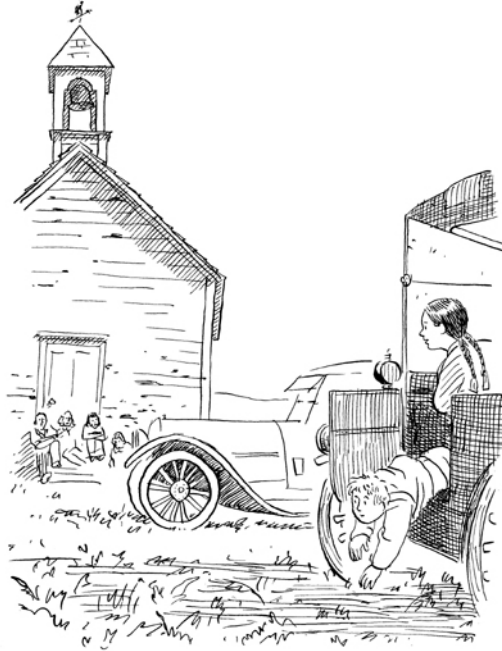


*a breakfast serials story*

# The Secret School

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## Chapter 1 Getting to School

On a cool spring morning in April, 1925, Ida Bidson, fourteen, and Felix, her seven-year-old brother, drove to school. Ida, brown hair braided and tied with faded blue ribbons, knelt on the torn seat of her family's battered Model T Ford and gripped the steering wheel as she guided the car carefully along the narrow dirt road. Since she was only four foot eleven, and unable to reach the pedals, it was Felix, on the floor of the car, who worked them.

"Brake!" Ida shouted as they swerved around a sharp bend.

Felix used his right hand to push the brake pedal down.

As Ida adjusted the throttle lever by the steering wheel, the car lurched, causing an old tin syrup can filled with lunch to bounce on the ragged seat cover. Behind them, dust twirled like a frayed rope, momentarily hiding the ring of snow-capped mountains that surrounded Elk Valley, Colorado.

"Where we at?" Felix called up. Being hunched under the dashboard was very uncomfortable.

"It's `Where are we?'" his older sister corrected. "And the answer is, close."

As the car wheezed up hill, Ida's eyes were fixed on the twisting ribbon of dirt road. They were approaching a steep curve, the last tricky place. Other kids might be on the road.

Sure enough, as they crested the hill, Ida caught sight of Tom Kohl and his younger sister, Mary, riding bareback on their mule, Ruckus. Tom, tall and skinny with flaxen hair, was Ida's best friend. Mary was in Felix's grade.

Ida squeezed the horn bulb affixed to the side of the car. The horn sounded a goose like Honnnk! Honnnk!

At the sound Ruckus gave a little buck. Skillfully, Tom reined the mule to the side of the road, then swiveled around. Seeing Ida's car, he yelled, "slow down."

"Who's there?" Felix asked from the floor.

"Tom and Mary. Now pay attention. We're almost there."

Felix worked the pedals furiously.

Motor backfiring, the car careened around the last bend, bringing Elk Valley's one-room schoolhouse into view. The school was a squat, square building with a pitched roof and a small steeple at the south end. The painted but peeling white clapboard walls had three

windows on each side. Before the school stood a flagpole not far from the water pump and a rusty, lopsided teeter-totter. Beyond the school stood two privies, one for boys and one for girls. Behind them was a small, shallow pond.

"Clutch to neutral and brake!" Ida shouted to Felix as she aimed the car toward its regular parking place. But another car—one she didn't recognize—was already there.

Felix pressed the brake even as Ida grabbed the hand lever and pulled back. "We're here," she announced. The Ford lurched to a halt next to the other car. The motor backfired, sputtered, and died.

Quickly, Ida untied the rope that held the door shut. It swung open. Felix crawled headfirst to the ground.

"I get awful cramped," he complained as he stretched.

"Better than walking five miles," Ida reminded him as she got out and looked toward the school.

Seated on the front porch of the school were four children of various ages and sizes: Herbert Bixler, Charley and Susie Spool, and Natasha Ashneski. As Ida and Felix approached, they all looked up.

"I'm back!" Herbert shouted gleefully.

"And he's already tried to tie my shoelaces together," Susie complained.

Herbert, with his coal black hair and a sly smile was the school's mischief-maker. Often absent, he claimed his father needed him on their farm.

"Whose car is that?" Ida wanted to know.

"Mr. Jordan's," Natasha replied. She was a year younger than Ida.

Mr. Jordan was the owner-operator of Wally's Mighty Fine Emporium, Elk Valley's feed and grocery store. He was also head of the school board.

"How come he's here?" Ida said.

Herbert shrugged. "I dunno."

"Is Miss Fletcher here?" Felix asked.

"Inside," Charley Spool assured them.

Tom, who had just arrived, slid off Ruckus, then helped his sister down. He tied the mule's reins to the rear bumper of the Bidsons' car.

"What's Mr. Jordan's car doing here?" Tom called. "He come for inspection?"

"No one knows," Ida replied.

As she spoke, the schoolhouse door opened and Miss Fletcher appeared. A slight, middle-aged woman with dark hair piled atop her head, she was dressed in a simple blue cotton dress. She had been the teacher for three years.

Ida immediately noticed that Miss Fletcher was not smiling as she usually did when greeting her students each morning.

"Children," the teacher said, "come in quickly, please. There's grave news to share."

Looking anxiously at one another, the silent children filed into the one-room school.

### Next Week: The Grave News

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