All Ronnie wanted was to return to his beautiful valley – but where on Earth was it?

Little Red Schoolhouse

By ROBERT F. YOUNG
Illustrated by JOHNS

RONNIE avoided the towns. Whenever he came to one, he made a wide detour, coming back to the tracks miles beyond it. He knew that none of the towns was the village he was looking for. The towns were bright and new, with white streets and brisk cars and big factories, while the village in the valley was old and quiet, with rustic houses and shaded streets and a little red schoolhouse.

Just before you came to the village, there was a grove of friendly maples with a brook winding through them. Ronnie remembered the brook best of all. In summer, he had waded in it many times, and he had skated on it in winter; in autumn, he had watched the fallen leaves, like Lilliputian ships, sail down it to the sea.

Ronnie had been sure that he could find the valley, but the tracks went on and on, through fields and hills and forests, and no familiar valley appeared. After a while, he began to wonder if he had chosen the right tracks, if the shining rails he followed day after day were really the rails along which the stork train had borne him to the city and to his parents.

He kept telling himself that he wasn't truly running away from home, that the aseptic three-room apartment in which he had lived for a month wasn't his home at all, any more than the pallid man and woman who had met him at the bustling terminal were his mother and father.

His real home was in the valley, in the old rambling house at the outskirts of the village; and his real parents were Nora and Jim, who had cared for him throughout his boyhood. True, they had never claimed to be his parents, but they were just the same, even if they put him on the stork train when he was asleep and sent him to the city to live with the pallid people who pretended to be his parents.

Nights, when the shadows came too close around his campfire, he thought of Nora and Jim and the village. But most of all, he thought of Miss Smith, the teacher in the little red schoolhouse. Thinking of Miss Smith made him brave, and he lay back in the summer grass beneath the summer stars and he wasn't scared at all.

ON THE fourth morning, he ate the last of the condensed food tablets he had stolen from his parents' apartment. He knew that he had to find the valley soon and he walked faster along the tracks, staring eagerly ahead for the first familiar landmark—a remembered tree or a nostalgic hilltop, the silvery twinkle of a winding brook. The trip on the stork train had been his first trip into the outside world, so he was not certain how the valley would look, coming into it from the surrounding countryside; nevertheless, he was sure he would recognize it quickly.

His legs were stronger now than they had been when he had first stepped off the stork train and his dizzy spells were becoming less and less frequent. The sun no longer bothered his eyes and he could look for long moments at the blue sky and the bright land with no painful after-images.

Toward evening he heard a high-pitched whistle and his heart began to pound. He knew at last that he had the right tracks and that he couldn't be very far from the valley, for the whistle was the shrill lullaby of a stork train.

Ronnie hid in the weeds that lined the embankment and watched the train pass. He saw the children reclining on their chairbeds, staring curiously

through the little windows, and he remembered how he had stared, too, on his trip to the city, how surprised—and frightened—he had been, upon awakening, to see the strange new land unrolling before his aching eyes.

He wondered if his face had been as white as those he was seeing now, as white and as peaked and as sickly, and he guessed that it had been, that living in the valley affected your complexion some way, made your eyes sensitive to light and your legs weak.

But that couldn't be the answer. His legs had never been weak when he had lived in the valley, he remembered, and his eyes had never bothered him. He had never had trouble seeing the lessons on the blackboard in the little red schoolhouse, and he'd read all the printed words in the schoolbooks without the slightest difficulty. In fact, he'd done so well with his reading lessons that Miss Smith had patted him on the back, more times than he could remember, and told him that he was her star pupil.

SUDDENLY he realized how eager he was to see Miss Smith again, to walk into the little classroom and have her say, "Good morning, Ronnie," and see her sitting reassuringly behind her desk, her yellow hair parted neatly in the middle and her round cheeks pink in the morning light. For the first time it occurred to him that he was in love with Miss Smith, and he recognized his real reason for returning to the valley.

The other reasons were still valid, though. He wanted to wade in the brook again and feel the cool tree shadows all around him, and after that he wanted to meander through the maples, picking a slow way homeward, and finally he wanted to wander down the lazy village street to the house and have Nora scold him for being late for supper.

