

The Bullies

Except for one thing, Bluffton was the best place in the whole world for a boy to live. It was on a beautiful river, three tidewater coves cut right through it, every yard and all of the crushed-shell streets were shaded with live oaks, and most of the grown people loved children. But there were a few young bullies in Bluffton, and they made my life miserable.

I couldn't help envying my brother Philip, who was four years older than I was. He had the courage of a lion and the speed of a panther, and bullies shunned him like the plague. One brush with Philip usually lasted a bully a lifetime.

Once a tall lanky boy from somewhere out west came to Bluffton to spend the summer. He wore cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. He smoked Bull Durham cigarettes and used words that we boys in Bluffton had never heard before. His father, he said, was a cowboy and had killed about twenty train robbers.

One day that cowboy's boy came down to the wharf at the foot of the main street while a gang of us Bluffton boys were swimming. He stood near the edge of the wharf and rolled a Bull Durham as he watched us do some fancy diving into the swift-running channel. Philip walked over to him and asked him if he liked to swim.

"Cripes a-mighty no," he said. "I leave that to fish and you slimy b-----s."

Before the boy could lick his Bull Durham, Philip connected a stiff uppercut with his chin and knocked him overboard, cowboy hat, cowboy boots and all.

The channel was thirty feet deep, and the boy must have gone all the way to the bottom. It seemed like an hour before he finally bobbed up out of the water, sputtering and pawing the air, the way a puppy does the first time you throw him in. He stayed up about ten seconds and then went down again.

Somebody yelled that he was drowning, and Philip plunged in after him. As soon as the boy surfaced the second time, Philip locked his arms around his neck and towed him to the slip. While Philip was doing that, Johnny Harrison dived in and retrieved his cowboy hat.

After he got through coughing and rubbing salt out of his eyes, he wanted to know why Philip hit him.

"Jumping Jehosiphath," he said, "out where I come from a fellow's not your friend till you call him a -----"

"But you're not out where you came from now," Philip said.

"You're out here in Bluffton where a ----- doesn't even know who his papa is."

I don't know whether that boy was a real bully or not. But he never called anybody in Bluffton that name again. He turned out to be a wonderful fellow, and everybody, including Philip, liked him. Philip taught him how to swim before he went back out west.

Then there was the summer that my cousin from Savannah was visiting Grandpa and Grandma Guilford in Bluffton. One day Cousin slipped a crocus sack over my head and arms and fastened it around my waist with a piece of Grandpa's fishing line, making me as blind and helpless as a kitten with his head in a salmon can.

Cousin had more fun that day than he'd ever had in Savannah in all his life. He crammed spurs into my pants and made me sit in ants' nests until I screamed with pain. He pinched me and tickled me and lashed my bare legs with Grandpa's buggy whip. He pushed me into Grandma's flower beds and said he was going to show her my tracks. He poured a bucket of water over my head and threw me down and rolled me around in the black dirt. That was what he was doing when Philip happened to come up. I heard his voice when he asked Cousin who was in the sack.

"It's me, Philip!" I cried. "Please get me out of here before I smother to death!"

Philip cut the string from around my waist with his pocket knife. He pulled the sack from my head, and before Cousin could make a dash for the house, Philip had the sack down over his head and arms and tied securely around the waist.

"Turn about is fair play," Philip said.

For the next hour, Philip and I did everything to Cousin that Cousin had done to me, plus a lot of other things that we thought up as we went along. The last was to tie Cousin to a tree. Philip cut a slit in the sack and crammed his handkerchief into Cousin's mouth, so he couldn't holler for help. We poured a bucket of water over his head and covered him with shell dust scooped up from the street in front of Grandpa's house. We left Cousin there squirming and groaning and trying his best to get out of that wet crocus sack.

In school, a bully always sat directly back of me, and amused himself by pulling my curls and pinching me and sticking pins through the crack in the bottom of my seat.

One boy used to keep a nail driven through the toe of his shoe. Every morning before he left home, he filed the nail as sharp as a needle. While I was busy studying my lesson, he would open a book on his desk and pretend to be studying, too. With perfect accuracy, he

would lift his foot and guide the nail up through the crack of my seat and straight into me. When I hollered "ouch," he would quickly raise his hand and ask the teacher to please make me keep quiet so that he could study his lesson.

