

by Andrew  
Clements

## Trial and Error

Mark didn't forget what he'd decided in the barn on Friday night. He wasn't going to be the new kid at school anymore. He was going to be the new and improved kid.

On Monday morning he had Leon drop him at school a little early, about ten minutes before the first bell. It was a cold morning, so all the kids had to wait in the gym. Mark stood in the doorway a moment. He spotted a group of five fifth-grade boys. Putting on a friendly face, he walked over and edged his way into the circle. The conversation stopped, and everyone turned to look at him. Mark smiled and said, "Hi, guys."

Most of the kids nodded at him, and one of them mumbled, "Um, hi."

No one said anything, so Mark said, "Lots of snow this weekend."

A couple of the boys looked at each other and then at Mark. One kid smirked and said, "You figure that out yourself, or did the butler tell you?"

The others laughed or smiled, and Mark felt his face start to color. He knew this was a test, and he knew he had it coming. So he looked the wise guy right in the face and said, "Actually, I figured it out because the gardeners were up all night using the snow blowers to clear off the tennis courts. I always play a couple sets of tennis in the morning before school."

A tall, thin boy with curly brown hair opened his eyes wide and said, "Really?"

And that made the rest of the guys start laughing.

So right away Mark said to the tall kid, "Nah, I'm just kidding. We don't have any gardeners, and we don't have a tennis court. Or a butler. I was out snowshoeing on Sunday, and I'm guessing we got eight or nine inches of new snow. More in some places. When does the stuff start to melt around here, anyway?"

And that was all it took. For the next five minutes Mark listened to all kinds of theories about how long it takes the snow to melt off, about how there could be some big snows in March, but the snowfalls never stayed long, about how snowshoeing was a drag and how snowmobiling was a blast. He felt like one of the guys. He picked up a couple of names, too. The kid who made the crack about the butler was Jason, the

tall guy was Adam, and the boy who had his own Arctic Cat was Ed.

When the homeroom bell rang and they all started to scatter, Jason nodded at him and said, "See ya 'round," and Mark felt like he meant it. He felt like he would actually be able to make friends with some of these kids.

Getting to a better relationship with his teachers was another matter.

During second period when Mrs. Stearns passed out three reading comprehension exercises, instead of staring out the window like he'd done for the first two weeks, Mark sat up at his desk, got out his pen and paper, and did all the work in less than ten minutes. Then he took out his Jack London book and began to read a new story.

Mrs. Stearns saw him reading instead of working on the assignment. She walked slowly to the back of the room and then came up from behind and snatched the book away. "Why aren't you doing your work?"

Mark was startled. "I . . . I finished everything." All the kids turned to stare at him. Most of them were barely done with the first exercise.

Mrs. Stearns held out her hand. "Let me look."

Mark handed her the sheets and Mrs. Stearns flipped through them. "Hmmm," she said. "Seems you're done. But that means you should do some more. This is not a free-reading period."

Mark stiffened and said, "But I'm done. Why do I have to do more?"

Mrs. Stearns was not used to arguing with fifth-graders. "Because this is a reading *comprehension* period, not a free-reading period. You might be a good reader, but you can always improve your comprehension."

Mrs. Stearns went to a filing cabinet and pulled out four more exercises. She put the Jack London book on the corner of her desk, and then walked to Mark and handed him the sheets.

Mark took them from her, but as she walked back to her desk, he put his pen away. For the rest of the class period he stared out the window.

And that didn't seem to bother Mrs. Stearns at all. Mark didn't understand how she could get mad about him reading a book, and then not care if he just sat and looked out the window.

At the end of the period Mark went up to the teacher's desk and got his book back.

Social studies began with a class discussion about the Civil War. Mark hadn't done the reading, but the questions Mrs. Farr asked weren't very hard.

When she asked, "Where did the first battle of the Civil War take place?" a lot of kids raised their hands, and so did Mark. Seeing his hand up surprised Mrs. Farr, so she said, "Mark? Where was it?"

And he said, "Manassas, Virginia."

Mrs. Farr frowned. "No, it was somewhere else."

And right away Mark said, "Well, if you mean Fort Sumter, my history teacher said most of the books are wrong. Because Fort Sumter was where the war started, but it wasn't where the first battle happened. That's because Fort Sumter wasn't really a battle. It was mostly a bombardment of a fort out in the harbor. The first real battle was at Bull Run. Near Manassas."