The stork train was still passing. Ronnie couldn't get over how long it was. Where did all the children come from? He didn't recognize a single one of them, yet he had lived in the valley all his life. He hadn't recognized any of the children on his own stork train, either, for that matter. He shook his head. The whole thing was bewildering, far beyond his understanding.

When the last of the cars had passed, he climbed back up the embankment to the tracks. Dusk was seeping in over the land and soon, he knew, the first star would appear. If only he could find the valley before night came! He wouldn't even pause to wade in the brook; he would run through the maples and down the street to the house. Nora and Jim would be delighted to see him again and Nora would fix a fine supper; and perhaps Miss Smith would come over during the evening, as she sometimes did, and discuss his schoolwork, and he would walk to the gate with her, when she was ready to go, and say good night, and see the starlight on her face as she stood goddess-tall beside him.

He hurried along the tracks, staring hungrily ahead for some sign of the valley. The shadows deepened around him and the damp breath of night crept down from the hills. Insects awoke in the tall meadow grass, katydids and crickets and frogs began singing in ponds.

After a while, the first star came out.

HE WAS surprised when he came to the big broad-shouldered building. He did not recall having seen it during his ride on the stork train. That was odd, because he had never left the window once during the whole trip.

He paused on the tracks, gazing at the towering brick façade with its tiers and tiers of small barred windows. Most of the upper windows were dark, but all of the first-floor windows were ablaze with light. The first-floor windows were different in other respects, too, he noticed. There were no bars on them and they were much larger than the higher ones. Ronnie wondered why that should be.

And then he noticed something else. The tracks stretched right up to the imposing façade and entered the building through a lofty archway. Ronnie gasped. The building must be a terminal, like the one in the city, where his parents had met him. But why hadn't he seen it when the stork train had passed through it?

Then he remembered that he'd been put on the train when he was asleep and could have missed the first part of the journey. He'd assumed, when he awoke, that the train was just pulling out of the valley, but perhaps it had pulled out some time before—a long time, even—and had passed through the terminal while he was sleeping.

It was a logical explanation, but Ronnie was reluctant to accept it. If it was true, then the valley was still a long way off, and he wanted the valley to be close, close enough for him to reach it tonight. He was so hungry he could hardly stand it, and he was terribly tired.

He looked miserably at the big hulking building, wondering what to do.

"Hello, Ronnie."

Ronnie almost collapsed with fright on the tracks. He peered around him into the shadows. At first he saw no one, but after a while he made out the figure of a tall man in a gray uniform standing in a grove of locusts bordering the tracks. The man's uniform matched the shadows, and Ronnie realized with a start that he had been standing there all along.

"You are Ronnie Meadows, aren't you?"

"Yes—yes, sir," Ronnie said. He wanted to turn and run, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. He was so tired and weak that the tall man could catch him easily.

"I've been waiting for you, Ronnie," the tall man said, a note of warmth in his voice. He left the tree shadows and walked over to the tracks. "I've been worried about you."

"Worried?"

"Why, of course. Worrying about boys who leave the valley is my job. You see, I'm the truant officer."

RONNIE'S eyes got big. "Oh, but I didn't want to leave the valley, sir," he said. "Nora and Jim waited until I went to sleep one night, and then they put me on the stork train, and when I woke up I was already on my way to the city. I want to go back to the valley, sir. I—I ran away from home."

"I understand," the truant officer said, "and I'm going to take you back to the valley—back to the little red schoolhouse." He reached down and took Ronnie's hand.

"Oh, will you, sir?" Ronnie could hardly contain the sudden happiness that coursed through him. "I want to go back in the worst way!"

"Of course I will. It's my job." The truant officer started walking toward the big building and Ronnie hurried along beside him. "But first I've got to take you to the principal."

Ronnie drew back. He became aware then of what a tight grip the truant officer had on his weak-feeling hand.

"Come on," the truant officer said, making the grip even tighter. "The principal won't hurt you."

