

THE STRANGE BOY

By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

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THEY had just returned from their work in the Manual and were considering larger matters concerning their coming hike. They were Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen, and full of the joy that washes into life with the first full tide of youth. At the Manual they had been making things with their hands in wood and iron and stone. Creation seemed good to them. And they talked, making their tomorrow a kind of exalted yesterday, which is the way of youth. An old party of forty-five, sitting near them reading a musty book that had been off the list of best sellers for six long months, closed the book over his finger to mark the place while he listened to the chatter of the boys.

There was talk of a day's walk in the country; of a raft to be made at the river under the scout-master's direction; of fishing tackle to be had at the town's store; where the best rods might be bought; what minnows were worth. Some consideration was given to the various grades of khaki for scouting suits.

They were good scouts of the first and second classes, and much of their chatter was of camp and field.

The boys were lying on a lawn beneath the stone veranda railing whereon his old feet rested. From time to time the youngsters looked

up as automobiles went whizzing by and in monosyllables checked off the makers and perhaps the owners of the machines; but the checking did not stay their talk of the glorious tomorrows, silvered and gilded with yesterdays.

"Canned!" sighed the old party. "Canned boys!" he repeated. The boys looked up and, seeing the feet disappear from the railing, Thirteen rose quickly and said as he appeared:

"Yes, sir. What was it, Father? Did yet speak?"

The old party shook his head, and the boys stretched out again on the blue grass. As he opened his book and fumbled for his place, over the page top he saw, coming round the house from the rear, a thin, freckled, barefooted youth, with long trousers pulled up halfway to his knees, showing the flowered calico lining. Suspended striped the shoulders of the boy's coarse-checked blue-and-white cotton shirt. Twisted into his right suspender was a Y-shaped stick wound with rubber, whereon a diamond-shaped leather piece dangled from two strings.

"If the marshal sees that hell ar rest you!" said the man, and as the strange boy grinned the old party asked: "Where have you been so long?"

The other boys did not seem to notice the strange boy who grumbled as he sat down beside them.

"Doing my chores. Old Sooky's calf like to never get her supper out of this bucket. And old Sooky tried to hold up on me. I think they ought to make somebody brush the flies off while I milk. I bet old Sooky hit me in the eye a dozen times with her tail. Say, this's a rangeland of kittens in the south stall."

The other boys looked up when the old party shifted his feet and groaned.

"Oh! These are not real boys—they're canned boys! All the other industries have left the home for the cannery—why not boy-making!"

The boys sat down, and the old party took the words from the strange boy's mouth and went on:

"Hodark is a hard brown wood and makes the best bow you ever saw—better than hickory even. Few boys that I know ever had a hodark bow, though all of them knew that the Indians prized hodark highly. 'Say, boys'—the man addressed himself to the youths whose faces beamed cherubically over the rail—"suppose you could have Babe Ruth and Douglas Fairbanks, and the greatest scoutmaster in the world, and the greatest football player, all rolled into one right here in the yard—who would wait in the barn while you—"

"What barn?" put in precise Thirteen.

"Well, the garage, then"—the man corrected himself and hurried on—"while you went into the house and stole fried cakes for him, and—"

"Stole what?" cut in Twelve.

"Why, fried cakes—doughnuts. Don't you boys eat doughnuts?"

ing place. Why, Bud, when the old barn went and the garage came, I saw each timber go as one bids good-by to an old friend.

"The very rafters were sacred; there our trapeze swung; there the rings dangled on which we turned buzz-wheels; there was our spring-board before the haypile in the manger; there we gave our shows; there we played our first casino and seven-up, and there we earned in whispers the great mysteries of life. The barn was the boy's Eden. He entered it in the sweet innocence of childhood and played about there and talked with voices there, and held communion with the gods; and when he left it—when the barn no longer held him—his creaking doors banged on him, and he walked past the blazing sword into life filled with the knowledge of good and evil!"

to a hand that went trailing out, single file and naked, through a cornfield, and down through the horse-woods of the tall timber, to a swimming hole."

"Did you have feet like goats, Father?" suggested Twelve timidly.

"Yes, hard, callous, cut, brained, sure, brown, ugly and adventuring were our feet," answered the old party. "And those were the pipes of Pan—those pumpkin-vine horns, those hickory whistles. Bud! Bud, do you remember that?"

The strange boy's face beamed with delight, and Thirteen cut in:

"How very interesting!" and then asked: "What is a whatnot, Father?"

The old man looked his mild scorn at the question, but only the strange boy saw it, and he chuckled:

"They don't understand! They were never as we were. They are of the higher order."

"I think," mused the man, "when the barn went the half gods went, and these gods appeared. The barn was the temple of earlier gods—they who were neither brutes nor gods, but half of each. The barn was our real abid-

"I know," said the strange boy. "I should not be so wise for my age; but living with you has kind of wised me beyond my years. So I venture to guess that most of our heavens are behind us—when we pass forty-five."

"You're a nuisance, boy!" laughed the old party. "Some day I'm going to discharge you—fire you—throw you out—get rid of you! I wouldn't keep you round but for one thing, and—"

"And that is—"

"And that is because if it wasn't for you I'd die! You are the cup-bearer who brings me the oil of gladness."

"Ah, but you're a rascal, Bud! You're a rascal; a wool-dyed villain! How slow you work before Sunday school! How long you lie behind the blackberry bushes in the back garden in the shade when your hoeing takes you past this shelter! Ah, Bud, only one old man in all the world ever knew you and loved you—just one old man!"

The strange boy turned away and pretended to be interested in what the youths were saying on the grass below.

