

Bob Debutant

(Continued from last week)

it was. He found himself forgetting how he had felt a moment before; and then he discovered that he was not thinking about what he wanted at all. He was thinking what a very blue blue his mother's eyes were when she looked at him so, and, all at once, he felt more sorry for her than for himself, because she looked so troubled; and he kissed her quickly, and hurt his lip.

Mrs. McAllister led him into the house. "Won't you tell mother, Bob?" she asked. But he couldn't. He was feeling better—much better—but he couldn't tell. There was another reason now, that he hadn't thought of before: it would make her feel more sorry. And after all, it didn't matter so much; that is, it didn't if—He looked up at her with a new thought.

"But, Bob, you must tell mother all about it," she was saying, as she carefully bathed his chin and lip, and so he had to shake his head again.

"Then you must tell Papa this noon, Bob."

Bob considered. No, he couldn't tell Papa Jack, either. He felt pretty sure father himself wouldn't tell about such a thing if he were a boy. He was silent.

Mrs. McAllister began to move about her work, though she still looked at him frequently and anxiously. Bob went away to the window, and stood looking out. He remembered how he had started out that morning, with school-bag and lunch; he remembered how he had approached the school-grounds, and how big and strange and attractive a place it had seemed to him at first, and what a good time all those boys had been having; and then he remembered how, suddenly, he had found them all around him, summoned by the call of that boy with the hateful grin, and how Curly Davis had sneered and spat and struck. Suddenly he found himself tingling all over, and pressing a burning forehead against the cool glass, and digging his knuckles into the corner of the sash till they ached. Then he went into the library, and lay down on father's big leather couch, and thought and thought.

Papa Jack came home for lunch at noon, and mother told him. Bob heard them in the hall.

"He says he didn't fight," said his mother, "and he says he didn't fall down. He won't tell me, and I told him he must tell you. I don't know why he doesn't want to tell; he isn't ashamed, or very much frightened, and he didn't cry after he came home."

Bob heard Papa Jack's footsteps cross the hall and come in upon the hardwood library floor, and then on the big rug by the library couch. Papa Jack sat down beside him and put his big fingers around Bob's little ones.

"Well, what about it, Son?"

Bob looked up and smiled. Always such a pleasant, warm feeling came over him when Papa Jack came near him and talked to him.

"What about it, Son?"

But Bob could not reply. His eyes grew serious as they looked back into his father's.

"What did this, Bob?" asked Papa Jack, gently touching the hazelnut bruise with a finger.

"A boy," said Bob.

"What boy?" asked Papa Jack. "A big boy?"

Silence, and then a shake of the head.

"Did you strike him first?"

Again Bob shook his head.

"What did you do to him?"

Still another shake of the head.

"Do you mean he just came up and struck you without any provocation?"

"He laughed," said Bob.

"What else?"

"Spit on my new shoes," reddening.

Papa Jack drew his mustache down between his lip and teeth. "Hm! He did, eh? What else?"

"Said 'Bob-tail, bob-cat.'"

Papa Jack looked puzzled.

"Said I was—Bob, bob-tail, bob-cat," explained Bob.

"Oh!" Papa Jack seemed to see light.

"And then he struck you?"

A nod once more.

Mr. McAllister looked out the window and his fingers closed tightly around Bob's. "When was this, Bob—before school?"

"Mm."

"And you came right home?"

A nod.

"Did you strike him back?"

Bob's eyes widened. "No."

Papa Jack's eyes widened also.

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because, what Bob?"

"Because mama said not to fight."

"And you promised?"

Bob nodded again.

"I see." Papa Jack's eyes suddenly lighted with something Bob did not understand, and he sat looking down at Bob for a long minute.

"I see," he said again, and then he turned and called to mother. "Helen!"

And mother came in, with a piece of white sewing in her hands.

"Helen," said Papa Jack, "it's a case of bullying. The boy promised you not to fight, and he didn't. It's a mistake, mother. He's been set upon by some young bully, and couldn't defend himself because of his promise."

Mother looked at Bob; there was distress in her eyes, but something else came into them, too.

"It's only the beginning, dear—the beginning of battles," said Papa Jack, and he put his other hand on mother's.

"Bob," he said, "mother doesn't mean you're not to defend yourself. Understand? By fighting, mother only means beginning fights, picking fights, provoking other boys to fight. We have to defend ourselves. It isn't right to pick a fight; that's what mother means."

Bob saw tears come into his mother's eyes. Papa Jack saw them, too.

"There's only one way among boys, Helen dear. The bullies must be fought, you know. Our boy's got to be a boy's boy if he's to be a man's man by-and-by."

Suddenly mother bent over and kissed Bob, and held him, with her arms thrust under and about him—held him hard.

"The only thing, Bob, is to be a man always. Be square and white. Do the right thing. I can't tell you what it will be every time; neither can anybody else: but you your own self will know. It may be right even to fight sometimes, for yourself and for others who are bullied; but every boy knows for himself when it's right and when it's wrong. If he does as he knows, he'll do right."

It was a quiet lunch that day. Father and mother talked little and the meal was quickly over. Bob hardly knew what he himself ate or did or thought. There was a strange excitement in his heart and in his head, a feeling that he could not define. It was not that he was going back to school after dinner. It was not that he would probably meet those boys again, nor that he would sooner or later have to face again that Curly Davis. Neither was it that, when he did face Curly Davis, he meant to—yes, to fight him. No, it was none of these things, though his heart did beat the faster as he thought of them. It was something else; it was something about what his father had said, not so much his words, but the way he had said "a man's man" and "we must defend ourselves"—something that thrilled him, made him proud and humble, all at once. Someway, father seemed to have taken a new attitude toward him, and in that change even Bob seemed to see father's recognition that babyhood was over for his small son.