"I—I never knew there was a principal," Ronnie said, hanging back. "Miss Smith never said anything about him."

"Naturally there's a principal; there has to be. And he wants to talk to you before you go back. Come on now, like a good boy, and don't make it necessary for me to turn in a bad report about you. Miss Smith wouldn't like that at all, would she?"

"No, I guess she wouldn't," Ronnie said, suddenly contrite. "All right, sir, I'll go."

Ronnie had learned about principals in school, but he had never seen one. He had always assumed that the little red schoolhouse was too small to need one and he still couldn't understand why it should. Miss Smith was perfectly capable of conducting the school all by herself. But most of all, he couldn't understand why the principal should live in a place like the terminal—if it was a terminal—and not in the valley.

However, he accompanied the truant officer dutifully, telling himself that he had a great deal to learn about the world and that an interview with a principal was bound to teach him a lot.

THEY entered the building through an entrance to the left of the archway and walked down a long bright corridor lined with tall green cabinets to a frosted glass door at the farther end. The lettering on the glass said: EDUCATIONAL CENTER 16, H. D. CURTIN, PRINCIPAL.

The door opened at the truant officer's touch and they stepped into a small white-walled room even more brightly illumined than the corridor. Opposite the door was a desk with a girl sitting behind it, and behind the girl was another frosted glass door. The lettering said: PRIVATE.

The girl looked up as the truant officer and Ronnie entered. She was young and pretty—almost as pretty as Miss Smith.

"Tell the old man the Meadows kid finally showed up," the truant officer said.

The girl's eyes touched Ronnie's, then dropped quickly to a little box on her desk. Ronnie felt funny. There had been a strange look in the girl's eyes—a sort of sadness. It was as though she was sorry that the truant officer had found him.

She told the little box: "Mr. Curtin, Andrews just brought in Ronnie Meadows."

"Good," the box said. "Send the boy in and notify his parents."

"Yes, sir."

The principal's office was unlike anything Ronnie had ever seen before. Its hugeness made him uncomfortable and the brightness of its fluorescent lights hurt his eyes. All the lights seemed to be shining right in his face and he could hardly see the man behind the desk.

But he could see him well enough to make out some of his features: the high white forehead and receding hairline, the thin cheeks, the almost lipless mouth.

For some reason the man's face frightened Ronnie and he wished that the interview were over.

"I have only a few questions to ask you," the principal said, "and then you can be on your way back to the valley."

"Yes, sir," Ronnie said, some of his fear leaving him.

"Were your mother and father unkind to you? Your real mother and father, I mean."

"No, sir. They were very good to me. I'm sorry I had to run away from them, but I just had to go back to the valley."

"Were you lonesome for Nora and Jim?"

Ronnie wondered how the principal knew their names. "Yes, sir."

"And Miss Smith—were you lonesome for her?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

HE FELT the principal's eyes upon him and he shifted uncomfortably. He was so tired; he wished the principal would ask him to sit down. But the principal didn't and the lights seemed to get brighter and brighter.

"Are you in love with Miss Smith?"

The question startled Ronnie, not so much because he hadn't expected it, but because of the tone in which it was uttered. There was unmistakable loathing in the principal's voice. Ronnie felt his neck grow hot, and then his face, and he was too ashamed to meet the principal's eyes, no matter how hard he tried. But the strange part of it was, he didn't understand why he was ashamed.

The question came again, the loathing more pronounced than before: "Are you in love with Miss Smith?"

"Yes, sir," Ronnie said.

Silence came and sat in the room. Ronnie kept his eyes down, fearfully awaiting the next question.

But there were no more questions and presently he became aware that the door behind him had opened and that the truant officer was standing over him. He heard the principal's voice: "Level Six. Tell the tech on duty to try Variant 24-C on him."

"Yes, sir," the truant officer said. He took Ronnie's hand. "Come on, Ronnie."

"Where're we going?"

"Why, back to the valley, of course. Back to the little red schoolhouse."

Ronnie followed the truant officer out of the office, his heart singing. It seemed almost too easy, almost too good to be true.

