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"Nothing wrong with his lungs, drat him," said Joe angrily to himself, as reading became more and more difficult. Next two pairs of small feet could be heard descending the stairs. There was a short whispered consultation at the bottom, and then Lena and Mary appeared hand-in-hand.

They did not speak, but stood and regarded him with such an expression of mingled consternation and reproach upon their faces that he soon began to feel like a vivisectionist and a dozen Herods rolled into one. At length he could stand it no longer; so impatiently throwing the magazine into a corner he snatched the pan from the stove and stumped noisily upstairs.

The unexpected appearance of his father caused little Joe to break off abruptly in the middle of a vocal effort, which for deadliness of execution would not have disgraced a Tetrazini, and he allowed himself to be propped up with pillows in a rough and ready fashion that would have started him off again at any other time.

"Joe be a good boy and take his breakfast," said his father firmly, as he tried to place a spoonful in the child's mouth.

There was a yell, and a small hand struck the spoon violently, spilling the contents over the bed.

"Drat the kid!" exclaimed Joe angrily. "Here take this you young rascal." But little Joe's refusal was even more decided than before.

He looked helplessly for explanation at the two girls who had followed him upstairs, and now stood watching curiously from the passage.

"Hot!" said Lena, and the contempt in her tones made him feel small. Blow!

"Daddy b'ow," echoed the small figure from the bed.

So Daddy blew obediently, but with such violence that he scattered the spoonful upon his trousers.

The next attempt was more successful, and he offered the result to the young autocrat with a humbleness of which he would never have believed himself capable.

It was swallowed condescendingly, but the following one met with another stone-wall refusal.

"What in thunder's up now?" exclaimed Joe losing patience.

"Mummy always eat some too," explained Mary artlessly.

"Gee whiz, but this is fierce!" muttered the unhappy victim eyeing the sloppy contents of the pan with aversion.

This was just a little more than he had bargained for, and just on top of bacon and fried potatoes he felt that really—no, really, he couldn't. He looked at his tormentor, but saw no signs of relenting there, while Lena and Mary seemed simply to await the performance of a most trivial everyday act.

The need for immediate action was emphasized by a preliminary tootle upon little Joe's vocal organs; so delicately selecting a morsel with the tip of the spoon he closed his eyes, and forced it down his unwilling gullet.

Little Joe's face cleared as if by magic; he clapped his tiny hands in delight and swallowed the next spoonful with huge enjoyment, beaming contentedly upon his sisters, who smiled back their affectionate sympathy. But it was only by taking back alternate mouthfuls—nothing less would satisfy the young tyrant once he realised he held the whip hand, and who refused to be deceived by anything in the shape of a miscount, and proved that up to 'once times one is one' his arithmetic was as sound as his parents—that the pan was finally emptied. With a sigh of relief Joe went to the window for a breather. The hot bread and milk made him perspire profusely, and he felt a little unwell.

In view of future possible complications he decided that it might be an advantage to dispense with an audience and by a happy inspiration sent the two girls off to feed the chickens.

"Now, Joe, my boy," he said briskly a few minutes later as he prepared to remove that interested spectator's nightdress.

"I guess we're about all fixed; and, remember, son, this here's a strictly solo performance, and don't you go for to think your Dad's a 'going to make a duet of it, same as he did at breakfast. Not by a long chalk!"

"Not—by—a—long—chalk!" he repeated thoughtfully, as two of the buttons came off in his fingers. He threw them under the bed. Nevertheless he was rather relieved that the bath-tub was a small one—for there was no knowing!

"Here, hold on a minute though."

"Funny thing to do, anyway!" he said to himself as he bared his elbow, and thrust it into the water. He withdrew it quickly, and looked thoughtfully at little Joe.

By the time sufficient cold had been added, the tub was full. He poured some out, dividing it pretty equally between the pail and the floor, and Selina's bedroom slippers. Hastily emptying the latter, he threw them after the buttons.

The actual bathing was a fair success, little Joe being vastly diverted by the curious hissing noise which was a novel addition to the performance; the only untoward incident occurring when his father, in reaching suddenly for the sponge, placed his heel upon the soap, and sat down rather heavily.

"Daddy, do it again," gurgled little Joe delightedly, as soon as he recovered from his astonishment.

"Do it again!" he commanded.

But Daddy refused quite crossly to give an encore, and yanking him almost roughly out of the bath, commenced to dry him vigorously.

"Gee, but he does look considerable red," he exclaimed in dismay. "Dashed if I ever see anything quite so red afore. Now I wonder!"

Suddenly his eye caught the words "Fuller's earth" upon a fair-sized glass jar. He seized upon it with relief, and applied the contents liberally until little Joe was floured about as thickly as an ordinary baking-board.

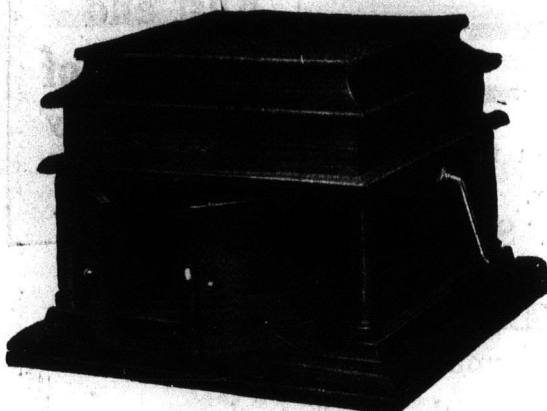
"I guess that oughter cool him off some," he remarked viewing the result with admiration. "Now for his clothes."

Gingerly turning over the small heap upon the end of the bed, he doubtfully fingered each article in turn, but was altogether at a loss as to which to choose for a foundation. Finally he made a selection at random, but the result even to his amateurish eyes did not seem quite a happy one. After three false starts he sat down to think.

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