

FICTION

Red Hair in the Sacred Grove

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In my library is a small book, a 1912 Macmillan edition of *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, with the name of Katheryn Spurns on the flyleaf. On the title page the name appears again with part of an address, 236 Mourning, and no city or state. I possess it — it is with me, a chronic chastisement to my sensitivity. It stands among Shakespeare's works an everpresent apologue, a potent irony on "He who steals my purse steals trash."

The owner of the book was my teacher when I was in the eleventh grade, the year of the Armistice. She came into my Idaho town on the train just before school started. I remember the town as it looked then. Anyone getting off the train could see most of it at a glance. He could see the front of the brick hotel, the church tower, the sandstone schoolhouse from the back, and in the distance the messy back yards of the two stores, a livery barn, a warehouse and various dwellings.

A broken cement and board walk led from the depot to the hotel, passing an ugly, unpainted storehouse with a pigpen behind. Rocks lay on several vacant lots like large potatoes, intermixed here and there with spears of brown and shriveled grass.

In those days I often ran from home two blocks away to meet the one daily train when it pulled into the depot. I remember the day Miss Spurns arrived. A section hand was standing there by the train leaning on his bar (the train coming in had temporarily put him out of work), gazing unabashedly at the four or five people getting off the train. Straight in front of the passenger car of the mixed train stood several people — a woman with scraggly hair and a sunbonnet, a freckled boy with a broken suspender, and an old man with watery eyes leaning on a cane. The drayman driving a mangy looking team of unmatched horses hitched to an old wide-tired Bain wagon had just said "Whoa" to his team at the mail car door a few steps ahead of the passenger car exit, and the station agent had come out of his office to say something to the drayman. The horses breathed pungent air down the neck of another bystander, Nephi Boseman, a high school senior from the West Side. Water leaked in little streams from the water tank beside the track making little puddles in which two children had been playing, but now with the train coming to a halt they stood polkadotted with mud, one holding a stick and the other a can, peering at the people. And I was there by the corner of the depot in my old knickers. Miss Spurns emerged from the car with a dude passenger. She glanced around momentarily, while her

red hair moved in the autumn air and her brown coat shone glossy in the sun, and said emphatically to her escort, "My God, what a dump."

She spoke plainly, ignoring the country eyes upon her which now peered more penetratingly through what the ears heard. All bystanders reacted. Even the deaf drayman thought he heard, and punctuated the comment with a swish of tobacco juice.

When high school started, all seventy pupils knew what Miss Spurns had said. They would not tolerate a teacher who hated their town and their parents could not tolerate a teacher who swore.

To some people Miss Spurns became at once the Ichabod Crane of the community with whom indeed she had a great deal in common — long legs projecting somewhat too far below her skirts, long arms protruding too far beyond her leather coat, and big bony hands hanging incongruously around. She became a common sight in the village, her red hair, not wholly untidy, flying in the wind as she walked with big steps, her torso listing to the front from her hips upward and her leather coat, long enough to reach half from her hips to her knees, refusing to make the turn with the contour of her body at the waist and continuing the angle behind like the eaves of a smoke house.

In the classroom Miss Spurns permitted no clowning. A dedicated teacher, she planned her work, prepared her assignments, drilled and tested her students, and checked their papers meticulously. I remember how the first day in Junior English class she assigned a theme of five hundred words and other heavy reading assignments for the first week that brought complaints which grew intensely as the week wore by and pupils learned that the reading was from a writer, Chaucer, who wrote in a well-nigh incomprehensible language.

When a few weeks of school had passed, the principal had listened to complaints from the students about assignments, and from parents too, who joined with their children in righteous indignation at such travesty of justice.

At this time when tender minds were being unmercifully stretched, some students found things in Chaucer not fit for consumption. Miss Spurns in reading the conclusion of "The Pardoner's Tale" read the line, "Though it were with the fundament depeant," which she failed to interpret or explain. "What does that mean?" asked Nephi.

"To translate word for word," said Miss Spurns, "It means, 'Though it were with thy excrement stained!'"

"What does 'excrement' mean?" asked Nephi.

"Manure," answered the teacher.

Nephi and other pupils laughed.