Mrs. Farr looked uncomfortable. "Well . . . then I guess I should have asked, 'Where did the Civil War begin?' Because I want you all to remember that it happened at Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. You'll need to know that for the social studies part of our statewide test."

Mrs. Farr continued to lead the discussion. Mark had his hand up for almost every question, but she didn't call on him again. After fifteen minutes or so, he stopped raising his hand.

English and math weren't much better. Mark really tried to be part of the class and pay attention. But on Friday night in the barn when he'd decided to work harder, he had forgotten that almost every class was pretty boring. He couldn't seem to help that. At his old school in Scarsdale the classes had been much smaller, so the pace had been faster. And what Mr. Maxwell had guessed was true: Mark probably should have been put into the gifted program when he moved to Hardy Elementary School.

When he got to science class, Mark made one more attempt. He sat up and paid attention. He raised his hand when he knew an answer. Mr. Maxwell seemed to look right past him, and sometimes, right through him. The class was plowing through a review of the scientific method, scientific measurements, and how to make field observations. For Mark it was pretty basic material. There just wasn't much he could get excited about. So after about twenty minutes he stopped trying to participate, stopped paying attention.

When the class ended, Mark waited until the room cleared out a little and then headed up to the front. He had something for Mr. Maxwell, and he was hoping it would put a smile on the man's face.

Mr. Maxwell was putting a scientific scale into the storage cabinet, and when he turned around and saw Mark, he said, "Yes?"

Mark held out an envelope. "Mr. Maxwell, I have the permission sheets."

Mr. Maxwell looked at him coldly and raised one eyebrow. "The permission sheets?"

Mark said, "For A Week in the Woods. They're all signed and everything."

Mr. Maxwell took the envelope and dropped it onto his desk. He paused a moment and then said, "So you're going? I thought you didn't want to." And he looked hard into Mark's eyes.

Mark shook his head. "No . . . I mean, yes, I do want to."

Mr. Maxwell didn't smile. "Fine," he said. "Glad to hear it." But that's not what his eyes said.

Mark said, "So . . . I'll see you tomorrow."

Mr. Maxwell said, "Yup." Then he picked up a rack of scale weights and turned to put them away.

When Mark had left the room, Mr. Maxwell sat down at his desk and picked up the envelope Mark had brought. He turned it over in his hands. It was a beautiful envelope with an embossed return address. The paper was thick and creamy, like a starched cotton shirt. Mr. Maxwell thought, *Good grief! Even their envelopes look rich! Some extra bleach and chemicals dumped into the rivers, and bingo—beautiful envelopes!*

Deep down Mr. Maxwell knew that Mark Chelmsley had just tried to apologize. Mr. Maxwell almost wished he could run out into the hall and catch up to the boy. He'd give him a big handshake and a friendly smile and say, "Welcome aboard, Mark!"

But Mr. Maxwell couldn't do that. He had already held a trial for this boy. Mr. Maxwell had looked at all the evidence, he had argued all sides of the case. Mr. Maxwell had reviewed the boy's general lack of interest, the *Hindenburg* incident, and especially Mark's response when he had been presented with a personal invitation to A Week in the Woods. The trial had lasted

most of the weekend. Mr. Maxwell had been the lawyer, the judge, and finally, the jury.

And the verdict? Guilty. Beyond all reasonable doubt. This boy was spoiled *and* disrespectful *and* ungrateful—in the first degree!

And the sentence? “You, Mark Robert Chelmsley, shall be made to feel the cold displeasure of Mr. William Maxwell for as long as you shall attend Hardy Elementary School.”

So it was too soon to be granting a pardon. No way.

Now, maybe if the kid actually came right out and said, “Listen, I’m sorry I’ve been acting so bratty and spoiled, and I’m sorry I’ve been acting like a slacker, and I’m *very* sorry I’ve been such a smart-mouthed moron who acted like it would be a big drag to enjoy a terrific week at the state park campground,”—then maybe the judge could agree to reopen the case.

But Mr. Maxwell knew nothing like that was going to happen anytime soon.

Mr. Maxwell tore one end off the envelope, pulled out the permission slip, glanced at it, and then tucked it away in the proper folder with all the others. Then he picked up the envelope, tore it up into tiny pieces and dropped them into his recycling bin.

There’d be no pardon for Mark Robert Chelmsley. Not even a shot at probation—at least not for a while.

Case closed.