Night Class

A Short Western Story

By Maryanne Peters

Black Bert was working his way through the book about the boy and his dog and the girl and her cat. He was doing well and mouthing the words rather than speaking them out loud. He was concentrating hard – so hard that he did not notice Sheriff Roy Roberts enter the schoolroom at the back and walk between the rows of double desks towards Miss Charles sitting at her desk at the front of the small classroom, still smelling of the freshly sawn timber it was built from a few months before.

Sheriff Roy saw the man but took little notice. It was not until he came closer and he saw the black hat with its band of silver chain that the lawman bristled and reached for his gun.

He should have had the drop on the outlaw without question. He was standing and just needed to drop his own book and pull the pistol from its holster. Black Bert was sitting, with his own book on his small desk with a finger on the next word. But it was a finger of his left hand, so when he heard the sound of fast action and even before Roy’s book hit the floor, his right hand was on his gun and he was on his feet.

Roy was amazed to see that while he had a bead on the outlaw he was looking down the barrel of his adversary’s six-shooter. He had been here before. A standoff – both men frozen like statues.

“Gentlemen, please!” Miss Caroline Charles, the pretty schoolteacher in the pink dress, was also on her feet, and stepping towards them.

“Stand back, Miss Charles,” said Roy. “I wouldn’t want you getting caught up in any gunfight.”

“Well, that is exactly where I am headed, Sheriff,” she said, her blond ringlets shaking with fury. “I will stand between you two until you put those guns away. Better still, you both put them on my desk and take your seats. The formal lesson is about to start. You are both my students, and it seems crazy to teach you both separately, so here we are … the three of us.”

Black Bert and Roy Roberts continued to stare at one another, guns drawn. Neither spoke. Fingers were on triggers. The distance between then was less than the breadth of a cow hide. Gunsmoke would clear to reveal two dead men. Trigger fingers twitched, but the guns stayed silent.

“I mean it, children,” said Caro, disdainfully. “I am going to reach out at the same time and take both guns by the barrel. I will put them on my desk. There will be no gunfight in my schoolroom. This is a place of learning and that is what we will do here. I will keep the guns until we are finished. You will leave here with learning in your heads, not bullets. What happened after that is your business.”

Her hand already held both hands by the barrel. Bert gently closed the hammer and Roy did the same. She took both weapons across to the table before turning to the men, still staring at one another and ready for a fight, but empty-handed.

“Clearly you two have met one another,” she said.

“This man is a cattle rustler and a train robber,” said the Sheriff. “He is wanted in 3 states and 2 territories. I am duty bound to arrest this man where he stands.”

“You can try if you like, Sheriff,” said Bert. “If necessary, I will tear you apart with my bare hands.”

“There will be no guns and no fighting here,” said Caro. “And there will be no arrests either. I invited you both here to learn, and learn you will. Now, take your seats and we will look at the words I have written up here on the blackboard.”

Bert sat down. Roy did the same. But they were looking at one another.

“So, you can’t read Sheriff?” sneered Bert. “How can you be a Sheriff without knowing how to read? The law you preach is in books you can’t read. What a joke.”

“It’s something called delegation, but I don’t suppose you know what that is,” smirked Roy.

“I know what that is,” said Bert, suddenly realizing that he was in the same position as the Sheriff. Everybody assumed that he was the smart one, and he was. He was just short on book learning. Life had been tough. He was born in this country when there were no schools, or not time, or neither. Maybe Sheriff Roy Roberts was the same – in fact, he knew he was.

“That is why you are both here,” said the school mistress as if reading his mind. You have both been making good progress on your own, and you are at the same level. It just seems sensible that these night classes be done together. That way we can do two a week if you want.”

“Miss Charles, this man is a dangerous criminal,” said Roy.

“I don’t think that you understand, Roy,” she replied. “Bert here has been studying just as long as you have. He has been sneaking in for his lesson just as you have. Neither of you want to be seen reading children’s books, and I don’t want to be seen having men visit me late at night. We will all keep this to ourselves – all of us. We have our own reasons. Are we agreed? Can we get on with the lesson?”