"Students," shouted Miss Spurns sternly, "Grow up." She was angry. "You people are so self-righteous in this community that you pretend to be shocked by your own language. Chaucer could have used another word instead of 'fundament', a word you know because it is not as cultured. In 'The Miller's Tale' he uses words that are crude to show how vulgar the Miller was, the same words you and your brothers and your fathers use. You would scoff at them in Chaucer because you cannot understand the artistic purpose. If you know Shakespeare at all, you think he is a lesser writer than Harold Bell Wright. You think your Eliza Snow is a greater

musician than Handel. You probably have never heard of Rembrandt, but if you had you would think that that sloppy painting of *The Sacred Grove* above the pulpit in your chapel is greater than his *Christ Healing the Sick*. You have no aesthetic sense, no concept of beauty. You people in this class will not allow yourselves to like Chaucer — My God, what poverty."

I was angry at Miss Spurns. I was beginning to get the pleasant sound of Chaucer's language, to enjoy his humor, his pathos, his freedom of expression, and now I was falsely accused. Yet there was something in Miss Spurn's wrathful indignation that pleased me.

Sitting on the steps of the limestone meeting house (which was also used for school) that noontime, eating sandwiches and enjoying the western sun of the early winter day, Ralph fingered his anthology and found in "The Miller's Tale" the forbidden words referred to by the teacher. He laughed as he handed the book to me.

"Can it really mean what it says?" I asked as we peered at the page. I had never seen such words in print except on untidy walls of public out-houses around town. I read again and knew I read right. We laughed. Nephi sitting below, looking and smelling like a cowboy, said, "Read it to me; I can't read the damn stuff."

Ralph read a few lines aloud. At that moment June Dubois came around the corner with Erma Jones. Ralph quite successfully camouflaged the cause of the merriment as I did until Nephi, not habitually concerned with the truth, now earnestly made sure to let it wholly out. He grabbed the open book. "Read it," he said handing it to Erma.

Erma saw it was Chaucer and handed it to June, a modest little girl who rarely smiled, who had spent far more time with books than with boys, and who was cold witted enough not to suspect the trickery of her classmate.

Erma, less book learned, though a better observer, stopped June before she began to read aloud, and the two girls' noses met above the book.

In a moment June dropped her hands, turned purple in the face, glanced menacingly at Nephi, and broke away from Erma to dash across the street toward the drug store.

Miss Spurn's circle of interested observers in school and out grew in number and intensity. Since many of the six hundred people of the school district knew Miss Spurns only by hearsay, her personality developed in various directions. Nephi Roseman called her the Wife of Bath, a character he knew only through her teaching. The pool-hall loafers called her "the broad." A group of Relief Society ladies called her worldly. A more kindly group said she was a person capable of being good, but one who needed a good man to keep her in line.

Monday class time the teacher specified as theme day. On that day she would comment on themes and return them to students. She began one day talking to the class about a set of themes she had read: "Ralph's theme is accurate in sentence structure, fair in punctuation — even *good* I should say for high school work — and in content fair, though somewhat purposeless. Nephi's theme as usual is a pleasure to me, a pleasure because I always wonder what it might contain. Occasionally when I find a word I can identify I am overjoyed." Her voice showed her amused irony. "Talitha, your mechanics are bad, though an improvement is observable over your first

theme; in fact this paper might be acceptable if you had anything to say. Do write about something significant. Virginia, as before, you have done an excellent piece of writing as regards construction, organization, and clarity. The quarrel I have with you is with your subject matter. Your argument is unsound; it lacks logic. Your title, "The True Church," is a satisfactory statement of the content. In the body you say that Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus and that Jesus told Joseph Smith that all the churches were an abomination to God. Then you say that God had Joseph Smith organize the true church and that all other churches are wrong — Virginia, is that what you said?"

"Yes," Virginia said quite weakly, "That is what *we believe*."

"You believe that all the churches except yours are an abomination before God?" the teacher asked incredulously.

Virginia nodded.

"Do you believe, then, that only your church people are in favor with God?"

"They are the only ones who will get to the Celestial Glory," Virginia explained.

"Then you are telling me that I, a Methodist, will not get to Heaven."

"I did not mean to, Miss Spurns."

Virginia now was nearly in tears. Feeling that someone should help her, I volunteered. "Miss Spurns, you could join the Church, or, if you don't, the work can be done for you after you are dead."

"What do you mean, work done for me after I am dead?"

"I mean — well — someone can be baptized for you."

Miss Spurns laughed, then said with a smile. "No, you can't, I won't let you be baptized for me."

The class laughed, and she continued. "No, students, you think about your religion. My people are good people; my minister is a good man — and you say only Mormons will go to Heaven. Is that logic?"

"Do your people all swear?" interrupted Nephi.