Ronnie didn't understand why they had to take the elevator to get to the valley. But perhaps they were going to the roof of the building and board a 'copter, so he didn't say anything till the elevator stopped on the sixth floor and they stepped out into a long, long corridor lined with hundreds of horizontal doors so close together that they almost seemed to touch.

Then he said: "But this isn't the way to the valley, sir. Where are you taking me?"

"Back to school," the truant officer said, the warmth gone from his voice. "Come along, now!"

RONNIE tried to hold back, but it wasn't any use. The truant officer was big and strong and he dragged Ronnie down the long antiseptic corridor to a recess in which a gaunt woman in a white uniform was sitting behind a metal desk.

"Here's the Meadows kid," he said. "The old man says to change the plot to 24-C."

The gaunt woman got up wearily. Ronnie was crying by then and she selected an ampoule from a glass cabinet beside the desk, came over and rolled up his sleeve and, despite his squirming, expertly jabbed the needle into his arm.

"Save your tears till later," she said. "You'll need them." She turned to the truant officer. "Curtin's guilt complex must be getting the better of him. This is the third 24-C he's prescribed this month."

"The old man knows what he's doing."

"He only thinks he knows what he's doing. First thing you know, we'll have a whole world full of Curtins. It's about time someone on the Board of Education took a course in psychology and found out what mother love is all about!"

"The old man's a graduate psychologist," the truant officer said.

"You mean a graduate psychopath!"

"You shouldn't talk like that."

"I'll talk the way I please," the gaunt woman said. "You don't hear them crying, but I do. Twenty-four-C belongs back in the twentieth century and should have been thrown out of the curriculum long ago!"

She took Ronnie's arm and led him away. The truant officer shrugged and returned to the elevator. Ronnie heard the metal doors breathe shut. The corridor was very quiet and he followed the woman as though in a dream. He could hardly feel his arms and legs, and his brain had grown fuzzy.

The gaunt woman turned off into another corridor and then into another. Finally they came to an open door. The woman stopped before it.

"Recognize the old homestead?" she asked bitterly.

But Ronnie hardly heard her. He could barely keep his eyes open. There was a bed in the shelf-like cubicle beyond the horizontal door, a strange bed with all sorts of wires and dials and screens and tubes around it. But it was a bed, and for the moment that was all he cared about, and he climbed upon it gratefully. He lay his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"That's a good boy," he heard the woman say just before he dropped off. "And now back to the little red schoolhouse."

THE pillow purred and the screens lit up and the tapes went into action.

"Ronnie!"

Ronnie stirred beneath the covers, fighting the dream. It had been a

horrible dream, filled with stork trains and strange people and unfamiliar places. And the worst part of it was, it could be true. Nora had told him many times that some morning, when he awoke, he would be on the stork train, bound for the city and his parents.

He fought harder and harder, kicking at the covers and trying to open his eyes.

"Ronnie," Nora called again. "Hurry up or you'll be late for school!"

His eyes opened then, of their own accord, and instantly he knew that everything was all right. There was the bright morning sunlight streaming into his attic bedroom, and there were the nostalgic branches of the backyard maple gently brushing his window.

"Coming!" He threw back the covers and leaped out of bed and dressed, standing in a warm puddle of sunlight. Then he washed and ran downstairs.

"It's about time," Nora said sharply when he came into the kitchen. "You're getting lazier and lazier every day!"

Ronnie stared at her. She must be feeling ill, he thought. She had never spoken to him like that before. Then Jim came in. He hadn't shaved and his eyes were bloodshot.

"For Pete's sake," he said, "isn't breakfast ready yet?"

"In a minute, in a minute," Nora snapped back. "I've been trying to get this lazy brat out of bed for the last half hour."

Bewildered, Ronnie sat down at the table. He ate in silence, wondering what could have happened in the brief span of a single night to change Nora and Jim so. Breakfast was pancakes and sausage, his favorite dish, but the pancakes were soggy and the sausage was half raw.