Bert smiled, and turned his glance away from the lawman.

“I would much rather look at you than that angry old cuss, Miss Charles,” said Bert, with a wink at her.

“We won’t be having that either, please Bert,” she scolded. “You are the student and I am the teacher. Now, pay attention to these words. Both of you are well beyond the easy words, and you have done the words with silent letters, and now it is time to learn the words that break the spelling rules.”

But Sheriff Roy Roberts was needled by this exchange. Why should Black Bert Duggan be able to walk into town and talk to a cultivated lady like Miss Caroline Charles in this fashion? Besides, Roy liked to look at her too – he was just too polite to come on to her like that.

The thought occurred to him that this outlaw was harmless with his gun. Bert was fast and he had just proved that, and rumor was that he was handy with his fists and could even fight with a sword, but he was smaller than Roy and nowhere near as strong.

Roy also knew that there was a reward out for Black Bert. He was not eligible to collect as a fulltime enforcement officer, but if he was to tackle Bert now, he could spin the reward towards Caroline. Not only would he remove another man from seeking her attentions, but the money ought to leave her indebted to him in some fashion. It was simply a question of jumping the crook now that he was distracted by her questions.

For the second time that night Roy had underestimated the speed of his opponent, or perhaps over-estimated his own. In any event the brief encounter saw Roy face down on the floor with his arm behind his back, but to the horror of both men, Miss Charles also on the floor and unconscious.

“Don’t you move Roy,” said Bert. “I am going to have to let you go so that I can attend to Caroline.”

Roy struggled for a moment to regain his composure even after he was released, but he had the same concern.

“Do you thinks she has any smelling salts?” he asked. “Do you think her corsets are too tight?”

“I may be worth cutting her laces,” said Bert. “He was gently patting her cheeks to try and bring back some color, but she was not responding. “I thinking she was overcome by shock when you tried to jump me.” But in Bert’s hand was a folding knife which he was handing to the man who had just attacked him.

“I can go up under the skirts rather than pull off her dress,” said Roy. The dress comprised a tight bodice with her breasts pushed high up, attached to a full skirt with what seemed to be a lot of underskirts. Reaching the bottom ties of her corset by going up through the skirts seemed to be logical if somewhat demeaning.

“Just keep her dignity intact,” said Bert, not meaning it to be humorous.

Roy went to work, but even before he was finished Caroline appeared to be coming around. But beneath the skirts Roy suddenly froze.

“You can come out,” said Bert. “She is opening her eyes.”

“I want to get out,” said Roy struggling to withdraw himself from the fabric. “Because I have seen something that no man wants to see!” Suddenly his head emerged, ashen faced. He said – “Our lady friend has a cock!”

Caroline was still not quite conscious so Bert had time to claw at the skirts to confirm what seemed to be unbelievable. It was true. It was small and surrounded by just a small amount of hair, all the rest of her having had every hair pulled out at the root.

“Oh my God … No!” Caroline Charles called out, after looking at her bunched underskirts and the look of shock on the faces of both of her students. “Gentlemen, I can explain.”

“I think that is what we need, Miss Charles,” said Sheriff Roy.

“Would you gentlemen be so kind as to help me to my seat,” she asked. Minutes ago both of them would have leapt to respond, but now they both looked at one another, seemingly reluctant to touch this creature, now so foreign to their understanding. But eventually bother helped their instructor to her feet and then her seat.

“I think that you both need an explanation so I am duty bound to supply it,” said Caroline. “You see I was originally from Charleston, South Carolina, which is why I carry that name - Caroline Charles. It is an invention, perhaps because my family name now gives me cause for some shame.

“You see, my family were rich – dealers in slaves. It matters not what I think about that, save to say that my views are not those of my parents or my neighbors in and around Charleston before the war. I was rich and I was spoiled, but above all I was educated. I was brought up n the style of many young gentlemen of that time and place, I wore my hair long, although not as long as it is now. I lived a life of decadence, which is a word that you men have little need of. Suffice to say, I was interested in pleasure rather than work and my family were in a position to allow that.

