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THE PONTS ASINORUM



By F. E. C. Robbins



"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, judge. It seems to have gone from me completely!"

IN my student days, began Mr. Norris, I once helped to discipline a teacher. It was when I was attending the academy, and the teacher was a Mr. Ray, who had the department of mathematics.

He was just out of college, fine looking and very bright, and we all admired him—most of the time.

An occasion when we did not admire him was one morning in our geometry class. George Darker was at the board, trying to demonstrate the proposition that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. George was not a bright student, and that day he was unusually slow and uncertain. Pretty soon Mr. Ray's patience gave out.

"Now do use a little reason," he said sharply. "Side AB in triangle ABD and side AC in triangle ACD are equal, aren't they?"

"I suppose so," George admitted doubtfully.

"Suppose so!" echoed Mr. Ray, with a look of disgust. "You can see as much as that, can't you?"

"I don't know as I can," said poor George, with the perspiration streaming down his face.

"That will do," said Mr. Ray angrily. "I can hardly be expected to furnish brains. This proposition," he went on, with something like a sneer in his tone, "has sometimes been called the *pons asinorum*, meaning the bridge that a certain order of intellect can't go over. It seems to have justified its title to-day."

Then as George found his way to his seat, Mr. Ray called on Miss Ridley to demonstrate. Laura Ridley was the star scholar of the class, and everyone looked up in surprise when she answered, "Not prepared."

"Do you mean to say that you cannot demonstrate that proposition, Miss Ridley?" asked Mr. Ray sternly.

Laura looked him straight in the eye and in a cold voice answered again, "Not prepared." Mr. Ray's face flushed, but just then the bell rang for the session to close. "We shall begin with this proposition to-morrow, and you will take three in advance," he said.

George Darker left the room at once, looking very sober, but the rest of us remained after Mr. Ray had gone.

"Do you mean to tell me, Miss Ridley, that you couldn't demonstrate that fortieth proposition?" said Ed Bates, imitating Mr. Ray's voice.

"Well, no," said Laura. "I simply was not prepared to recite to Mr. Ray after the way he treated George Darker. It was shameful! George is trying to make something of himself under all kinds of discouragements, and he is entitled to kindness."

"Oh," said little Fannie Dean, "I don't believe Mr. Ray really meant to be unkind. He is nervous and sometimes forgets himself."

"Then he needs to be reminded," said Laura. "*Pons asinorum*, indeed! I'll tell you one thing; I don't propose to cross that bridge myself until he comes forward and squares himself with George, and I think that the rest of you ought to take the same stand."

There was seldom if ever any question

about following Laura's lead, and, though Fannie Dean hung back at first, we all finally agreed to say, "Not prepared," when called upon to demonstrate the fortieth proposition. Just what was to be the next step we did not decide.

We were all a bit nervous when we assembled for our geometry lesson the next day; that is, all except George Darker, who knew nothing about what was going on. And just as the recitation was about to begin Judge Wharton, the chairman of the board of trustees, entered!

The judge was a great man, and we were naturally anxious to appear at our best before him. Mr. Ray was all smiles as he announced that we should take up the fortieth proposition, the figure for which was already on the board. Blandly he called upon Miss Dean to demonstrate.

Poor Fannie flushed and hesitated; then she half rose from her seat and glanced at Laura as if for instructions. I suppose she got them from Laura's eye, for presently we heard a scared little voice say, "Not prepared."

Mr. Ray looked startled, but made no comment. He called on me, and I, too, managed to say, "Not prepared." And so it went throughout the class. Mr. Ray must have known that there was some kind of conspiracy among us; but, though his face became fiery red, he made no sign as he called upon one after another, with the same result.

Judge Wharton, of course, had no way of knowing that it was anything except a genuine case of disability. Finally he interposed. "I remember that proposition of old," he said. "It used to be called the *pons asinorum*." Then he laughed and said that he meant no reflection on his young friends, who he was sure would eventually get over the difficulty. "In fact," he continued, "I'm in the same box, for I have forgotten how the demonstration goes. I guess we'll have to call for a little help, professor," he said, smiling and turning to Mr. Ray. "Would you mind showing us how to do it?"

It was plain that Mr. Ray did mind. His hand and his voice trembled when he began to give the theorem. It was the first time that I had ever seen him show the least sign of embarrassment; but it was nothing compared with what followed. He stood staring at the figure on the board as if fairly dazed, and at last I heard him say, "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, judge. It seems to have gone from me completely!"

I am sure that there was not one of the class who at that moment was not sorry for him; but it was George Darker that came to the rescue.

"Why, Mr. Ray," he called out, quite unmindful of schoolroom etiquette, "you haven't drawn the line AD to bisect the angle BAC."

"Thank you, Darker," said Mr. Ray, stepping toward the board. Then he stopped and turned to him. "Can't you demonstrate it for us?"

George went forward, and in a very few minutes the *pons asinorum* had been safely crossed. I do not know how much midnight oil he had burned, but he certainly knew the fortieth proposition this time.

"A very fine demonstration!" said the judge. "I didn't realize that this young man hadn't been called upon. There is at least one mathematician in the class."

"This isn't exactly an exercise in geometry, judge," said Mr. Ray quickly; "it is a lesson of quite another kind. The fact is that yesterday in an unguarded moment I said some disagreeable and uncalled-for things to one of the class who had trouble with this same proposition, and to-day the other members have taken their own way of showing their displeasure. Circumstances have helped to make the punishment more complete than they expected. On the whole I think they are not to be blamed. At any rate I bow to their correction, and I offer my sincere apologies to the pupil whom I mistreated."

"And now," he continued with his customary smile, "suppose we try to show Judge Wharton that we do know something of geometry, after all."

We all tried our best not only to redeem ourselves with the judge but to show our good will toward our teacher. Peace was happily restored, and I believe that it was never afterwards seriously interrupted.