He excused himself after his second pancake and went into the living room and got his books. The living room was untidy and had a moldy smell. When he left the house, Jim and Nora were arguing loudly in the kitchen.

Ronnie frowned. What had happened? He was sure that things hadn't been this way yesterday. Nora had been kind then, Jim soft-spoken and immaculate, and the house neat.

What had changed everything?

HE SHRUGGED. In a moment, he would be in school and see Miss Smith's smiling face and everything would be all right again. He hurried down the bright street, past the rustic houses and the laughing children on their way to school. Miss Smith, his heart sang. Beautiful Miss Smith.

The sun was in her hair when he walked in the door and the little bun at the back of her neck was like a golden pomegranate. Her cheeks were like roses after a morning shower and her voice was a soft summer wind.

"Good morning, Ronnie," she said.

"Good morning, Miss Smith." He walked on clouds to his seat.

The lessons began—arithmetic, spelling, social studies, reading. Ronnie wasn't called upon to recite till reading class, when Miss Smith told him to read aloud from the little red primary reader.

He stood up proudly. The story was about Achilles and Hector. Ronnie got the first sentence off fine. He didn't begin to stumble till the middle of the second. The words seemed to blur and he couldn't make them out. He held the primer closer to his eyes, but still he couldn't read the words. It was as though the page had turned to water and the words were swimming beneath the surface. He tried with all his might to see them, but his voice stumbled worse than ever.

Then he became aware that Miss Smith had walked down the aisle and was standing over him. She was carrying a ruler and her face was strange, sort of pinched and ugly. She snatched the book from his hands and slammed it on the desk. She seized his right hand and flattened it out in her own. The ruler came down on his palm with stinging force. His hand tingled and the pain shot up his arm and went all through him. Miss Smith raised the ruler, brought it down again—

And again and again and again.

Ronnie began to cry.

THE principal had had a long hard day and he didn't feel much like talking to Mr. and Mrs. Meadows. He wanted to go home and take a relaxing bath and then tune in on a good telempathic program and forget his troubles. But it was part of his job to placate frustrated parents, so be couldn't very well turn them away. If he'd known they were going to come 'coptering out to the educational center, he would have put off notifying them till morning, but it was too late to think of that now.

"Send them in," he said wearily into the intercom.

Mr. and Mrs. Meadows were a small, shy couple—production-line workers, according to Ronnie's dossier. The principal had little use for production-line workers, particularly when they spawned—as they so frequently did—emotionally unstable children. He was tempted to slant the interrogation lights into their faces, but he thought better of it.

"You were notified that your son was all right," he said disapprovingly, when they had seated themselves. "There was no need for you to come out here."

"We—we were worried, sir," Mr. Meadows said.

"Why were you worried? I told you when you first reported your son missing that he'd try to return to his empathic existence and that we'd pick him up here as soon as he showed up. His type always wants to return, but unfortunately we can't classify our charges prior to placing them on the delivery train, since doing so would require dispelling the empathic illusion at an inopportune time. Dispelling the illusion is the parents' job, anyway, once the child is integrated in reality. Consequently, we can't deal with our potential misfits till they've proven themselves to be misfits by running away."

"Ronnie isn't a misfit!" Mrs. Meadows protested, her pale eyes flashing briefly. "He's just a highly sensitive child."

"Your son, Mrs. Meadows," the principal said icily, "has a pronounced Oedipus complex. He bestowed the love he ordinarily would have felt for you upon his fictitious teacher. It is one of those deplorable anomalies which we cannot foresee, but which, I assure you, we are capable of correcting, once it reveals itself. The next time your son is reborn and sent to you, I promise you he won't run away!"

"The corrective treatment, sir," Mr. Meadows said, "is it painful?"

"Of course it isn't painful! Not in the sense of objective reality."

HE WAS trying to keep his mounting anger out of his voice, but it was difficult to do so. His right hand had begun to twitch and that made his anger all the worse, for he knew that the twitching meant another spell. And it was all Mr. and Mrs. Meadows' fault!

These production-line imbeciles! These electrical-appliance accumulators! It was not enough to free them from the burden of bringing up their children! Their piddling questions had to be answered, too!