Mother stood in the door and watched him go. She had been crying again, a little; she had even wanted to keep him at home. But father had said, "No, let him go; as well now as to-morrow," and so she had kissed him and cried again, a little. And then she had begged him to "try to keep away from those bad little boys," and to "play only with good boys who did not want to fight"; and Bob had said yes—doubtfully. He waved his hand to her from the gate, and again from the corner of the block, and then he set his face once more toward school, and walked very fast.

It was five o'clock when Bob came home again. School closed at four, but the clock on the library mantel was tinkling five when he opened the door and closed it very softly. He didn't want mother to see him just then.

He was trembling and very white—his little mirror by the window showed him that. There was a brown-and-blue bruise just in the corner of his little brown eyebrow, of which he had felt carefully a dozen times on the way home, but which did not look so big in the glass as it had felt. There was a rubbed place on his chin, and the soft knuckles of his hands were grimy and stained. He laid his school-bag and box carefully on a chair, and went to look out the window for a moment. And then a strange feeling came over him.

—This was his little room; yes, it was his—the same little room; the same white curtains; the same little window, the same view of the little green doorway and the apple-tree and the cedar-hedge; the same soft sunset light coming in upon him where it had come so many, many other evenings, ever since he could remember. But the boy—that little boy who had looked upon it all, who had lived there and loved the white curtains and the sun and the apple-tree—where was he? he wondered.

When he closed his eyes he could see just one thing—one whirling, seething vision: a ring of boys, excited, eager, yelling, laughing, cheering, with only here and there a frightened face; and there in the midst himself and another—some one who was striking and kicking and scratching at him, but whose blows he did not seem to feel, so hard and fierce and fast he himself was striking, and so hotly ran his blood. And in his ears were ringing the cries which had gone up at the end, when that other boy—he of the curly hair—had suddenly, at last, turned from him and run away through the crowd, beaten and sniveling and—alone. And he remembered that he had felt sorry then—oh, so sorry—sorry for that other boy!

He washed his face and hands carefully, and looked again in the little mirror. Perhaps mother wouldn't notice—much. He opened his door and crept softly down the stairs and into the library, and there was mother, looking anxiously from the window, and father, who had just come in, putting on his hat as if he were going out again. And they both turned and looked at him; and mother ran and caught him up in her arms, just as if he were that baby-boy again—that baby he had been yesterday. He wondered.

Father looked at the brown bruise and the scuffed knuckles critically, while mother held him with her face against his hair.

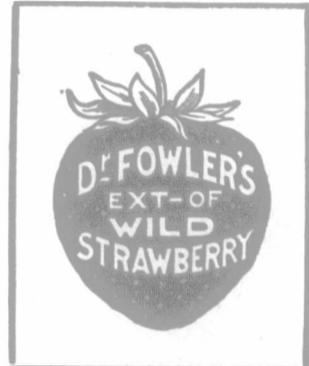
"Do you think he'll bother you any more, Bob?" father asked, just as if the whole story had been told.

Bob shook his head, and mother suddenly clasped him closer, while father turned away with a grim smile. And Bob himself just wondered—wondered about that baby-boy he had been yesterday.—By HENRY HUNTING in McClure's.

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Once upon a time there lived a king who was very foolish. He thought he was better than anyone in his kingdom; he thought he was wiser, and he wanted to be richer. Now there lived in his land a very rich man, who was known far and wide for his fine dinners, and when the news of this man's entertainments was made to the king, the foolish king sent for him in great wrath. "How dare you outshine me!"

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Mrs. Robt. Rahm, Burketon, Ont., writes:—

thundered his majesty. "For this you shall die."

"Please my king, let me live, and I'll do your every wish," cried the rich man.

"On one condition will I grant your life," said the king, "and that is if you answer me three questions within the next three days. If your answers are absolutely correct and true, I will make you my prime minister; if not, off goes your head. Firstly, tell me to the very day how long shall I live? Secondly, how long will it take me to ride around the world? Thirdly, of what am I thinking?"

The rich man went to his home and consulted his books, and on the third day he again came before the king.

"I am ready to answer your three questions."

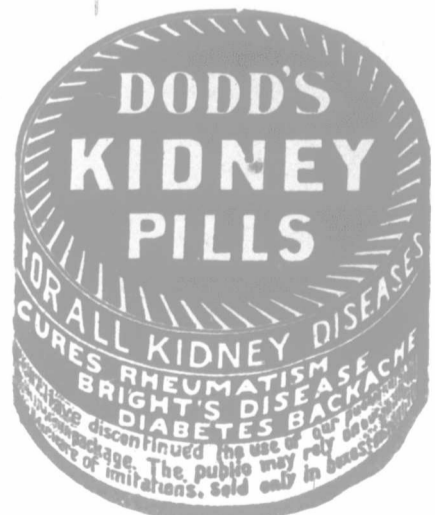
"Firstly. You shall live until you breathe your last."

"Secondly. If you rise with the sun, and travel with the sun in its course, it will take you just 24 hours to travel around the earth."

"Thirdly. You think I'm not such a fool as I look."

The king embraced the man and complimented him on his wisdom.

"I see," he said, "it would be a pity to cut off a head so full of learning. Rise and be my prime minister and share your wealth with me."



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