

A Knight of Avenue A.

(Margaret E. Sangster, in the 'Christian Herald'.)

Avenue A is a neighborhood where boys abound, and they have no play-place but the street. As many of the lads go to work as soon as the law will allow, the evening is their especial playtime, and, boys being only men in miniature, fighting and wars are often a part of their fiercely enjoyed recreation. The gangs of fellows from one block or another are organized loosely yet firmly under able leaders, and, on occasion, they meet and make night hideous by their howls and cries, and the furious clash of their violent on-set.

When the ladies from a region far away uptown invaded the avenue, hired a house and set up a home in the very midst of the most crowded neighborhood, the residents already on the spot were puzzled. What did these newcomers mean? Why had they forsaken their natural and appropriate environment for quarters that must seem strange and comfortless? The mothers all held aloof, the young girls were at first shy, and the children hung round the door, like birds looking for crumbs, who would take wing and scurry off at a hint of further acquaintance. But the ladies had a piano, a harp and a mandolin, and, evening after evening, there was sweet music in their home. The doors flew open at the most timid touch, and the welcome was so cordial that the ice of avenue A was soon melted, as snow melts in a January thaw.

The girls and young women were won before the boys, more cautious, and less disposed to seek indoor ease and instruction in the classes and clubs that the Settlement initiated, came asking for admission. After a while, however, there were petitions from the boys, and they were drawn into the light, warmth and gladness of evenings with men and women who cared for them, young men from colleges, who understood boy nature, having added their skilled assistance, when Boys' Clubs were formed. The avenue gangs worked harmoniously enough when mustered into civic and patriotic associations, in which they studied, discussed problems, and occasionally had a supper, called in boy parlance 'a feed,' together.

Rudolph Goldstein was a low-browed, dark-eyed, shrewd-looking youth of sixteen, a youth of excellent natural abilities and absolutely no advantages. He had lived in a rear tenement, in a cellar-basement, flooded in the spring rains, cold in the zero winters, and stifling in the summer heats, all his life, and he was one of thirteen children. The poverty of his home was something the workers at the Settlement could not gauge; but they could and did estimate rightly, before very long, the strong character of Rudolph. He was full of gentle intuitions, and there was a vein of poetry in his soul. Not an unworthy member was Rudolph of that mighty race which produces poets, musicians, bankers, and statesmen, and which once had among its people a shepherd-boy who killed a lion and a bear when they attacked his flock, and whose psalms are sung to-day in every Christian assemblage.

Rudolph admired all the women who

took a hand in helping along the clubs, and in making good men of the boys who joined them. But most of all he revered two—the Little Old Lady, and the Lame Princess. These two did not live in the Settlement itself, but they often visited it. The Little Old Lady had white hair, and soft, shining black eyes. She wore furs that wrapped her from head to feet, and she always arrived in a carriage with a coachman and a footman on the box. The Lame Princess was a golden-haired child with a crutch, and she was always with the Little Old Lady, whom she called grandmother. Rudolph had never seen any one so beautiful as this child, yet he held in even closer fondness the dear elderly woman, who was so genial, so courteous, and so wise. For generations, old women had been deferred to, and obeyed in Oriental countries, and Rudolph, a Jewish boy living in Avenue A, New York, was, in every fibre of his nature, a son of the Orient.

There was peace for a long time between the rival factions that had once made the avenue a scene of wild conflict night after night. But finally, a reaction set in. Some of the more restless spirits wearied of the evening study. A snow-storm brought a chance for sport such as city boys prize. There was ice enough in some places for long and delightfully perilous sliding. With scouts stationed at the corners to give timely warning of 'Cheese it, cop, cop,' if a stout policeman loomed alarmingly on the horizon, the fellows had some grand times sliding, and indulged in snow-ball fights which were most exciting. This was all right until the old enmity awoke between the Fifteenth and Fourteenth street gangs, and the snow-fights became deadly battles, in which each group grew angry and tried to do real harm to the other.

Rudolph, as leader of the Fifteenth street force, felt the joy of battle, and, for a while, forgot the pleasure of the warm room, the wide tables, and the bright lights of the club. 'Aw, now!' he said, 'a fellow must have some fun,' when his mother remonstrated. She, poor woman, knew what the good ladies were doing for her boys and girls, and prized the evening learning, as a stepping-stone that well might enable them to climb out of the basement one of these days, to a first or second floor tenement. The father was growing old and stooped over his tailoring. Rudolph was in a big store downtown. He, at least, would not have to sit cross-legged with a needle in his hand all his days.

The firm that employed Rudolph had promoted him twice since he had been under the influence of the Settlement, each time increasing his pay. And one of his employers had recently presented the boy with a garment of which his mother was very proud. A long, perfectly whole, and very nice rain-coat, which Rudolph wore over a red sweater, which the Little Old Lady had given him for Christmas. The Lame Princess had given him red mittens, but these reposed, as a rule, in Rudolph's pocket. His hands could bear a good deal of cold without flinching.

Well, the battles of the gangs were at their height, when a thaw dropped upon the city as stealthily and suddenly as a thief in the night. The streets were rivers

of slush, the gutters were abyssmal, the sidewalks were a horror. As for the boys, they declared a truce, and went back in a body to the Settlement, where the forgiving ladies received them with kindness, crullers, and hot coffee.

On the second night of the thaw, when the slush had partially yielded, who should take it into her head to visit the clubs but the little old lady? And the Lame Princess too, of course. The woodenly carved coachman and footman had their own opinion of such folly, but did not express it. And in the carriage, under the warm robes, with their feet on a heater, and every luxury around them, the two visitors—both child and grandmother—were as cozy as in their own home.

When they arrived at the Settlement, there was a difficulty unexpected and distressing. The carriage could not get quite close to the pavement, owing to debris and heaped up snow, and the pavement was evidently freezing over. The footman lifted the Lame Princess in his arms and carried her in bodily, but no footman could presume thus to convey the Little Old Lady.

At this moment Rudolph appeared on the scene, with his crowd of followers. At one glance he seized the situation. 'Come on, fellows!' he shouted, 'and bring your shinny sticks!' These were conveniently kept in the lower hall of the Settlement. With a yell of joy, which made the Little Old Lady laugh till the tears ran down her cheeks, the lads with the shinny sticks cleared a place for the carriage to approach close to the sidewalk; then off came Rudolph's splendid rain-coat, and down it went on the slippery pavement, that the Little Old Lady might walk over it in safety to the steps. Never had Rudolph heard of Queen Elizabeth or Sir Walter Raleigh, but Sir Walter's hero-heart was his, and he performed a knightly act for the lady he adored.

A few years hence, and Rudolph and his comrades will be boys no longer. They will be men and citizens, taking their own share in the government of our great republic. They are wide-awake, energetic, and capable fellows, inured to hardship and open to whatever influence is strongest in their lives. Shall it be the saloon? Shall it be the Settlement? The Little Old Lady and the Lame Princess, and the young people from the colleges and universities, and some of the good men and women who sit in the pews every Sunday, are doing what they can for Rudolph and his friends. Nobody, even if he dwell remote from the big town, can afford to be indifferent to what is accomplished in the tenement districts, for New York is the heart, and the outlying suburbs are the extremities. And as the heart-throbs beat, so the extremities are healthful or feeble. One gallant deed of courtesy to womanhood one knightly 'devoir' gladly paid, is a pledge of the future which is worth something to us all. God bless the fellows who are growing up in Avenue A, and enrol them in his own great army!

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