncoat's face.

Henderson had half-risen from his chair at the sight of Forrest in uniform, and now he slumped back, as panic-stricken as a jungle animal trapped in the darkness of a pit and awaiting the sound of footsteps. If there had ever been an arrogance or contempt in him, it was gone at that moment when Martin first dared to look at him, and that would be how he would always think of him, conscience-trapped and waiting for the sound of footsteps closing in around him, following him, circling him.

He is the weak one of the lot, Professor Martin thought, a strange pity filling him. He is the laggard who will have to be carried over the bad spots. Every Monday he will have to live this hour of hell, terrified by the uniform he has betrayed and worn now by a young man who has no idea why anyone should fear his particular Monday garb. The name Henderson mean nothing to these freshmen, even the ones who might possibly remember Korea but have forgotten Bataan.

Ex-Sergeant John Martin, who did remember Bataan, took off his glasses and shined them. Somehow in polishing he removed the sergeant's stripes and replaced them with the words he had remembered that night on the campus after learning that the turncoat would attend class there: "Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny."

He put on the glasses that were *his* battle scar. He looked at Forrest's army uniform, then at Henderson's white face. His identity returned to him. He was professor John Martin, who would some day take his family on a vacation to Mexico, even if they could buy no silver souvenirs.

"You're late, Mr. Forrest," he said crisply to the young man in uniform.

"I'm sorry, sir," Forrest said.

Professor Martin nodded. He took a deep breath and the class became quiet. It was a comfortable silence, one that reached far beyond springtime.