

Susan Tripped

J.P. de Klerk

Susan Mole was very nervous. When she entered the classroom, she chose quickly a chair with a table at the back. It was the last part of sitting for a scholarship and Susan had not taken the time to prepare herself well enough. The night before she had been to her next-door neighbors who had invited her to come to see a beautiful film. It took longer than they had expected and so she had gone to bed far too late.

Her friend Laura was only a mediocre pupil, but she had studied as much as she could and was now in a good mood. She smiled in an encouraging way when she saw Susan. When Mr. Douma gave her the papers she had to work at, she started straight away with writing and looked neither right nor left. She seemed not worried about a thing. Susan saw most of the others busy and she understood she could not just sit there; there was a time-limit.

Well, perhaps, it was not all that bad, she thought. But soon she discovered one problem after another. The answers slipped from her. It seemed her head was a blank. Slowly she became seized by panic. She had to guess several answers or else fill in nothing. She could not remember what she had learned already at the beginning of the year. What was the capitol of Iraq again? At what river? She looked at Laura, who worked quietly.

She filled in what she knew and skipped the other questions till later. It was all she could do. Of all the subjects, she was best in algebra, and she went quickly through it. She noticed she could easily look at Laura's paper and she picked up two answers and wrote them down. She realized it was not honest, it was no good, she should not do it, but...Mr. Douma did not look in her direction, Laura was concentrating on her work, so she did it again, and again. A strange excitement took possession of her; it was like a tumult. She felt she reddened. Her blood drummed in her temples....

It was quite a job, but when the bell rang, Susan had just written down the last answer she had taken from Laura's papers and looked skittishly about her. "Well, boys and girls," said Mr. Douma. That has been done and you can all go home relieved. Put your papers on my desk." Susan was one of the first to become rid of her papers, but her legs trembled. She tried to leave the school building in a rush, but suddenly she felt a hand at her shoulder and that gave her shock. She turned around and looked in the face of Lilian Roberts, who had been sitting behind her. She said: "Now Susan, I saw that you managed to do very well this morning, using the answers of Laura Weir!... I did not know that conservative Christians did such things!"

Susan could not move, here eyelids fluttered, her lips quivered. She did not know what to say. Last week she had invited Lilian to go with her to church. What a bad example she had given her. How could she ever regain her trust and speak about the Christian faith? This was terrible. She went home through the back door.

The following two days she felt miserable, disillusioned, bad, and with a poor appetite. She prayed and asked God to forgive her, but she knew she had to do something to put the record straight. The third day, she met Adrian, a boy from another class, who asked her, "Did you hear already about Laura Weir?"

"No, what is the matter with her?"

"Mister Douma went with her to the office of the boss. They say that she had copied all the answers of the test from your papers. Even two wrong ones are the same!" He walked away chuckling. Susan watched him with a bewildered look on her face. It was clear that matters had become worse, because she had not acted immediately. Mister Douma had concluded that Laura had done it. Now she knew what she had to do...

She went to school and knocked at the door of the teachers' room, where Mr. Douma was at work. "Come in, the door is open!"

When she entered, it was obviously a surprise for him. "Sir, I would like to... I must tell you... I have..." stammered Susan.

He pointed to a chair and said, "Now, sit down and tell me quietly what is bothering you."

Susan asked the Lord in silence to guide her. With lowered eyes she told him the whole story about what she had done, and that she regretted it very much, also because what had happened now to Laura. She pleaded to forgive her.

"I shall never hold up my head again," she sobbed.

He regarded her in silence. Then he said, "I had never expected this from you, Susan. I will have to destroy your papers and give Laura the high mark she deserves. I think this is enough for a punishment.... I forgive you, but you will have to talk with Laura yourself. I cannot give you a second chance. That would be wrong in this case, but if you work hard you still have a future. You tripped. Let us leave it there. You can go now."

"Thank you, sir," muttered Susan and shuffled away. She felt relieved and dismayed at the same time. She knew where Laura lived and decided to pay her a visit. She saw her in the garden in front of her house. Laura was not angry. She said she understood why Susan had copied. She knew the temptation herself. They agreed they would not talk about the incident with others. Susan would not soon forget what had happened. ❖

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Originally Published in:

Vol. 55 No. 11 November 1996