



Simon's Story

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Simon's Mystery Story

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This is a story I wrote for my eight year old grandson, Simon. He asked me to write him a mystery. The setting is in the nineteenth century and I put in some school history of that period. Simon straightened from his slump and waved his hand frantically in the air, thinking, "I know, I know, call me!" Finally the teacher had asked a question that he thought he knew the answer to. "Alright, Simon, what's the answer?" "Thirty seven, Miss Niven." "Oh, Simon, I'm sorry, but that's not correct. Don't you remember that if one of the numbers is an even number the answer will be an even number too? You should get your slate and write that rule that you learned down." Simon slid forward in his desk's seat, returning to his slump and resumed his normal squirming action. Opening the cover on his desk he retrieved his treasured slate and chalk. He took a moment to admire his prized possession. It was larger than every slate that he knew of except the large one hanging on the school wall that Miss Niven used. Simon's was mounted in an oak frame that his father had lovingly made and carved his name in it for him. He started to write the axiom on his slate when the recess bell rang. He quickly set his slate on the slanted desk top before he tore from the classroom and into the blessed outdoors with the rest of the children. The fifteen minute recesses in the middle of the morning and afternoon sessions let the youngsters release some of their pent up energy that had accumulated during class. It was a beautiful winter day, crisp, but not frigid. The sun glistened off a new snowfall that had fallen during the previous night. The girls would go off from the more rambunctious boys and play Jacks or, for the more lively, a game of hopscotch scratched in the dirt of the wagon area. The boy's favorite games were usually more raucous although there were boys that were addicted to a serious game of marbles. Simon was a more energetic stripling. His favorite recess activity was 'King of the Hill.' It was a simple game where one stood on a hill of about four feet tall where some dirt had been dumped some time ago, now snow covered. You were the king until displaced by another that pushed you from the apex. Naturally, this action led to some altercations that Miss Niven had to disentangle periodically. When Simon stood atop his 'mountain' he felt supreme. Although not the largest of his four or five adversaries he had a natural agility that allowed him to keep a large portion of the allotted time on the crest of the hill. His main rival was Jason, a quite large but clumsy boy that was easily diverted from his charge up the steep slope. When Jason attacked Simon did a pirouette that would put shame to a toreador and lightly pushed Jason off his feet to roll down the hill. This angered Jason. He didn't rush now, but advanced on his hands and knees until he reached Simon whereupon he tackled him around the knees and they both slid down the slope. Fists and feet flew as they pummeled one another until Miss Niven pulled them apart. Jason's nose was bloody and Simon's cheek was puffy with a bruise starting to appear. Miss Niven had the boys apply a handful of snow to their injuries and took Jason into the schoolhouse to administer to him. The children gained an extra five minutes recess until Miss Niven came from her ministrations to Jason and rang the bell to say

