

NEWBERY MEDAL WINNER

AVI

The Secret School



*A fourteen-year-old
teacher?*

One



ON A COOL MONDAY morning in early April 1925, Ida Bidson, aged fourteen, carefully guided her family's battered Model T Ford along a narrow, twisting dirt road in Elk Valley, Colorado.

"Brake and clutch!" she shouted.

Ida, only four-feet-eleven and unable to reach the floor of the car, knelt on the torn seat and gripped the steering wheel tightly. Her seven-year-old brother, Felix, hunched on the floor before her and used his hands to push the brake and clutch pedals down.

As Ida adjusted the throttle lever, the battered

car, hiccuping like a damp firecracker, swung into a sharp turn. "Less brake!" Ida called.

"Where we at?" Felix called up as he leaned onto the right pedal.

"It's 'Where are we?'" his older sister corrected.

"You're not my teacher! Just tell me!"

"We're close. Less brake!"

The car bumped along, causing the old tin syrup can filled with their lunch to bounce on the seat beside Ida. Behind them, dust twirled out like an unraveling rope, momentarily hiding the high ring of snowcapped mountains that surrounded the valley.

As the car churned up a hill—with enough backfiring to suggest a small war had erupted—Ida caught sight of Tom Kohl and his younger sister, Mary, riding bareback on their mule, Ruckus. Best friends, Ida and Tom were forever talking about all kinds of things: their plans, their friends, their families, what was going on in the valley.

Seeing him, Ida grinned, reached over the door—the car had no windows—and squeezed the horn bulb attached to the outside of the car. *Honnnnk! Honnnnk!*

At the loud gooselike sound, Ruckus gave a little buck. Though startled, Tom skillfully reined

the mule to the side of the road, then turned around and pushed his floppy flaxen hair out of his eyes. Seeing Ida's slow-moving car, he smiled and yelled, "Get yourself a mule!"

"Join the twentieth century!" she shouted back.

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

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

The car finally rounded the last bend, bringing Elk Valley's schoolhouse into view. The building stood in the middle of its own small north-south valley, through which the dirt road ran. To the east low hills gave way to higher ground, woods, and mountains. West it was much the same. Squat and square, the school building had a pitched roof and a small bell steeple at the south end. The painted but peeling white clapboard walls had three windows on each side. Beyond the school stood two privies, one for boys and one for girls. To the south was a small shallow pond. In front of the school stood a flagpole not far from a water pump as well as a lop-sided teeter-totter.

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

MORE THAN ANYTHING, Ida Bidson wants to become a teacher. To do that, she must finish eighth grade, then go on to high school. But her dream falters when the one-room school in her remote Colorado town shuts down. Her only hope is to keep the school open without anyone finding out. Yet even a *secret* school needs a teacher. Ida is only fourteen, so she can't do the job. . . . Or can she?

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