ED ON HIS TEACHER

“Raivaaja” January 14, 1988

One evening as I was looking for something to read, my hand pulled out Alexis Kivi’s “Seven Brothers” in a fine red binding. My curiosity was aroused. Who could have given me such a special book?

I opened the cover to find an answer to my question and there it was. There was a card with a message saying “reading for Edward and Saima” and it was signed by Fanny Rautiainen.

Now I knew who had sent the book to me, it was my teacher. I began a correspondence with her when she was about 80 and I was 6 years younger.

My sister had found her address and I surprised my teacher by writing to her and introducing myself. That was the beginning of a long exchange of letters.

Now let’s take a long step backwards to get into this story.

When the “circulating school” was held at our farm, I was about 14. I was not really of the proper age but my mother said “since the school is being held here and your chores are easier in the autumn, you go to school too. You’ll learn something of value for your nose is always in a book!”

Fanny had just been accepted as a teacher for this school. I think she was about 20 years old, a difference of 6 years between teacher and pupil. Mother asked her to give me more difficult studies so that I would not be bored and cause unrest in the schoolroom.

During the day we studied diligently and I must admit that pounding the multiplication tables and other subjects in my brain left me little time for mischief.

When evening came our interests turned to other things. The school desks were moved to one side of the room, the curtains were drawn tightly over the windows, the door was latched to prevent intrusion. My brother, Lauri, who played the fiddle, provided the music while the teacher and I danced.

She taught me famous dances like “spin, spin, o maiden, tomorrow you’ll welcome a suitor” and “It’s in Raatikko, Raatikko, where live all the old maids” and other dances of the gentry. On my part, I taught her more familiar dances. When our supply was exhausted, mother sat on the bedside and sang the dance tunes of her youth.

This sort of evening entertainment could not have taken place at any other farm in the village, for they were all hypocrites. The teacher was afraid that others would find out about our dances and report her to the school board. She was afraid of dismissal.

My mother comforted the teacher. “My curtains are made of closely woven linen and no outsider could possibly see through them. The teacher screwed up her courage and dancing was resumed.

The wheel of time kept circulating and the years moved into the past. I became a man and she became a woman. She continued to teach and I enrolled in another school, “the world’s circulating school”. Years went by and we did not meet.

One day I was working as a milk driver for Nestori Mäenpää, delivering milk and other products from the farms to the dairy in Stormi. The teacher ran out of the local school and after we had greeted each other, asked me to bring this and that from the shop, gave me the money involved. Such a service was a part of the milk driver’s job and I must say, some old salt from the past raised a thirst in me.

When I returned with the items, Fanny had coffee and buns ready for us. As we enjoyed them, we remembered the dancing at our farm and how the teacher had been afraid of spies. We laughed at the memories and I dared to tell her that I had experienced a schoolboy’s love for his teacher.

The years passed on again. My brother, Jussi Helander, send me a ticket to come to America and I went gladly. It was 1914. I heard that the teacher had gone on to continue her education. She became a teacher in the elementary school system.

So we lived our separate lives and time marched on. Then came the war years and we all know what that was like in Finland. When we began to send trunks of relief materials to our relatives, we also sent Fanny a sizeable package. That served to increase our correspondence. We sent a second package.

Toward the end of our letter writing, I noticed that Fanny’s hand had lost some of its control. It was difficult to read her text. I did not receive an answer to my last letter. Her hand had gone limp, she had laid down her pencil for the last time.

I have sometimes thought that perhaps it is time for the pupil to do the same thing.

Ed Helander