that recess was over. Miss Niven hurried the children into the one room school house before the heat from the pot-bellied wood stove in the corner was lost. The school was a small, whitewashed, two room building with a wood shingled roof and a belfry on top. As the children entered they hung their coats on pegs in the wall of the combination closet and storage room that was immediately inside the entrance, with the bell rope hanging overhead. They then went to their desks. There were only a couple of dozen desks in the room, and most of these were occupied now. Later, in Spring, the older boys and some of the girls from the farms would be helping their parents with the preparation of the soil and planting. They wouldn't return to school until late in the fall after harvest because of their chores during the growing season. Soon they were all seated at their desks except for one of the older boys feeding some split wood to the stove to regain the heat that had been lost when the door was open. Their breaths could be seen in the chilly air, but the boys and girls were used to this. Their homes weren't kept very warm except in the morning when they were getting dressed and the evening from supper time until bed. Miss Niven told the children to take out their McGuffey's Readers for reading class. Simon opened his desk and rummaged through his assorted treasures, the shed snake skin, interesting stones, even a mummified toad. He finally found the reader under his tablet of paper and closed the desk. He thought a moment and reopened the desktop. His slate was missing. He waved his hand wildly while calling, "Miss Niven, Miss Niven!" "Simon, you know better than yelling like that. Now sit back and quietly tell me what's wrong." "My slate! It's missing!" "Calm down, Simon. What do you mean it's missing? Did you leave it somewhere?" "No, I had it before recess. You told me to write something down, and when the bell rang I put it away." "Are you sure? Maybe you set it down somewhere. Everyone, has anyone seen Simon's slate?" There was a throng of young heads shaking no. As Simon glanced around the room he noticed that Jason was staring at his desk with his head down. "Simon, I'm sure it will turn up, maybe Mr. Haskins picked it up and put it somewhere. In the morning we'll ask him, but he's left for the day. Now, open your reader and start reading where we left off yesterday." Mr. Haskins, the janitor, was an elderly man that had been crippled in the mines and could no longer do very strenuous work. He was the one that arrived at the school first in the morning where he would rake the banked coals from yesterday's fire and stoke the stove so that it would be warm when Miss Niven and the children arrived. Then he would sweep and pick up the debris from the previous day's children's antics. One of his chores was shoveling the snow from the entrance and wagon yard if needed, then he would go to his next job, the town hall and repeat his chores there. The rest of the school morning went pretty much as normal although Simon wasn't paying much attention to class, but was watching Jason. Jason had been alone in the school when Miss Niven had gone unto the entry to ring the bell for the end of recess and Simon was very suspicious. At lunch time the children gobbled their sandwiches and retreated to the open air for the rest of the lunch period. Simon didn't keep his position on top of the hill as usual as he was worried what his dad would say about losing his slate. He lost his position on top of the hill once when the ground shook when one of the mines that were tunneled under the whole area set off one of their explosions. Normally, everyone was so accustomed to them that they hardly noticed when the ground shook and the windows rattled. Jason was noticeably absent from the game, but approached Simon

as they were going into the school when the bell was rung. "Simon, I know what you were thinking when you gave me the stink eye all morning, but I swear I didn't take your slate. Miss Niven even looked in my desk and where else would I have put it?" "Okay, Jason, but did you see anyone around my desk?" "I couldn't see much of anything. I had my head back and a rag full of snow on my nose. The only person I heard was Mr. Haskins and he was just finishing up scraping the frost off the windows." That night at supper Simon's dad said, "What's the matter, Simon? Usually you're chattering your head off, is something bothering you?" Simon sat with his head down for a moment, then, with tears running down his cheeks confessed, "Oh, Papa, don't be mad, but I lost the slate you made me." "Simon, I'm not angry. Come here and tell me how you lost it, did you leave it somewhere?" He gathered Simon on his lap as Simon related the day. Afterwards he said, "Don't worry, Simon, if it doesn't show up I'll have one of the men bring me a new piece from the mine when they hit some good slate. I'll make you an even better one." Simon was relieved a little but was still upset because he couldn't figure out where his prized slate could have gone. The next morning Simon was at school even before Miss Niven arrived, but waited for her. He didn't want to approach Mr. Haskins by himself. The old gent had a reputation amongst the kids as being a bit of a grouch. When Miss Niven arrived they went to Mr. Haskins and Miss Niven asked, "Mr Haskins, did you see a slate yesterday that was in a frame? It seems one has gone missing during morning recess." "No Ma'am, I was scraping the windows and picking up some trash that the children had left about before recess. I waited for recess so that I didn't disturb class. I left before recess was over, but I'm sure I would have noticed a slate in a frame, that would be mighty unusual." "Well, thank you, Sir. Say thank you to Mr. Haskins, Simon." "Thank you, Mr Haskins. If you do find it, please keep it for me, my papa made it for me." "I certainly will, Simon. Your papa must love you very much." Miss Niven said, "I'm sure it's just misplaced somewhere, Simon and will turn up. You'll need a slate for school today so select one from the slates by my desk." Simon went to the pile of slates. They were kept there for children that didn't have their own or if someone had forgotten theirs at home. Paper was too valuable to be used for everyday work. It was only used for compositions or tests that would be handed in to Miss Niven. Slates and chalk were used for normal arithmetic and spelling. Most of these slates were very grainy, not like the one that Simon had. His had been smooth and could be easily erased. Some of them were not even rectangular, just uneven as they had come from the mine. Simon picked through them and found one that was smooth but had jagged edges on two sides. This would do. He put it in his desk. That afternoon, close to school being over for the day, Miss Niven gave a spelling test. She would pronounce a word and they would write in on their slate. After she had given all the words she would print them on her large, wall hung slate and the children would compare their spelling to hers. When the test was done Simon erased the slate and started to put it away. He saw the back of it for the first time. There, neatly printed were the words, "If the multiplier or the multiplic...." and there it ended at one of the jagged edges. He recognized the printing, it was his. As soon as school was over he approached Miss Niven and showed her what he'd found. "Miss Niven, this is part of my slate, I remember starting to write this when the bell rang for recess, but now it's broken." "Oh, Simon, are you sure? Yes, I recognize your fine printing, I guess you're right. I'm sorry, Simon. At