"Bud, I've been pretty good to you—haven't I—since you came back, twenty-five years ago?"

"Was it that long ago? Why, I thought it was only—"

"Twenty-five years, Bud! I didn't miss you so much for half a dozen years; and then when you did come back I rather—"

"Yes, you've spoiled me probably, so far as that goes," the strange boy broke in. "Made a pot of me—and a fool, more or less."

"But, Bud, answer me this," said the old party quickly. "What became of you in those years—those beautiful years of youth? Where did you go and why did you go?"

The strange boy stood still and looked at the ground.

"Do you want to know, honest—honest?" asked the strange boy, drumming his fingers on the cool stone.

"Honest to God, Bud!"

"Won't you ever tell her?"

"Who?" He followed the strange boy's eyes toward the house, and the old party went on with his oath: "Honest to God, Bud! Hope to die! Hope to be—any name you call me—cross my heart, and hope to drop dead!"

"Well—I Aw, I'm goin' to do it!"

"Ah, yes! Come on! Why did you leave me so suddenly, and only come back in my dreams? Come on, Bud! Tell a fellow something, Bud!"

The boy looked in the open door of the house. He stepped close to the old party.

"Aw—well, it's notin' much—only she—her in there—that used to live across the alley. Well, you know just as well as I Aw, I ain't a goin' to tell!"

The old party looked gently into the strange boy's red, shame-colored face. Tears streamed through the freckles, but he tried to smile.

"Go on, Bud, I'll remember."

"Well, you remember that night she was standing by the fence that June evening when we came home from Pillick's party? Well, dog-gone it, and killed me—killed me as dead as a nit, I tell you! She did—she is in the house—she who has been in the house all these years—she killed me, I tell you!"

"How? Why, how, Bud?" exclaimed the old party under his breath, also furtively keeping his eye on the door.

"With that—that—! Oh, you know—with that first awful kiss!"

"Oh—I see!" replied the man. "And so she—"

"Yes," interrupted the strange boy. She turned me into a dream and you into a man—and we parted."

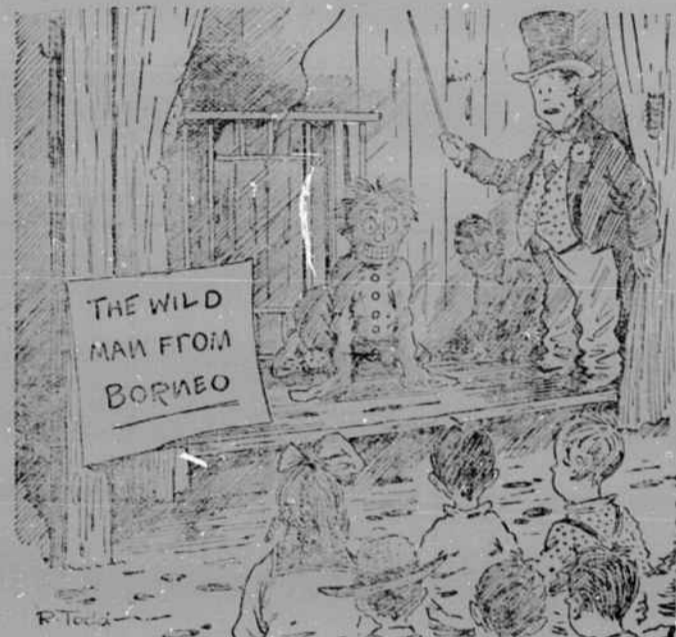
As the hook fell to the floor the old party cried:

"Son! Son, how about that music? Isn't it time for your practicing?"

"Just a minute, daddy!" called back Fourteen. "I'm inventing a new kind of music, with an unusual piano bottom, for war!" And the young man saw visions.

The old party smiled sadly and sighed as he saw the strange boy dragging himself slowly round the corner to finish his evening chores, limping heavily as he went, and whispering:

"And the old men dream dreams!"



"There We Gave Our Shows."

"Oh," lazily returned the old man, drawing his breath. "I forgot you boys are highly sanitary—absolutely pure! You probably never ate such a sorel, nor—"

"Nor sucked a grapevine in spring—nor ate rosebuds?"

"Bud," smiled the old party, looking into the blue eyes of the strange boy who found reminiscence which is the bestest joy of maturity, "do you remember we used to go trailing through the woods, browsing, off the young fresh twigs like gods in the older days?"

"Perhaps we were gods," replied the strange boy.

The old party gazed mutely for a moment across the green carpet of the lawn.

"Yes," he answered softly; "perhaps we were—perhaps we were!"

"Perhaps we were what?" insisted Fourteen. "What are you talking about, Father?"

"Can you make a whistle from a hickory sapling?" replied the old party, ignoring the question. "Can you make a horn from the stem of a pumpkin leaf? Did you ever belong

The three sprawled on the close-cropped sward—on back or belly as it pleased each; and the talk drifted from carbonators and a cynical criticism of the talking movies to the proper weight of tennis rackets, then into the teen-boy problems in wireless, and on into the mysteries of the new pulmotor over at the engine house of the fire department. But on the wanders the old party and the strange boy were holding forth on the splendors and glories of the Golden Age.

"And yet," returned the strange boy, "what they have—all this large leisure to consider the universe, all these store things, all this machine-made pleasure and formal joy—was what I hoped for, what I longed for most eagerly. They are as I would have had the angels in the heaven. They are the visions I saw of good boys made perfect."

"And you," repeated the old party gently, "you, Bud—you are the dreams I dream!"

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