"Look," he said, getting up and walking around the desk, trying to keep his mind off his hand, "this is a civilized educational system. We employ civilized methods. We are going to cure your son of his complex and make it possible for him to come and live with you as a normal red-blooded American boy. To cure him of his complex, all we need to do is to make him hate his teacher instead of love her. Isn't that simple enough?

"The moment he begins to hate her, the valley will lose its abnormal fascination and he will think of it as normal children think of it—as the halcyon place where he attended elementary school. It will be a pleasant memory in his mind, as it's intended to be, but he won't have any overwhelming urge to return to it."

"But," Mr. Meadows said hesitantly, "won't your interfering with his love for his teacher have some bad effect upon him? I've done a little reading in psychology," he added apologetically, "and I was under the impression that interfering with a child's natural love for its parent—even when that love has

been transferred—can leave, well, to put it figuratively, scar tissue."

The principal knew that his face had gone livid. There was a throbbing in his temple, too, and his hand was no longer merely twitching; it was tingling. There was no doubt about it: He was in for a spell, and a bad one.

"SOMETIMES I wonder," he said. "Sometimes I can't help but wonder what you people expect of an educational system. We relieve you of your offspring from the day of their birth, enabling both parents to work full time so they can afford and enjoy all the luxuries civilized beings are entitled to. We give your offspring the best of care: We employ the most advanced identification techniques to give them not only an induced elementary education but an empathic background as well, a background that combines the best elements of Tom Sawyer, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, and A Child's Garden of Verses .

"We employ the most advanced automatic equipment to develop and maintain unconscious oral feeding and to stimulate the growth of healthy tissue. In short, we employ the finest educational incubators available. Call them mechanized extensions of the womb if you will, as some of our detractors insist upon doing, but no matter what you call them, there is no gainsaying the fact that they provide a practical and efficient method of dealing with the plethora of children in the country today, and of preparing those children for home high school and correspondence college.

"We perform all of these services for you to the best of our ability and yet you, Mr. Meadows, have the arrogance to express doubt of our competence! Why, you people don't realize how lucky you are! How would you like to be living in the middle of the twentieth century, before the invention of the educational incubator? How would you like to have to send your son to some rundown firetrap of a public school and have him suffocate all day long in an overcrowded classroom? How would you like that, Mr. Meadows?"

"But I only said—" Mr. Meadows began.

The principal ignored him. He was shouting now, and both Mr. and Mrs. Meadows had risen to their feet in alarm. "You simply don't appreciate your good fortune! Why, if it weren't for the invention of the educational incubator, you wouldn't be able to send your son to school at all! Imagine a government appropriating enough money to build enough old-style schools and playgrounds and to educate and pay enough teachers to accommodate all the children in the country today! It would cost more than a war! And yet, when a workable substitute is employed, you object, you criticize. You went to the little red schoolhouse yourself, Mr. Meadows. So did I. Tell me, did our methods leave you with any scar tissue?"

Mr. Meadows shook his head. "No, sir. But I didn't fall in love with my teacher."

"Shut up!" The principal gripped the edge of the desk with his right hand, trying to stop the almost unbearable tingling. Then, with a tremendous effort, he brought his voice back to normal. "Your son will probably be on the next delivery train," he said. "And now, if you will please leave—"

HE FLICKED on the intercom. "Show Mr. and Mrs. Meadows out," he said to his secretary. "And bring me a sedative."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. and Mrs. Meadows seemed glad to go. The principal was glad to see them leave. The tingling in his hand had worked all the way up his arm to his shoulder and it was more than a mere tingling now. It was a rhythmic pain reaching forty years back in time to the little red schoolhouse and beautiful, cruel Miss Smith.

The principal sat down behind his desk and closed his right hand tightly and covered it protectively with his left. But it wasn't any good. The ruler kept rising and falling, anyway, making a sharp thwack each time it struck his flattened palm.

When his secretary came in with the sedative, he was trembling like a little child and there were tears in his bleak blue eyes.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG