



THE BOY WHO
COULDN'T BE SAVED

Author Unknown

*B*uck Torres did it—he set the school on fire. No ifs, ands, or buts. Buck was through in the town; perhaps reform school would straighten him out.

Buck had but one defender: Miss Christie. One against the entire town—tough odds indeed! Tougher even than Miss Christie knew.

They told Miss Christie, "You can't do anything with riffraff like that." Why did she keep trying?

Now the school day was over. Five minutes ago the last football had echoed down the hall, the last harried teacher had turned in reports, but for Miss Christie Emerson, principal of Latimer Grammar School, the hardest job was still ahead. She was face to face with it this very moment, and she hadn't an idea how it was to be handled.

The boy sitting across the room was the school's problem boy. Miss Christie had taught for forty-three years, and this was the one pupil from whom she had failed to get some response. Although she was working on reports and not looking at him, she knew he was not looking at her either. He seldom met anyone's eye. He would be gazing straight ahead, that sneer on his face—almost a smile of satisfaction. Last night he had tried to set the schoolhouse on fire. Arson. A criminal offense. The evidence was nailed.

Miss Christie sighed. She had tried so hard to reach him, but now it was out of her hands. She could do nothing. They would turn him over to juvenile authorities for prosecution, and that meant the state reformatory.

Still without glancing up, Miss Christie spoke. "Buck, bring me the card index on that filing case, please." Her voice was detached, as if she were engrossed in her work. It was a trick she had used before. It eased the tension and it gave Miss Christie a little more time to think.

There was no movement in the room. She could picture the sneering response to her simple request, meaning *I'm not in your custody now. I'm big-time. Don't have to go to sissy school any longer. I'm a real character.* Then a foot scraped on the floor. Two feet. He

shuffled across the room, slouched back, and dumped the box on the desk.

"Thank you. I'll be finished here in a few moments," she said conversationally.

It wasn't that she handled them with gloves—when Miss Christie pitched into a kid he remembered it—but she tried to treat a boy as if he were a responsible human being. She often said, "This is a grown-up world. The children can't understand our laws and attitudes, having had no adult experience, but they've got to abide by them. I'd like them to know why, if possible and to feel that they can depend on grownups for a square deal."

The door opened cautiously, and the old janitor stuck his head in. Then, not scenting too much brimstone, he retrieved the wastebasket and trotted hastily away. Miss Christie's pen scratched on. *I'd give my prize possession to escape this next half hour.*

Last night the town had been aroused by fire sirens, and Superintendent Clint had phoned Miss Christie after midnight. "We've had arson at your school."

"No!" There had been cases of vandalism, but arson—! "A fire? Do any damage?"

"Not much. The night watchman discovered it almost at once."

"But who would set the school on fire?"

Miss Christie hadn't slept a wink.

This morning Superintendent Clint came into her office early.

"Well," he said, "we've got the culprit spotted. The night watchman had a good look at him as he ran. But we want conclusive evidence before we crack down . . ."

"It wasn't one of our boys, was it?"

"Yes, Buck Torres."

"Oh, no, not Buck!"

The superintendent said impatiently, "Who else? He's the troublemaker here, a chip off the old block. You can't do anything with riffraff like that."

Miss Christie said, "Was Kerbs sure?"

"Absolutely. The boy has even boasted about it."

"To whom?"

"Jimmy King. Mr. King came in this morning to tell us."

Miss Christie pressed her lips together. The Kings were well-to-do, prominent people and Jimmy was a little snob and a smart aleck.

"Have you spoken to Buck?"

"They had a dozen boys up for questioning; he was one of them. He clammed up of course."

Miss Christie thought fast. "Let me talk with him, Mr. Clint."

He frowned. "This is a serious matter. The town is panicked. They've stood enough from that Torres gang. People don't want their children in school with such like him, and they're right. Well, this will end it. I'm relieved to have enough on the boy to send him up."

"Give me one day, Mr. Clint," pleaded Miss Christie.

"It won't change matters. Why put it off?"

"I only want to hear Buck's version, not Jimmy King's."

He stood scowling, remembering that she always begged a second chance for the boys. "Well, all right—all right. One day, no longer. And I'll have to explain this to the chief."

