

## HYMN 342

*Jess Harper is a jack-of-all trades at the Cedar Crossing Gazette. He's also a member at St. John parish. I did everything I could to keep this story hidden in that dark place that everyone has—that place where all those dumb things done as a youth never see the light of day. At some point, I must have weakened, and Jess wheedled it out of me. While he begins the story, I eventually take over and despite regretting having done so, at least I kept it within the bounds of historical truth. I am, in fact, the victim, and I suffer about every other week when someone in the congregation makes a request to sing Hymn 342.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

My Aunt Felicia spent eighty-three years on this earthly journey, most of it within a fifty-mile radius of Cedar Crossing. When my wife and I arrived at her home out on County Road C, we found cousins Connie and Steve already sorting out

decades of accumulated memorabilia. Aunt Felicia taught school in Cedar Crossing, and she loved to record things in diary form. At some point in the afternoon, I slipped into my inquisitive reporter mode and opened one of her diaries. A lot of the entries almost seem humorous now, given society as it is today. About halfway through the diary, I ran across the name of Arnold Schmidt. I asked Connie and Steve if they knew if it was our Pastor Arnold Schmidt. After a brief discussion, everyone agreed that the time frame fit. I took it upon myself to dig a little deeper into the story behind the entry into her diary.

The last Sunday of May, I cornered Pastor Schmidt after late service. Showing him the entry in Aunt Felicia's diary, I suggested we talk, and we did the following Tuesday. After first claiming to not remember anything about the incident, he eventually came around to the inevitability of having to come clean. The rest of this story is his account of the incident and, as far as I can tell, his version seems reasonable enough.

Jess Harper, *Cedar Crossing Gazette*

I was in the sixth grade at the time and should have started sprouting the early stages of good sense. I know that after the whole incident was over; I experienced a flush of excellent moral sense.

Jack Owens called himself a friend of mine, though I can't say a good friend. What friendship we had faded rather quickly after sixth grade. Aggressive and outgoing, Jack always stirred a little envy within my shy personality. Consequently, I followed along after him in a lot of the things he did. Regarding the incident in question, he led, and I followed.

One Saturday afternoon in the early part of September, my father dropped Jack and me off at the door to the church so we could fulfill the duties assigned to the sixth-grade Sunday School class. We opened the door and walked inside, where we found Pastor Wolfe at the altar.

“Good afternoon, boys,” said Pastor Wolfe. We nodded and continued looking at our instructions. “Nothing special required for today, so just do the usual job of straightening up the hymnals

and checking the racks for pencils, envelopes, and such. I'll be in my office for about half an hour, and then I'll come back to check on you."

As soon as Pastor Wolfe left the sanctuary, Jack called me over and said, "Go to the door and watch out for anyone coming."

I did what Jack told me to do, but I also tried to keep an eye on what he was doing. He pulled out a hymnal from the rack, and then he pulled out a piece of paper from his knapsack. I couldn't see exactly what he did, but I can say he had a strange look of joy on his face while he did it. Finishing up, he then called me back over.

"Look at the hymn board," instructed Jack. "What number do you see as the first hymn?"

"342," I answered. "Why?"

"I stopped by here on Thursday and saw that number listed on the board for this coming Sunday. Now, open one of those hymnals to hymn number 342."

"Okay, so what am I looking for?"

"Now look at hymn number 342 in the hymnal I have."

At first glance, I saw nothing unusual, until I started reading the words. I won't repeat what I read, but I will say it contained about every word my father told me he never wanted to hear me say.

“Don't you get it?” asked Jack. “Old Lady Watkins always sits here. When we stand to sing that first hymn and she opens this hymnal and starts reading—it'll be a riot.”

“I don't know, Jack,” I protested mildly. “Suppose somebody finds out we did this. We'll get in big trouble.”

“Who's going to find out? It's just you and me, right?”

“Well . . .”

And so, we went ahead with the plan. When Pastor Wolfe told the congregation to stand for the first hymn, everybody stood up and opened their hymnals. Just as the organist started to play, Miss Watkins screamed and fainted into the arms of Mr. Appleby. Jack could hardly control himself. I literally shook with worry.

