

The Flag of Our Union

Too Much Haste
by James Dabney

George Summers was a brave lad. He was twelve years old, and well grown for his age. He stood high in his classes, and was regarded by his teacher as the most promising boy in the school. He was a truthful lad too, and his teacher was proud of him on this account. He knew he could always depend upon George for a fair and candid statement of whatever happened.

One day the teacher placed in his desk an unusually fine orange. He had bought it on his way to school and intended to carry it home to his wife who was sick. During the recess he left the room to attend to something on the grounds, and when he returned he found George Summers just closing the lid of his desk.

“What are you doing there, George?” he asked, noticing the flash on the lad’s face.

“I was looking to see what mark you gave me today, sir,” replied the boy, in some confusion.

“You should not have done so without my permission,” said the teacher, gravely.

“I know I did not do right, sir,” said George, “but I was very anxious to see if I would lose my place in my class, as it is the first time I have failed to be perfect in my Latin.”

“Don’t do so again, but come to me when you want any such information,” said the teacher. Taking his seat, he opened his desk to look for something, when he uttered an exclamation of surprise and called George Summers; but the boy had left the room by this time. Going to the door, the teacher called him back. “Where is my orange, George?” he asked.

“I have not got it, sir,” replied the boy.

“The orange was in the desk when I left the room,” said the teacher. “On my return I found you at my desk, and my orange was gone. Tell the truth George. What did you do with the fruit?”

“I did not know that you had an orange,” said the boy, looking him frankly in the face. “I did not see any in your desk, and, indeed, sir, I have not taken it.”

The teacher said nothing more, but rang the bell for the reassembling of the school. When all the boys were in their places, he told them that he had brought an orange to school with him, but that someone had taken it from his desk. Then taking the roll, he called over the names, asking each boy if he took the orange, or if he knew anything about it. Each one answered, “no.” When he came to George Summers, the lad returned the same answer to the first question, but when asked if he knew anything about it, he was silent, and then said he’d rather not tell, as it might bring some of his companions into trouble, and after all he was not certain.

The teacher looked at him sternly for a while, and then said, severely:

“I don’t mind the loss of the orange, but I am very sorry to find that I have a thief in my school, and that the thief is one whom I have always regarded as my best pupil. I mean you, George, for I am satisfied now that you took the orange. If you will confess it, I will try to overlook your fault, but, if you do not do so, I shall punish you severely after school.”

When the exercises of the day were over George was called to the teacher’s desk, and the questions repeated. He reiterated his denial, and the teacher whipped him severely. The boy did not flinch or murmur. He stood proud and silent while the degrading punishment was being inflicted, never betraying by the slightest movement or any emotion. The boys looked on in astonishment, and at last the teacher paused and said:

“I am sorry to see you so hardened, George. I thought you a better boy.”

“I am not hardened,” replied George, indignantly. “You have charged me with dishonesty, and whipped me for it without any proof. You never knew me to tell you a lie, but now refuse to believe me, and treat me so merely upon suspicion.”

The teacher thought there was some force in what the boy said, and that he might have been too hasty; but the case seemed to him so plain that he did not see how there could be a doubt about it.

“You can go home now, George,” he said. “I hope you will be in a better frame of mind when you come back to-morrow.”

“I shall not come back again, sir,” said George, firmly. “You have treated me too badly for me to want to stay here. I shall tell my father all about this and ask him to take me away.”

“I will see your father to-night, myself,” said the teacher, and he dismissed the school.

After the boys were gone the teacher sat for a long time, thinking over the occurrence. Somehow he could not help feeling reproached for his haste. George had always been the best, the most truthful boy in the school, and it was very strange that he should do so mean a thing; and, after all, the evidence against him was not conclusive when it came to be sifted carefully.

As he sat there a lucky thought entered the teacher’s mind, and rising he examined closely every desk in the school-room. His search was almost ended when he discovered in a remote corner of a desk a couple of orange seeds, and a piece of fresh rind. The owner of this desk was a bad boy and one who had given him a great deal of trouble. What if this boy should prove the real thief?

Without delay the teacher proceeded to the house of the lad, Jim Greenidge by name. Arriving there, and asking for the boy’s father, he told him the whole story. Mr. Greenidge, with shame and mortification, called his son into the room, and asked him where he got the orange he had at school that day. As the boy saw his teacher, his face grew deathly pale and he replied in a frightened tone that he did not have an orange at school. The teacher then produced the bits of rind and the seeds he had found, and asked how they came to be in his desk. The boy saw that

there was no escape for him, and, yielding to the commands and threats of his father, confessed that he had taken the orange and that he had been afraid to confess it.

Having discovered the mistake he had made, the teacher now took his way to the residence of Mr. Summers to do what he could towards repairing the damage he had done. He was received with cold politeness by the boy's father. Upon hearing what the teacher had to say, Mr. Summers called George into the room and the teacher told him how he had discovered his innocence.

"Did you suspect Jim Greenidge of taking the orange?" asked the teacher.

"Yes sir," replied George. "I saw him coming from your desk as I went up to it, and I noticed a guilty look on his face."

"Then why did you not tell this to me?"

"Because," said the boy, proudly, "I would not do so mean a thing as to accuse one of my companions simply on suspicion."

The teacher winced, for it was a home thrust. He was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I am sorry this has happened, George, and I hope you will forget it and forgive it, and come back to school to-morrow."

"Let me speak for my son," said Mr. Summers. "That he will forgive you for the wrong you have done him, I am sure. But I cannot permit him to go back to your school, and he does not desire to do so. You were very wrong to accuse a boy of an infamous offence merely upon suspicion, when you had always known him to be honorable and upright, and to inflict upon him a degrading punishment upon no stronger evidence. I cannot place my boy in such danger again. George sustains my decision, and it is final. This ought to teach you a lesson, and I hope you will profit by it."

The teacher departed in silence, a wiser and an humbler man. The next day he proclaimed George's innocence, and expelled Jim Greenidge. He did profit by his lesson, and never again permitted himself to act in haste or upon mere suspicion in matters in which his pupils were concerned.

The Flag of Our Union, Nov 24, 1866