All day Miss Christie had racked her brain. She had prayed. There was nothing one could say for Torres. His father had been killed in a police raid on a hide-out. His father's brothers were doing time for burglary. His stepmother, with whom he lived, was a drug addict. What chance had a fourteen-year-old boy,

who had reached the fourth grade by staying in each class two years and then moved up via a social pass?

You couldn't make him study or cooperate. Pass his desk and you saw behind the arithmetic or geography a paperback or a sport sheet. Miss Christie always claimed that if a boy took an interest in one thing of merit, he was redeemable, and the hidden books were all on baseball. Once he had organized the little fellows into two teams. Every player had been named for a big-league star. Sauntering near, Miss Christie could hear him giving instructions:

"You there, Nelson Fox, you're covering second. You've caught the ball. Get your right foot on the base to put that man out; then whirl and throw to first to get that runner. See—this way." And to her surprise, the slouchy figure moved in a lightning-swift exhibition of skill that was pure grace and sureness. "It's as much the windup as the throw—you're Maglie. . . . Run in, Willie Mays; catch it backhanded. . . . Come on, Duke Snider. Put that ball over the fence. . . . You can't be a pitcher because you're left-handed? So is Joe Nuxhall."

Miss Christie was a little excited. Once, when a boy slid home safely, she clapped. Buck turned to discover her standing there, and flashed her a grin, another face shining through the sullen lines of his habitual face. But the parents soon discovered what was going on and had snatched their children away from the "bad influence." Buck had withdrawn into himself, reverting to the old don't-care slouch and the sneering responses. He walked to and from school alone, occasionally tangling with some tormenter. She had tried to talk with him about baseball but had received only muttered replies. He was suspicious of everyone, defiant and distrustful. But that one glimpse of a different look kept haunting her.

"Buck, come here."

He came and stood by the desk, looking straight ahead at the wall.

"Do you know anything about the fire?" Direct as a knife cut.

His eyes flickered. His feet shifted a little, and his shoulders moved. Then, "Naw."

Miss Christie pressed her lips together. "You haven't anything to tell me?"

The feet shifted again. She waited. Her face was stern, but her eyes held compassion. Buck's head came up. For a split second she thought he was going to talk. Then the curtain fell over the pinched features.

"Naw." Defiantly.

Miss Christie sat back in her chair. "Very well, Buck. You may go now."

He was taken by surprise. He had braced himself for a third degree. He must know that she was his one chance. Turning, he slouched across the room to the door. His shoulders sagged, and Miss Christie felt the sting of tears back of her eyes. Buck reached the door and put a hand out to swing it.

Miss Christie spoke more to herself than to him. "I'm sorry," she said, and her voice was weary. "You can't know how sorry. I've believed in you. You did things that troubled me. But there were other things—like helping the little fellows with their baseball team—I liked that. Well . . ." she said, dismissing him.

He stood with his hand on the half-opened door, and Miss Christie went back to her reports.

He turned. She could scarcely believe it. He was coming back! Miss Christie didn't look up until he had been standing by her desk a little while. Then she raised her head and spoke gently. "Just the truth, Buck."

His voice was low and halting. "Jimmy King is always riding me about my old man and bragging about his dad's war medals and bravery. He'd tell me who all his ancestors were and what they did. He said George Washington was his great-great-great-granduncle, and who was mine, and I said Paul Revere. He said, 'Oh, yeah? Let's see you prove it. I bet you won't put a lantern in that tower at midnight.' We were on the bridge they're fixing near the school, and we both looked at the lanterns that would be lighted at night, and I said, 'O.K. You come back at midnight and I'll show you.' So he came. I picked up one of those lanterns and went in through a basement window and ran up to the tower. I'd meant to wave it at him and bring it back, but he's slippery. He'd say he didn't see it. So I looked around for something to set it on, and there wasn't anything up there but stacks of old papers as high as a man's head. I put the lantern up on a stack of papers and ran down right quick, and I said, 'You see it, don't you?' And he said, 'Ha, I got you! Paul Revere didn't put a lantern in a tower; he watched for it. You didn't even know.

That proves you're a liar.' I was going to paste him one when he began jumping up and down and saying, 'Now you've set the schoolhouse afire.' And I looked, and the lantern must have turned over. The papers were blazing up. I started running back, and here come old Kerbs. So I scampered. I never meant to set anything on fire, Miss Christie. I was gonna put the lantern back where I found it. But won't anybody believe that."