least we know what happened, just not how it happened. Maybe we never will." "I'll tell Papa tonight. He's the smartest person I know, maybe he will figure it out." After supper Simon did tell his papa. Papa said, "Alright Simon, let's see if we can figure it out. When was the last time you saw your slate?" "I was writing on it when the recess bell rang, so I put it away." "Where did you put it? Did you put it in your desk?" Simon thought very hard, then answered, "No, Papa, I'm sorry, I should have, but I put it on the desk top." "That was careless, Simon. You have to learn to take care of your things." "I know, don't be mad, Papa, I'll try to do better." "I'm not angry, Simon, but I am disappointed, you know better." "I'll try real hard." "Alright, but we still don't know how it was broken. Do you have any ideas, Simon?" "No Papa, but I'll think real hard about it." The next day at school Miss Niven told the class that the broken slate had been found and asked if anyone knew anything about it, but there were no answers. At lunch time Jason took Simon to the side and said, "I didn't see anything because Miss Niven told me to hold my head back after our fight and I could hardly see where I was going when I came into the school with that snowy rag on my nose. I do remember that when I was going to my desk I kicked something on the way. I almost tripped and fell. Could that have been your slate?" "I don't see how, Jason, I left it on my desk, but thanks for trying to help." Just then the ground shook as an explosion was set off in the mine deep below them. Neither boy gave it a thought, it was such a common occurrence. Even the school bell gave a small ding as it swayed in the belfry. That afternoon another blast set the school shaking a bit. The children, as usual, put their arms atop whatever they had on their desktop to keep it from falling off. Simon's face lit up. He went to Miss Niven's desk and asked her if he could take another slate from the stack. "Why do you need another slate, Simon, isn't the one you're using alright?" "Sure, Miss Niven. I just want to try something, I won't hurt it." "Very well, but take one of the rougher ones that no one would try to use anyway." "Thank you, Miss Niven." Simon had to wait two days before another explosion went off one early morning while he was sitting at his desk. He started to cover his desktop, but didn't cover the other slate that he had put where he had set his slate the day it went missing. Sure enough, the trembling of the school dislodged the slate and it fell to the floor. Eureka! Simon now knew what had happened. He waved his hand in the air until Miss Niven said, "Did you want to say something, Simon?" "Yes Ma'am. I think I know what happened to my slate. I set it on my desktop and an explosion shook it off and it broke. When Jason came in he couldn't see it but he kicked it to the back of the room. Mr. Haskins probably saw some broken slate, which he sees a lot, and put the pieces on the stack. The oak frame pieces, being broken, probably ended in the kindling for the stove. I think that's what happened." Mr. Haskins was in the back of the room and said, "I think I did pick up some broken slate and wood that morning. I never associated it to Simon's slate. You never know what the boys and girls will bring into school and leave laying around." The class applauded and Miss Niven said, "Good for you, Simon, you thought it all out. I'm proud of you and I'm sure your papa will be too." When Simon went home that night and told his papa he was rewarded with a huge hug and a brand new slate.