“Then the war came. My father and my older brother joined the Confederate Army. It seemed to them that they had no choice. They were fighting for their very survival. Our livelihood depended on the trade in human beings, and those of my family who were involved in that, knew no other work. Without slavery we would be ruined. They were judges of human muscle and the attitude of subservience – experts in assessing the value of slaves.

“So, in joining the Confederate cause they were some of the first. A nation without slaves was unthinkable, even while all of Europe and modern world had outlawed it long before. They went to fight for the right for white people to own black people. I was left to care for my mother, but in time it was expected that I too, would take up arms – not just by my family but by everybody around us. All young men of the South were expected to stand up to defend our way of life.

“I was my mother’s favorite, and when my brother died at the Battle of Manassas she feared for me even more. She had me dress as a young woman. She told all in town that her youngest sone had gone to war but that a cousin from Augusta was coming to stay, a Southern Belle as she called her – that would be me. I found it hard at first, but my mother guided me, and as you both can see from my features, I was never very masculine in appearance. I was motivated. There were stories coming in of the horror of modern war. I made sure that I was the best woman I could be.

“And the truth is, that I grew to enjoy living that life. Even with the news of the war coming in daily we lived a life of pleasure in Charleston in those days. Apart from the fire in December of 1861, the war never came that close to us until the naval attack in April 1863. Although the war would drag on for another two years after that, it seemed that the people around us knew that our lives would change forever. It was the death of my mother. I had to mourn her as my aunt, not as my mother. Everybody had accepted that I was her niece Caroline. But her death changed everything, because my father was dead and her younger son was missing. What was I to do?

“I stayed there to await the return of the person that I ought to have been, but I was now in financial trouble. I took in some men injured in the war – men without arms or legs, or just so injured in the head that they could not fight. At least I made enough from board paid out of army funds to keep on the servants and put food on the table. But as our armies collapsed we could see only ruin, and some of the men started to talk about leaving Charleston and heading west.

“You have to understand how things were. I was brought up to live the way I lived. That future was finished. I was not headed into the unknown – I was standing in the unknown. I said that I would go west with some of the men seeking to make a new life in the great plains of opportunity west of the Mississippi.

“It seemed like I had the opportunity then to step out of the corsets and bustles and return to being a man, but there seemed to be so many reasons why that should not happen. For a start I was Caroline Charles and so many Southern Gentlemen admired me and wanted to protect me and escort me. Secondly, I had no skills other than those I had acquired through pretending to be a woman. What can a man do with women’s skills? And finally, what would people think of a man who had lived for so long as a woman, avoiding fighting in the war as I had done. It seemed better to be a woman than a coward, even though my body was not as perfect as it should be.”

“Not perfect?” said Black Bert. “This is not a wart on your fanny. This is a cock.”

“Well, now that you use the phrase, can I take that,” she said, smiling at him in a way that could only see him confused again. “Could you see your way clear, both of you, to consider it as just that? I have wart on my fanny – a particularly ugly one. You would rather not touch it, but it is only a wart.”

“If you are suggesting that we should adjust our memories, then what should we expect in return?” said Roy.

“Well, gentlemen, I see no reason why I can’t expand you education beyond reading and arithmetic,” said Miss Caroline Charles with a sly smile. “An education in alternatives to coitus might seem to be something that you could both consider, and in an order you would have to resolve between yourselves.”

“That’s a new word – coitus,” said Bert. “What does it mean.”

Let me teach you, Boys,” said Caro. “Now take your seats and pay attention.”

The End

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Erin’s seed: A story where two men are in a struggle for the favors of the pretty schoolmarm or something. She holds special classes for adult literacy. Both Roy Roberts the sheriff and Black Bert the outlaw are both taking it. They is both kinda sweet on the school mistress, but she done got a secret in her skirts - she just left her home to live a life in skirts