"I believe it, Buck," she said. "I don't know just what I can do, but I'm going to work mighty hard. You see, it will be your word against the way you've been acting. Not what your father did. What he did can't really hurt you. Only you can hurt yourself. But I'm staying with you, and you've got to stay with me. Not let me down."

He had no graces of expression, and he could only stand there, head bent, fighting for control.

She said, "You go along home now."

"Yes, ma'am," he said humbly.

With the closing of the door, her sense of relief vanished into a gray fog of hopelessness. Buck might think that because she was principal here her word would carry weight, but Miss Christie knew better. It might even go against him. They called it Miss Christie's weakness. She always took up for the bad boys. Superintendent Clint had said she mothered them; a stern hand was what they needed. He had been emphasizing this recently. Miss Christie knew what he meant. She was getting old. Was he right? Did she handle them too gently? Too sympathetically? She thought not. Make too much of a child's fault and you implant that fault in his character.

Sitting here in the empty silent building, her thoughts went back, in an effort to gain from the past some course of action for the present. The years seemed to file through Miss Christie's heart in a troubled line of boys: of smoldering glances, sullen lips, shuffling feet, going out from here through this very door. To what? She had worked hard over them, but had it helped? Had it given them the chances they needed?

One case came back. She had been young then. Among her third-graders was an incorrigible Teddy Reynolds. When he got completely out of hand one day, she sent him to the principal with a note.

At recess she went down the hall to the principal's office. Opening the door, she stood shocked and horrified. Teddy covered in a corner, a small bundle of quivering flesh. Above him, with a ruler in his hand, stood the principal, his face almost beyond recognition. He had completely lost control of himself.

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"Miss Christie," he said in a voice shaken with rage, "he fought me like a tiger, cursed me. He's a little devil and I tried to kill him."

Oh, heavens, you almost have. The child has had a terrible beating.

"If he ever lifts a finger, bats an eye, send him back," the principal continued angrily. "The next time, I'll finish him." He scarcely knew what he was saying.

She was as sorry for the principal as she was for the boy, because normally he was an even-tempered man. Teddy must have given him a rough time. She left the room, sick at heart. Teddy was back in his place that afternoon, trying to hide his swollen face. When the closing gong sounded, Miss Christie said, "Now I've written something in this little book, and I want you to read it and think about it. Don't sign it unless you feel you can keep it."

She handed him a small black notebook in which she had written: "I, Teddy Reynolds, on my word of honor as a gentleman, do promise Miss Christie that I will try to obey the rules of the school."

After a time, the little book was shoved across the desk. Teddy Reynolds had signed his word of honor.

Afterward, if ever he got obstreperous, she had only to show him the little black book and catch his eye and smile. He stuck to his agreement, finished school, worked his way through college, and graduated with honors. And he had built a career in this town on his word of honor. It wasn't that Miss Christie had given it to him. She had only pointed out to him what he already had. You can bring out the devil in a child or his word of honor. But what chance had this one misguided boy when the whole world was against him?

Again the door opened, and the old janitor, troubled, said, "Miss Christie, you goin' to sit here all night?"

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She looked up, surprised that the room was growing shadowy.
 "No, John, I'm going now."

The eight-block walk home seemed extra long tonight. Every footfall was heavy. Fire-flies filled the soft April dusk, and somebody was broiling a steak. Miss Christie wished she had a steak, but she was too tired to fix more than a pot of tea and a sandwich. When she had finished her second cup, she went to the phone and called Jerry Fisher, young editor of the *Latimer Clarion*. Jerry had a crusading spot somewhere in his make-up, but he was down-to-earth, too.

"Jerry, can you drive out here tonight?"

"Funny thing is, I was practically on my way there. I want to talk to you."

Half an hour later, she heard his car on the driveway. "Well," said Jerry from the stoop, "there you sit brooding."

He had been a handsome boy when she taught him, and he still was.

"Jerry, I've got trouble."

He shot his finger at her. "It's no good, Miss Christie. We're better off without any embryo hoodlum. This town has really suffered from the Torres family, and personally I dread having another one grow up here. Already turning into a firebug. We're not safe."