In thinking back on it today, I must say that Jack had a remarkable artistic talent. His version of

hymn 342 matched everything perfectly on the page of the real hymn, except, of course, for the words. Unfortunately, somewhere in his plan, there was a flaw. That fact became clear while we were sitting in Pastor Wolfe's office with our parents waiting to hear our punishment.

"Now, boys," said the pastor. "I'm going to give you a choice. You can either come back here on Saturday morning and paint the whole fence around the playground area, or I can let you speak with the chairman of the Board of Elders to see if he might have an alternate punishment. Which will it be?"

Before I could even open my mouth, Jack said, "We'll take the Board of Elders."

"Okay," he replied. Picking up the telephone, he dialed a number, and when the other party picked up, he said, "Carl, it's Pastor Wolfe. I've got those two boys here who pulled that prank I told you about, and they prefer to take their punishment from you ... sure ... okay, I'll have them here next Saturday morning at nine o'clock ... thanks ... goodbye. Okay, boys, you heard me—Saturday at nine o'clock."

Jack gave me a ‘thumbs up’ down near his leg so nobody else could see. Too worried, I did not give him one back.

“Oh, boys,” said Pastor Wolfe. “The chairman of the Board of Elders is a man by the name of Carl Thompson. He usually comes to the late service, so you may or may not know him, but I’m sure you’ll recognize him when you see him.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. The name Thompson rang a certain ominous bell in my boyish brain. The only Thompson I knew was ... no, it couldn’t be him.

As is so often the case with young boys (and perhaps even some older men) and their lack of interest in certain details, I had been going to Cedar Crossing Elementary School for six years and I had never fully read the school’s sign out by the road. We had to pass by the school on the way home, so I forced myself to be more fully engaged ... there it stood. The death notice for Arnold Schmidt. No, it didn’t actually say that, but it could have, for the last line on the sign read, “Carl Thompson, Principal.” If I had been a hymn writer, perhaps I would

have said something like, “Oh, Dread, of all dread. I await the sting of approaching death.”

Just how serious was this enlightenment? I recall as a first grader when my brother and some of his sixth-grade buddies gave me an introduction to Cedar Crossing Elementary. They strongly recommended that I never, never, never, ever, get into trouble, because if you got sent down to the principal’s office, you were dead meat. They added that the man I see walking around the halls and stuff shouldn’t fool me, because when he gets back to his office he changes into an incredible monster. According to them, in his office he stood over eight feet tall, had a big hairy chest, and carried a twenty-foot-long paddle with ten-inch steel spikes on it. By the time I reached the sixth grade, I knew that most of what they told me wasn’t true. In reality, he stood no more than seven feet tall, and his paddle wasn’t any longer than twelve feet without the spikes. This knowledge remained hidden to incoming students.

I never had an opportunity to see Mr. Thompson in his office, but I knew of at least one kid who had. New to the school, he didn’t have the benefit of our accumulated experience. Before we could



properly indoctrinate him, he got into some trouble and got sent down to the principal's office. We never saw the kid again. I asked our teacher, Mrs. Foster, about him and she said the family had moved out of the county. But my friends and I knew the actual story. He didn't move out of the county. Mr. Thompson knocked him clean out of the county with that paddle.

When I caught up with Jack at school on Monday morning, I shared the insight I had gained.

“Don't worry, Arnie,” Jack said. “I've got it all figured out. It'll be a breeze.”

For the first time in my life, I stood up to Jack, and I said, “Jack, if you don't call Pastor Wolfe and tell him we choose to paint the fence, I'm going to punch you in the nose.”

After painting the fence, Jack and I just kind of drifted apart. Several years after I came back to St. John as its pastor, I heard he had been spending his time in a federal prison for counterfeiting. I've had a strong aversion to painting ever since.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

*For a long time after Jess Harper made this story public by printing it in the “Man About Town” column of the newspaper, I did not relish reading the Cedar Crossing Gazette, but it’s a small town and I felt a certain obligation as a community leader to continue to do so—perhaps, too, there lurked within me a desire to find something that I could use for leverage in getting Jess Harper to serve as a sixth-grade Sunday School teacher. Nevertheless, I have resisted all the many attempts by my flock to get me to choose Hymn 342 as one of our worship hymns.*