Miss Spurns flashed anger in darkening eyes. "Perhaps we do, Nephi, but we do not say *ain't* and *comin'* and *goin'* and *I seen it* and *I clumb it* — don't you ever swear, Nephi, tell me, don't you swear?"

"Yes, I do," said Nephi, boastingly, "but I ain't goin' to Heaven."

"No, and you are not going to get credit for this class unless you correct your language."

"Yes," said Miss Spurns, nodding to Virginia whose hand was raised.

"You could go to the Terrestrial degree of glory without joining the Church," Virginia said.

"Terrestrial," said Miss Spurns thinking, "terrestrial comes from the French *terra* meaning 'earth.' What do you mean, terrestrial glory?"

"It is a heaven a little lower than the celestial," explained Virginia; "only the people who are baptized can go to the celestial glory."

To the whole group, the teacher now spoke more softly: "What poor, innocent lambs you are. You know so little about this life, and you are ready to go to the highest heaven. You think that you could take a moron out and baptize him, and though he is filthy as a dung hill, inane as a clod, or lazy as a sparrow, he has a ticket to Heaven."

Class was dismissed and all themes had been handed back except mine. I went to the teacher's desk.

"Your's was not worth commenting on or reading," she told me; "it showed disrespect for teachers, and you and this community need to be taught something about culture and manners."

I turned and walked away. Never before had I been accused by a teacher of being disrespectful. The theme was humorous, I thought, but she did not see it.

Miss Spurns loved Shakespeare, the writer who stood boldly above all other writers, the man with the great invisible power, the supreme articulate, the wisest, the wittiest, the most inspired and inspiring writer of all time — all this Miss Spurns taught. And she read the plays with such poetic expression and meaning that I, too, learned to like Shakespeare. Under her forceful drive, Shakespeare rose out of the past to become a great citizen of the world I lived in. I watched the teacher and saw the sparkle in her hard eyes as she read something she loved. I saw her become Shylock demanding his pound of flesh and Portia pleading for mercy. Shakespearian images under her tongue became visions. The forests in which I had wandered became the magical forest of Arden with books in its running brooks, and the continuous wintry winds I thought of now as "counsellors that feelingly persuaded him who he is." English class to me became a pleasure to anticipate, and reading the assignments a delightful discipline. Miss Spurns read Lady Macbeth's speech:

I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would while it was yet smiling in my face
Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed his brains out, had I sworn, as you
Have done to this.

Then I saw the hardness in the teacher's face, which I had seen before when she scornfully denounced the earthy people of the community. I heard classmates say, "She would, she would kill her own baby."

I also heard her read speeches of the humbled Lady Macbeth, washing her hands and crying, "Here is the smell of blood still," and the doctor's speech, "What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged." But in this I saw another Miss Spurns.

Students, angered at the teacher's repeated charges of shallow provincialism in the community and her incessant demands for letter-perfect work, were griping unmercifully. But I was not aware of the extremes to which townspeople had caught fire with the generated heat of wagging tongues until another event occurred.

The man who had the greatest influence and say in the community was C.M. Hatch, Chairman of the School Board, owner of the C.M. Hatch and Company General Merchandise Store, member of the Church Stake High Council, and State Senator. I felt honored when Mr. Hatch called me behind the swinging gate of his office in the back of his store just beyond the pot-bellied stove.

Mr. Hatch was impressive with his gray hair crowning his pale, unwrinkled face, with his spotlessly clean clothes, and his easy flow of language.

"About this Miss Spurns," he asked; "how do you think she is succeeding as a teacher?"

"Do you mean? — Just what do you mean? With all the students?"

"Are you learning, becoming educated under her tutorage?"

"Yes, Mr. Hatch," I said quite inarticulately.

"What do you students think of her ability to lead you to learn and understand literature and to use better language in speaking and writing?"

I hesitated.

"Your reluctance to talk about your teacher, son, is quite justifiable, but we have a problem. You know, many people are complaining. In our town is a faction we could call the I-have-the-Lord people. Now with Miss Spurns these people are causing trouble. They are the people who think they are magnifying their Priesthood when they are magnifying other people's sins. These people know they belong to God's Kingdom, are among the elect, the chosen of the chosen. Actually they have narrowed God to an infinitesimal smallness, to a few specifics they understand themselves, and they see no purpose in many of the educational values possessed by Miss Spurns."

I was agreeing with Mr. Hatch.