"I've heard that a good many times in the past forty-three years about one boy or another. The town's still here."

"What I'm concerned with is you." He picked up a chair, turned it backward, straddled it, and eyed her solemnly. She wasn't a woman to quibble with. "They're gunning for you."

"Don't I know—"

"Well, then drop it. Let the authorities take over."
 Miss Christie sat and considered. She was sixty-four. Almost at

retirement age, unless she chose to go on. During the next few years, there would be other boys who would need her, if she stayed. Why throw away the needs of many for the need of one? But this boy. . . . She looked at Jerry and shook her head. "Are you siding with them, Jerry?"

"I'm just thinking of you. You'd feel pretty bad if they fired you."

"I'd feel worse if they sent Buck to Gatesville. Look, Jerry, are there records in your office or in the police files about the Torreses? I don't mean their criminal life, but family history."

"I can find out tomorrow."

"Do it tonight. I only have until tomorrow. One thing more; I want you to take me down where Buck lives."

"That's no part of town for a lady."

"I've got you with me."

He stood up, and paced the floor. "Have they phoned you tonight, the school board?"

"No."

"They're having a called meeting tomorrow morning. They say you're too easy on incorrigibles. They've got their eye on a man."

"Oh, no." Latimer Grammar was her school. She'd helped build the big new brick building in place of the old wooden one. Campaigned to get it sodded, an ice-water fountain, gymnasium, and playground apparatus. Fought every year for something new and needed.

Jerry was waiting, hands in pockets, troubled eyes on her. He'd hated to be the one to bring her this piece of news.

She looked up. "I can't drop it, Jerry."

"All right. Come on."

Step out under the stars. Sounds of distant music, lighted

windows, couples strolling, the happy shouts of children. Ordered, safe, and beautiful. God's world. A mile or so farther: a narrow dark alley, a stench from uncollected garbage, wooden shacks flush with the walk. Where are the stars now? This, too, is God's world.

"Do you know the house, Jerry?"

"Yes." And soon: "This is it."

They stopped. The place was totally dark.

"What'd you want?" a voice said almost at their elbow—a woman's voice, thick-tongued, drugged.

"Looking for Buck," said Jerry.

"He ain't here. Never here nights. Stays in that pool hall." The voice grew whiney. "Now don't you take Buck away. He's all I got to do for me."

They turned and walked back to the car.

Miss Christie said, "Go into every pool hall till you find him. See what he's up to."

"And leave you in the car alone?"

"I'll be all right."

Jerry was back in ten minutes. "Found him. He's glued to the radio, listening to the Giants—Dodgers game."

Miss Christie had what she wanted.

"Now you phone me later tonight, Jerry; no matter when," she admonished at parting.

"I'll do it."



For years, life may go along with scarcely a ripple of change in the ordered routine of duties, work and pleasure. Then there comes a corner. Miss Christie had reached that corner today. She

tried to pretend to herself that it was no more than many other crises in her forty-three years of teaching, but she knew better. She was old now. New methods had been established in other schools, and mostly she had stuck to the old ways. The world moves on. She drank her coffee, ate a little breakfast, and put on her best navy silk suit and a soft white blouse. She fluffed her hair about her temples. People are more likely to agree with you if you are not unpleasing to look at. Good of Jerry to tip her off about this called meeting.

The school secretary was already in the office when Miss Christie arrived. "Oh, hello, Miss Christie. You look spruce.

They're having a meeting at 9:30 in the superintendent's office. They want you."

"Thanks, Jenny."

At 9:30 Miss Christie rose and walked down the hall to the superintendent's office, her heart pounding a little. She paused, her hand on the doorknob, feeling abruptly alone. Then she got the smile back on her face and went in.

The door opening started a discussion that hushed away into almost embarrassed silence at her entrance. Seven men sat about the big table—six board members and Superintendent Clint. The chairman of the board was the town's banker. He sat at the head of the table, a serious middle-aged man with a poker face. To either side of him were superintendent Clint and the owner of the big textile mills, Richard Martin. Then Sid Seymore, a merchant; Olen Merriweather, president of the City Council; Jake Bevins, a lawyer; and the board's newest member, young Dr. Henderson.

