

the unpleasant necessities which the alternative involved. These followers, numbering some six or eight, through their unity of aim and Curly's leadership, had gained a certain ascendancy over the far greater, but unorganized, body of would-be independents who, chafe as they might under the yoke, dared not attempt to throw it off; and these loyal retainers were zealous in service of their lord's interests and pleasure.

On that beautiful fall morning when Bob first went alone to school, he had not been ten minutes on the playground, standing upon its outer edge, school-bag and lunch-box in hand, to gaze upon its novelties, before a satellite of Curly's, one Percy Emery espied him. Instantly it was as though Percy had discovered some new quarry, unearthed a fresh specimen of some genus, edible and choice.

"Hi, Curly," he yelled, with the eager loyalty of his kind, "come 'ere. 'Ere's a new one. Look at the school-bag to 'im."

Curly, who was at the moment engaged in the pleasing pastime of hectoring a scared little five-year-old who ought still to have been in the kindergarten, pricked up his ears at the cry and, like a hungry bird of prey leaving a mouse for a lamb, promptly swooped down upon the new game. His movement was the signal for the gathering of a crowd, and, before Bob was fairly aware that he was the object of attention, he had become the center of a curious group whose interest, if not wholly hostile, was in the main certainly not friendly. The dictator himself confronted him with unmistakably bellicose intentions.

"New shoes!" said Curly contemptuously, selecting the first obviously vulnerable point open to a shaft of insult. "New shoes! Spit on 'em!" He suited the action to the word, and immediately word and act alike were imitated by two or three of his more ardent admirers.

"Stop!" said Bob. He did not know what it meant. He backed away from his persecutors.

"Aw, stop, eh?" mocked Curly. "Who are you? What's yer name?"

"Bob McAllister."

"Bob! Bob-tail! Bob-cat!" chanted Curly, in gratuitous insult of which only bantam shamelessness is capable. "Stop, will I? Who'll make me? You? You want to fight?"

He danced about Bob's quiet little figure, snapping his fingers in the new boy's eyes. Then, suddenly, he swung his wiry body and swept a stinging blow in Bob's face.

A yell of delight from the despot's own drowned a weaker chorus of protest. Curly backed and squared, ready for some show of retaliation or resistance, a scornful little grin on his face.

"Come on, now. Fight! Stop me!" he cried.

But Bob did not move. Curly's blow had landed fair on the tender little red lip, and it had cut against the teeth behind; a tiny scarlet stream flowed down Bob's smooth little chin. In his eyes the dizziness of the first jar gradually gave way to slow amazement. Then the tears welled up, hot tears which overflowed the lids and ran scalding down the cheeks, but they did not conceal or quench a glitter which grew to a bright flame behind them.

Bob's school-bag and lunch-box dropped from his hands. The pudgy fists which had never before been clenched with belligerent purpose, but which were, nevertheless, a boy's fists, doubled themselves into hard little knots; but still he stood quiet.

So far as his whirling little mind could think, he thought thus: So this was fighting; this was what he had promised his mother not to do; what he had promised—had promised—promised. He was not so big, this boy who had struck him, not so big. Bob was not afraid. But that a promise is a thing to be kept inviolate he had learned, oh, years ago, from Papa Jack, along with all the other of-course-ities of life, like telling the truth, keeping your troubles to yourself, and not being a cry baby or a tell tale. And a promise to mother—well, nothing could be more sacred. Yet here was a new condition which he had never met before, a new situation which suddenly made him see

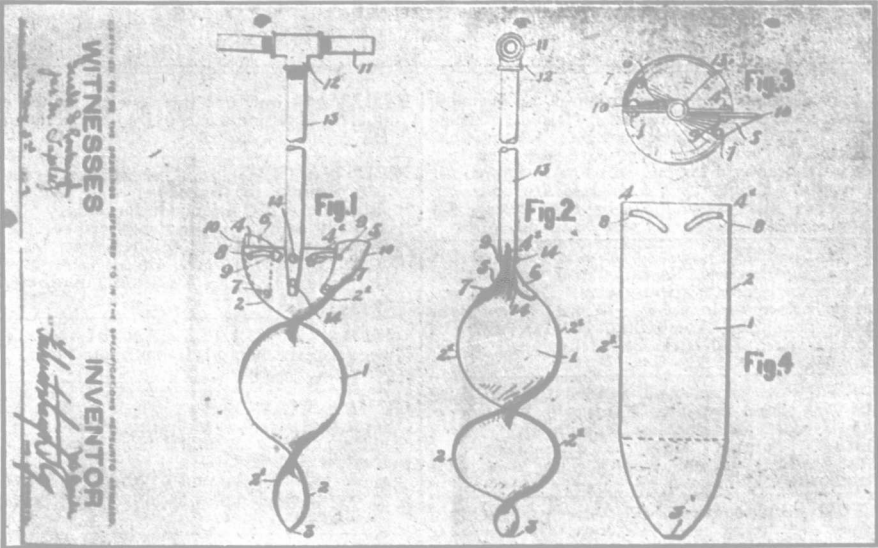
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