"These I've-got-the-Lord zealots, though relatively few, are winning many people of the other groups to their cause; right now, many people are agitating the school board toward revocation of Miss Spurns' contract. That is why I am asking you questions; I've got to get the facts with which to judge this teacher."

I hoped I could honestly report.

"Specifically," Mr. Hatch went on, "they claim Miss Spurns attacks the Church, teaches false doctrine, swears, exposes the pupils to vulgarity, is herself immodest, considers herself better than we, and is guilty of carrying on flirtatious affairs with men from over the hill. Are these charges in your opinion made in all justice? Does she swear in school?"

"Yes, she has."

"Has she attacked principles of our religion?"

"Yes, Sir," I said; I wished that I had words to explain.

"Do you know of a time when she raised her skirts and exposed her body to the students?"

"I was at a school party when she ran against a bench and fell — we were playing fill-the-gap — she raised her dress to show how she had skinned her knee."

Mr. Hatch smiled. "That wound has moved upward since the accident," he said.

"Has she assigned you stories to read which contained vile language, and do you personally know of any indecent behavior of this young lady in her associations with men from Jackson Hole?"

"I have seen her with men, Sir — a man from Jackson —"

"A Boseman boy from the West Side," broke in the Chairman, "is responsible for circulation of some scandalous details of her private life. Do you know of this — of the reliability of this information?"

"The boys can see through her window from the top of the warehouse behind the hotel," I said.

"Even a school teacher would hardly expect a warehouse to have eyes on its roof," Mr. Hatch said with a sardonic smile.

I left the Chairman's office in melancholy, sorry for my inability to put everything in its context, to show how Miss Spurns had something from the big world of literature and life that people of the town did not have, and how she had opened up that world for us to see.

Back at school, I resolved to uphold the teacher at all costs, for I chafed under the sting of conscience for having failed to do so before the Chairman of the Board.

Early one day before school began, I went toward the little room used by the Church for a kitchen and by Miss Spurns for a combined classroom and office. As I approached through the bigger room, I could see the desk, through the open door, unoccupied, though overwhelmed with books and papers. Then as I came nearer I saw Miss Spurns leaning to the floor, her back to me, trying to replace the broken draft door on the coal range which furnished heat for the room. For speedy heating the janitor had left the door off. Now with the room warm, the stove red with heat, Miss Spurns was attempting to cut off the draft. I was too disturbed in my thought to give more than a glance to the womanly figure, dressed this morning in her lovely white-knit dress and silk stockings. I stood thinking, feeling misplaced, afraid to speak while her hips waved before me in a way hardly compatible with her dignity. I feared that this inconvenience of trying again to get this broken door to hang in place would bring a tirade against the destructive heathen of the high school or the dilatory School Board who failed to have it repaired.

Then, having met with success, Miss Spurns stood, turned to come to her desk and saw me. Almost without emotion she said, "You will note, Burt, that I replaced the exasperating thing without vocal invective."

I smiled without speaking.

She looked at me as though she expected something from me. But I was slow; before superiors, words deserted me. Hesitantly I moved toward the desk at which she had arrived and managed to say, "Miss Spurns, you are leaving Shakespeare in English." Immediately I knew I had not said what I wanted to say and that I had said it awkwardly. "What I mean is, I am sorry — I hoped — I hoped you would study *Othello*. You rec—re—commended it, you know."

The teacher did not speak. I felt as if I were in a spelling match with my turn to spell a word I did not know.

I continued, "I like—"

"I know you do. I know you like Shakespeare," Miss Spurns added with a smile. "I have been discouraged with my work here, but I am beginning to feel success. Now that I see some sparks of interest in some of you, I will not be as impatient, cross, and impetuous."

"You have had reason," I said.

"This is my first year out of college, Burt, and I think now that I have expected too much. I have expected of you what my teachers in college demanded of me."

I could think of nothing to say.

"I remember, Burt, that some weeks ago I mistreated you, called you discourteous. I want to apologize because I was wrong."

"Thank you, Miss Spurns."

"You were asking about studying *Othello*," she continued; "you could read it yourself, you know; I could loan you the book."

"Oh, no, I might lose it, or have an accident, or fail to return it."

"You will protect it and return it; I am not afraid to loan it to you," she said.

I left the teacher's room content with the accepted apology and the proffered book; yet I felt an oppressive awareness of my failure to tell Miss Spurns what I wanted her to know.