Miss Christie mentally reviewed them. The banker would be difficult; he stood for the right as he saw it. Rich Martin headed the Rotary Club—a go-getter, genial and friendly. Sid Seymore

would be with the banker. Olen Merriweather was a hard nut to crack, and Jake Bevins could be stubborn as an old field mule. Dr. Henderson, young and malleable, was her one hope. You have to be pretty old or else pretty young to understand life.

There was a chorus of good mornings, and Miss Christie sat down. The seven looked at her with a sort of helpless chagrin, the way men look at a woman when they know she's going to disagree with them.

The superintendent said, "This is an emergency meeting, Miss Christie, because this problem can't wait. If the boy is guilty—and I think we're all pretty well satisfied on that score—we want to turn him over to the juvenile authorities this morning. The town is seething with uneasiness, and they don't want him loose tonight. I suppose you didn't get anything out of him?"

"Yes," said Miss Christie, "I did. He told me the whole thing."

"Admitted it?" asked the banker, leaning forward.

"Well, yes."

Everyone sat back. Superintendent Clint sighed with relief, "A confession simplifies everything."

Miss Christie said, "That depends on what you call a confession, Mr. Clint. He told me what happened. Did it ever occur to you that Mr. King, who came to you with the tale, might be covering up for his own son?"

A smile went around the table. The Kings against this Torrebart? Superintendent Clint said, "The night watchman saw him."

"Yes, Buck put the lantern in the tower, but he didn't mean to set the school on fire." Leaning forward she told them Buck's story. Then she said, "If one boy is culpable, why aren't both of them?"

The lawyer, Bevins, raised a skeptical eyebrow; Richard Martin smiled amusedly; the banker looked at her from behind

his business face; Dr. Henderson sat back in his chair, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Not one of them believed Buck's story.

Then Superintendent Clint said, "Of course he'd make up something like that—trying to shift the blame. He isn't noted for veracity, is he? The boys know you're too soft-hearted and you'll always take their part. It's got to where they can pull off anything in your school, Miss Christie, and hide behind your skirts."

Sid Seymore spoke up. "We've talked with him—talked at him, and there's nothing there. The boy comes from low stock, steeped in crime from the cradle. Actually, all of us here are to blame for what occurred and what it might have grown into, because we've already overlooked so much other vandalism. We couldn't pin it on him before, but now we have something he can't squirm out of. I really don't see how you can say one word in his defense, Miss Christie. He set this building on fire! His fist came down."

Miss Christie had the disadvantage of always seeing both sides. She saw her side now and she knew they were thinking, *We're always making concessions to Miss Christie and it simply can't go on.*

"Ever look in his face?" asked Olen Merriweather. "At that sneer?"

"He's defending himself the only way he knows how. What any boy needs is someone on his side. Do a wrong to a boy and he grows bitter and resentful; you make a criminal out of him. He's confessed his part, and we ought to give him a second chance."

"A chance to burn up another school?" Superintendent Clint exploded. "I want to go to sleep tonight knowing that the town is safe. Safe from that Torres gang."

"Yes, I agree we ought to do something about it," said Miss Christie with spirit. "We ought to have a playground in this town with equipment, baseball teams, a swimming pool, tennis

courts. How much does it cost to keep a boy in the reformatory a year? Fifteen hundred dollars. How much better if that money could be spent to keep the boys busy and occupied. Develop their natural faculties. This boy is not a bad boy. I've had considerable experience and I know good material when I see it. Buck Torres is good material. He could be valuable. I've watched him for two years and I like what I've seen. He fights because the boys tease him. He takes care of that old woman out there, and he spends his evenings in the pool hall where he can listen to the baseball games. You say he's a Torres. Well, Jerry Fisher looked up the Torres family last night. Torres was not Buck's father."

She saw Dr. Henderson nod slightly, but her words glanced off the rest of them without even a dent. They had come there with their minds made up, agreed among themselves that they had let Miss Christie bulldoze them too long.

The bank president spoke. "Miss Christie, we appreciate your kind heart and your unflinching interest in the boys. But none of us are right all the time. And you aren't. It's taking chances not to lock this boy up—put him in a place where he'll learn respect for the property and rights of others. When he comes out—and if he goes straight—he can live a normal useful life and get a good job."

"In your bank?" asked Miss Christie. "Will you give him a job in your bank?"

