*TEXT FOUR* THE FUN THEY HAD

By LAsimov

A professor of biochemistry and a science writer, LAsimov is well-known as science fiction writer as well. In 1957 he won the Edison Foundation award for *Building Blocks of the Universe,* and in 1960 the Howard W.Blakeslee award for *The Living River* in which he analysed the chemical composition of the blood and related it to other manifestations in our universe. Hfeis also the author of *The Intel­ligent Man's Guide to Sciences,* an encyclopedic work covering in brief essay all of science for the layman. Besides all this, *Lucky Stars* and *The Pirates of the Aster­oids* (1953), *The Kingdom of the Sun* (I960), *The End of Eternity* (1962) are only a few'science fiction books that came from under his pen.

Margie even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2157, she wrote, "Today Tommy found a real book!"

It was a very old book. Margie's grandfather once said that when he was a little boy *his* grandfather ' told him that there was a time when all stories were printed on paper.

They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to — on a screen, you know. And then, when they turned back to the page before, it has been the same words on it that it had been when they read it the first time.

"Gee,"2 said Tommy, "what a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. 3 Our television screen must have had a million books on and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away.

"Same with mine," said Margie. She was eleven and hadn't seen as many telebooks 4 as Tommy had. He was thirteen. She said, "Where did you find it?"

"In my house." He pointed-without looking, because he was busy reading. "In the attic." "What's it about?" "School."

Margie was scornful. "School? What's there to write about school? I hate school."

Margie always hated school, but now she hated it more than ever. The mechanical teacher had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse until her mother had shaken her head sorrowfully and sent for the County Inspector.

He was a round little man with a red face and a whole box of tools, with dials and wires. He smiled at Margie and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart. Margie had hoped he wouldn't know how to put it together again, but he knew all right, and, after an hour or so, there it was again, large and black and ugly, with a big screen on which all the lessons were shown and the questions were asked. That wasn't so bad. The part Margie hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers. She always had to write them out in a punch code they made her learn when she was six years old and the mechanical teacher calcu­lated the mark in no time.

The Inspector had smiled after he was finished and patted Mar­gie's head. He said to her mother, "It's not the little girl's fault, Mrs. Jones, I think the geography sector was geared a little too quick. Those things happen sometimes. I've slowed it up to an average ten year level. Actually, the overall pattern of her progress is quite satisfactory." And he patted Margie's head again.

Margie was disappointed. She had been hoping they would take the teacher away altogether. They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely.

So she said to Tommy. "Why would anyone write about school?"

Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. "Because it's not our kind of school, stupid.5 This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds years ago." He added loftily, pro­nouncing the word carefully, *"Centuries ago."*

Margie was hurt. "Well, I don't know what kind of school they had all that time ago." She read the book over his shoulder for a while, then said, "Anyway, they had a teacher."

"Sure, they had a teacher, but it wasn't a *regular* teacher. It was a man."

"A man? How could a man be a teacher?"

"Well, he just told the boys and girls things and gave them homework and asked them questions."

"A man isn't smart enough."

"Sure6 he is. My father knows as much as my teacher."

"He can't. A man can't know as much as a teacher."

"He knows almost as much, I betcha.7" Margie wasn't prepared to dispute that. She said. "I wouldn't want a strange man in my house to teach me."

Tommy screamed with laughter. "You don't know much, Mar­gie. The teachers didn't live in the house. They had a special build­ing and all the kids went there."

"And all the kids learned the same things?"

"Sure, if they were the same age."

"But my mother says a teacher has to be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl it teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently."

"Just the same they didn't do it that way then. If you don't like it, you don't have to read the book."

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Margie said quickly. She wanted to reatt~about those funny schools.

They weren't even hall-finished, when Margie's mother called, "Margie! School!"

Margie looked up. "Not yet, Mamma." in

"Now!" said Mrs. Jones. "And it's probably time for Tommy, too." Margie said to Tommy, "Can I read the book some more with you after school?" "Maybe," he said nonchalantly.

He walked away, whistling, the dusty old book tucked beneath his arm.

Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bed­room and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. It was always on at the same time every day, except Saturday and Sun­day, because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

The screen lit up, and it said:

"Today's arithmetic lesson is on the addition of proper frac­tions. Please insert yesterday's homework in the proper slot."

Margie did so with a sigh. She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighbourhood came laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in schoolroom, go­ing home together at the end of the day. They learned the same things, so they could help one another on the homework and talk about it.

And the teachers were people ...

The mechanical teacher was flashing on the screen:

"When we add the fractions 1/2 and 1/4 8 — "Margie was think­ing about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. *his* **grandfather:** graphic means (italics, bold type, etc.) are very  
   often used as expressive means of the language to enhance a part of the  
   utterance in order to convey in written form the emphatic intonation of  
   the speaker.
2. **gee** *(interj.);* a very common mild euphemism based on the first  
   syllable of the word "Jesus". Used to express surprise or the like.  
   *(Russian:* Вот так так! Вот это да! Здорово!)

3.1 **guess** (Am. *colloq.):* I think.

1. **telebooks:** authors of science fiction (SF) very often coin new words  
   to describe advanced technology of the future. The term is used by  
   I.Asimov in the meaning "books shown on a TV screen".
2. **stupid** *(colloq.):* a stupid person.
3. **sure** *(Am. colloq.):* inevitably, without fail.

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7.1 **betcha** *(illit.):* I am sure.

8. 1/2 and 1/4 — one half and one quarter; 1/8 — one eighth; 1/3 — one third.