On the following Friday, school had been called and teachers were attempting to generate in pupils some intellectual yearning when a message from the school board demanded an immediate recess for a joint meeting of the board and the three-member faculty. The principal announced that classes would be reconvened before noon and all students should respond at bell call.

Pandemonium immediately broke loose. I heard a voice from behind say, "They are going to can Spurns." Someone near said, "No more good window peeping for Nephi."

The principal was coming toward me. Instinctively I thought of this man as a loaded gun, loaded now with ammunition for me and undoubtedly loaded to avenge some wrong done or duty undone. "Burt," the principal was speaking, "the board has asked me to bring you to the meeting."

Though frightened at the thought, I knew no recourse but to obey.

At the beginning of the Board Meeting, while cordiality edged its way around, I looked from one to another of the group — no one dressed for the occasion, each betraying his own occupation: Mr. Davis sat in carpenters' white overalls and shiny black shoes; Mr. Hatch in his white shirt and black half sleeves to the elbow, dress pants and vest with gold watch chain across; Mr. Brussels in faded blue denim overalls and jumper and high topped over-shoes discolored a barnyard yellow.

Miss Spurns sat with her auburn hair glistening brightly, her eyes alert; I recalled how in class she had smelled like perfumed soap. I looked again at Mr. Brussels. High on the leg of his overalls was a dirty spot, round like the top of a can and stringing funnel-like at the bottom, showing glassy on the denim making it stiff and unwrinkled. I knew this kind of spot; a calf being separated from his breakfast had nuzzled the overalls with his slobbery nose. I wondered what Miss Spurns thought of this man looking and smelling dirty.

Next to me sat Mr. Killpack, the hotel manager, who was there in blue serge, smelling like good cigars. On my other side was the principal, looking like a principal, and next to him Miss Gray with a faint, stony smile as always, as unruffled as an unused swimming pool. And next to her sat Miss Spurns.

The chairman began talking about the reasons for calling the meeting, and after a short time said, "We regret, Miss Spurns, that the necessity has arisen to inform you that certain people of the community accuse you of violation of two points in the Idaho School Law, that dealing with teaching religion in the classroom and that regarding moral behavior. We have asked

you and others to this meeting, not to call in question the revocation of your contract as is rumored, but to learn the facts regarding these charges and thereby establish a better relationship between the people of the community and the teachers." He looked from Miss Spurns to members of the board as if to get their approval of his statement of the case.

The charge of teaching religion in the classroom became the first topic of discussion. Somehow this matter seemed unimportant to me. I thought that most of what Miss Spurns had taught was Christianity, an adjunct and not a challenge to my religion.

Too soon Mr. Brussels was speaking, through stubble face and uneven yellow teeth, about his children bringing home reports of the teacher having attacked the revelations of God. He would rather his children would remain unschooled, totally illiterate, than have their testimonies destroyed.

"What have you to say regarding these reports, Miss Spurns?" Mr. Hatch asked.

"I have nothing to say except that I have tried to answer questions honestly that have arisen in class."

Mr. Hatch turned to me, "We asked you here, young man" — I was frightened — how could I talk? — What could I say before my teachers, and these men? "We have asked you here, Burt, to give a report representing the students of the school. Has Miss Spurns in your opinion attacked the principles of the Church?"

"Only in the way she said," I answered.

"In answering questions which arise," asked Mr. Hatch, "has she attacked the Church?"

"Not exactly," I answered without further comment. Others in the group now spoke, relieving me of the necessity to say more, and leaving my emotions stirring sufficiently to dull my hearing as to what occurred subsequently. Then out of the chaos of my mind I heard Mr. Davis' voice saying: "—a faith which may seem peculiar to you, Miss Spurns, and undoubtedly as you hear fragments of it from the students it appears illogical. When you see it all it makes a better pattern. I do not believe that you have openly attacked our faith; you have not treated this important subject with the delicacy something so sacred to us deserves."

"I am sorry if I have erred in this way, Mr. Davis," Miss Spurns said.

"If we are crude," he continued, "that is not the fault of our religion. Many of our people have risen from total illiteracy, from complete ignorance to become responsible citizens, happy self-respecting people. Our religion is a vital faith that inspires great loyalty, great action, great sacrifice. It teaches us to seek all truth; that is why we established this little high school and hired you — just because we want our children to have some of the culture you have to offer."

"Mr. Davis has stated our position very well," said the Chairman. "We tell you this to let you know that we want your cooperation to preserve all the good things we have."

"Thank you, Mr. Hatch," said the teacher.