The banker smiled. "Not by a long shot!" But he sobered quickly. "We've got a hard year ahead. The railroad is moving in twenty-five new families. Mixed nationalities. Some look pretty tough. Their kids will go to Latimer School. They'll be too much for you. Too much for any woman." He spoke kindly, but it had to be said: "You've carried the burden long enough. You've done wonderfully. All of us appreciate that. But now we need a man."

The room was very still. A rather uncomfortable stillness.

touched with relief. This was out in the open. Miss Christie was fired.

For just a moment she seemed to grow smaller, sitting there in the navy silk worn to impress them. After all her years of effort and labor, she wished the end might have been otherwise. Not eulogies, but honest regret and appreciation. "I'm sorry you're going. Good luck, Miss Christie." She had brought it on herself, of course. Miss Christie stood up. She had entered the room as employed by the city fathers. But now everything was changed. She was no longer beholden to anybody. She was free. And her freedom gave her a long perspective, a sense of distance. She looked down the table at them, and abruptly they were not the town's leading citizens but boys in school at various ages and in different years. She lifted her shoulders and held her head high. That old glint of steel came into her eyes. It made Miss Christie look taller.

"You don't need me at this meeting any longer, but before I go I want to ask you a question. Did any of you ever do anything when you were boys that might have turned into tragedy if someone hadn't taken your part? Think back. Every one of you." She pointed a finger at Richard Martin. "Rich," said Miss Christie sternly, in her well-remembered school teacher voice, "what about those broken windowpanes? Was that a high-spirited prank or vandalism?" The finger moved to Lawyer Bevins. "Jake, who was it who climbed the flagpole and took down the town's expensive new silk flag and hid it?"

His face turned red, but no one saw. Miss Christie had moved on to Merrivether. "Olen, a stolen car is something to laugh about now, but it might have been called plain theft. . . . Sid, who was it picked up a stone and threw it, and hit the principal on the arm? Just a small boy dare, and the principal knew it was, and

tossed the little pebble back. But it could have been called assault." She looked at the bank president. "Reynolds, was there a time when you needed—not a strong arm, you had that—but somebody to understand, to believe in you—to call out the best in you?"

He sat transfixed.

"Just remember," said Miss Christie, "that what you do here in the next hour will save a boy—or make a criminal."

She turned and started toward the door. But before she reached it, there was a hurried step, then a hand was on her arm. "Wait, Miss Christie." It was the bank president. "You're right. We forget. There's something that is ageless. You've got it, and we need it here in this school. We need you," he said gruffly.

"That recreation center—I'll make it a personal gift to the town." Chairs scraped and through a blur she saw them surge toward her, but the young doctor got there first.



Miss Christie was at her desk working on reports. The building was quiet. The last boy had gone. The last but one. He sat on a chair against the wall, awaiting the verdict.

Miss Christie looked up. "Buck, come here." She was smiling. He shuffled over, stood dejectedly; his pale face a degree whiter, the dingy cap twirling between unsteady hands.

"It's all right, Buck. They're going to take your word—to trust you. Jimmy King was sorry he got you into all this trouble. He came in with his father and they talked to the school board about it. I think he'll be your friend now, Buck."

Too astonished to comprehend, he widened his eyes as they

came up to meet hers. And back of the astonishment she saw a wonderful thing bloom on a scared boy's face—hope.

Miss Christie fought a battle with a stubborn lump in her throat and won. "I have something else to tell you. I've been investigating, and we found that Jacques Torres was not your father. He took you when you were a baby. Well, that relieves you from any responsibility to his wife, Buck," she said briskly, "do you think you could build a shed—a room on the back of my house? I want to get a power mower and other garden tools so you can keep the yard pretty. We can enclose the screen porch for a room for you."

His face underwent a series of changes as each surprising sentence opened a new facet of life.

"You mean—?" he swallowed. "You mean I'm to live at your place?"

"At *our* place. You're to be my boy," said Miss Christie proudly. "I've had it in mind a long time, Buck. I need somebody. I'm not so young as I was."

She could see the muscles along his jaw jerk. His eyes were swimming, but they met hers squarely. And something passed between them so bright, so dazzling, that for a moment it seemed to light the room, and the town, and the whole world.

Then Buck spoke. His voice was gruff, but this time it had a ring: "Yes, ma'am!"