"If you think, Miss Spurns," Mr. Davis said, "that our lives in this isolated community are barren, just think how much more barren they

would have been had our people not come out of the darkness of disbelief and accepted some of the marvelous light of Christ."

"Do you feel, Miss Spurns," asked Mr. Hatch, "that to ask you to avoid discussions of points of theological doctrine would be in any way unfair?"

"I do not. I shall follow your advice, gentlemen."

"We are concerned with accusations of immoral behavior," the chairman continued, "loose conduct — entertaining men in your room at the hotel."

"But now," he said, turning to me, "we will excuse you, Burt, — thank you for coming."

I left, feeling as if I had been arbitrated out of adult status to childhood and at a time when it violated my arduous wish. I could now only speculate on what Mr. Killpack, the hotel manager would report. I had heard my mother say that gullible gossips were spreading the tales, and that Miss Spurns, a city girl, was no doubt finding it hard to adjust to country life. The boys her age were off to war — nothing to do at night for relaxation from the treadmill of school teaching but to sit in the hotel lobby with a motley assortment of old men talking muffled talk through cuds of chewing tobacco, punctuating conversation with whistling shots at the spittoon, or the other alternative, fraternize with bachelor cowboys from Jackson's Hole.

Outside, I walked mopingly to join classmates at school, feeling angry, though I hardly knew why.

Back at school I found the students gathered in the auditorium in unusual unity.

"Are they going to can her?" they chorused.

I did not want to talk. "No," I said curtly, "no case against her. They are advising her, telling her what to do."

"We knew it," Nephi Boseman said, "so we're gon ta put her out ourselves; we've all signed a petition that we won't go to school if she stays."

"All?" I asked.

"All but Charley and Fern."

Charley and Fern, I thought; I am with them — stubborn Charley and prudish Fern.

"You gotta sign now," Nephi said; "you know what she is."

"Yes, I know what she is, and it's not what you make her with your lies." I said. "I will not sign that paper."

Shouts of protest came from every side. Someone said, "He wants to keep Spurns. Can you believe it?"

Virginia spoke as noise diminished, "Please sign it, Burt; We want you to sign last because you are president."

I felt a stir in my heart. Another weight was being laid on the scales. In the meeting, I felt that I was Miss Spurns' advocate and defender. Now I must reject her or be rejected by my peers. Momentarily I felt as if I could not endure isolation from classmates. They were urging, arguing, insisting that I sign.

"Alright! alright! I'll do it," I said.

I took the petition and signed. The gadflies had driven me to an impetuous act of conformity.

As I did so, I hardly contemplated the consequence. My youthful idealism led me to conclude unthinkingly that justice somehow would prevail.

The school board, the parents, the principal would not listen to a foolish petition initiated by children. If I were a child to be expelled from a meeting, I was a child to be ignored in this — Miss Spurns would stay despite the petition; it would be disregarded.

When the teachers entered the chapel a few minutes later, the students sat orderly and silent, tense in quietness.

The clock marked seconds vocally while teachers took their seats behind the pulpit. Directly behind Miss Spurns from where I sat and above her head hung the painting of *The Sacred Grove*, the green landscape and trees contrasting with her red hair, a painting of the very place where God told Joseph Smith that all the churches had gone astray.

The principal arose and began, "Students, we are happy to announce that all the teachers have complete support of the School Board and that school will continue as usual."

Nephi stood at his seat in the audience, "I got a paper to give ya," he shouted as he started toward the front.

The principal accepted and read the paper silently — my heart pumped loudly in my ears.

"What can this petition mean?" the principal said.

"It means," shouted Nephi, "just what it says; we don't go to school if Spurns stays."

Miss Spurns reached for the petition. She looked at it coldly, intensely; she arose, moved like smoke to the pulpit and spoke quietly, her eyes piercing. "You are against me too — I never would have gone through the ignominy I have just experienced had I known that you, my students, were against me."

I could not lift my eyes for shame. I felt alone, an isolate, a sinner condemned by the infallible judge Truth, an inarticulate before his confessor. When I could raise my eyes, Miss Spurns had turned her head and seemed to be looking at *The Sacred Grove*.

Three hours later, before anyone — the Principal, the School Board, or the parents had risen to defend the teacher, and before I recovered from the shock of fast-paced action, the mixed train puffed northward carrying Miss Spurns somewhere beyond the valley.

At home that night when I went to my room, I saw Miss Spurns' green book, *Othello*, lying on my dresser, a sardonic accuser, telling me of my own perfidy.