Inside the building, bullies could go only so far with their attacks on me. But when we were outside, I was on my own and had to do the best I could. They tripped me up and pushed me around whenever they felt like it, and I was too scrawny to do anything about it. Nor could I expect help from Philip, because he was several grades ahead of me and our rooms weren't turned out at the same time.

There was a certain boy whom for obvious reasons I shall call Bully. He bided his time to beat me up. I think he hated me because he thought I had access to all the candy I wanted in Papa's store. He didn't know why Papa displayed his rack of buggy whips so conveniently near the candy showcase.

One day after school he was waiting for me in the street in front of the schoolhouse. The moment I started down the steps I saw that I was heading for trouble. Bully had given his books to another boy to hold. His head was lowered like a bull's when he's ready to charge, and he was looking right at me. I had no doubt that the dreaded moment had come.

Bully was short and all muscle. His tiny ears laid close against the sides of his head. He had been plowing his father's mule ever since he was old enough to say gee and haw, and his hands were large as a man's. A strain of Indian blood flowed in his veins, and he could shoot a twenty-two with both eyes closed and never miss. One time I saw him come out of the woods with 52 squireels hung over his shoulders. He had killed them all with fifty cartridges. Even if I hadn't been afraid of his plowhand fists, I would have trembled at the thought of what he could do to me with a piece of hot lead.

As I approached him, he sidled over to me. He walked along with me shoulder to shoulder, breathing threats against the side of my face.

"You think you're something when Philip's around," he said. "But you ain't nothing by yourself, and I'm gonna knock your block off."

I believed that he could, and I didn't see any point in trying to prove it. I didn't answer him. I didn't even look at him. I just kept on walking, but my heart was running away and my stomach was crowding my tonsils.

"I can beat a scrawny scary-cat like you," he said, "with one hand tied behind my back."

He could have said he could beat me with both hands tied behind his back, and I wouldn't have doubted it.

"Put your books down and fight," he said, "if you haven't got a streak of yellow running up and down your spine."

I didn't know what color it was, but I knew something was running up and down all over me, and whatever it was had me all broken out with goose pimples.

"I dare you to fight," he said. "I dare you to fight. I dare you to fight."

Three times he said it, and each time loud enough to attract the attention of all the children in range of his voice. Immediately a crowd of fight fans was trailing along behind us, urging us to fight, or rather urging me; Bully already had the urge.

I hooked my books higher under my arm and pretended not to hear what they were saying.

"Fight him, Kink," somebody yelled. "You can beat him."

"Yeah," somebody else said, "you can beat him. Jack McWhorter beat him yesterday."

There was poor consolation in that. Jack McWhorter was almost as husky and fast as Philip.

"You can beat him, too," Dixie Hubbard said. "I'll make him fight fair."

Dixie was in front of us and walking backward while he talked. A Duke's Mixture cigarette was hanging from one side of his mouth. He was a farm boy with round shoulders and a long stringy neck. He was tough as an alligator and wasn't afraid to tangle with a wildcat. By "fair" he meant that he wouldn't let Bully twist my nose and ears off or gouge my eyes out. He wouldn't let him do anything but bloody my nose and knock a few teeth out and crack a rib or two.

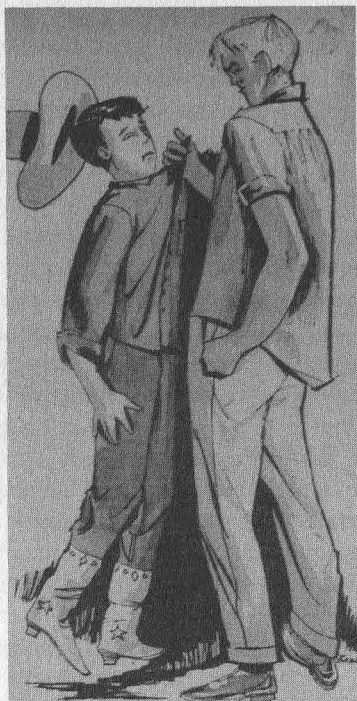
We were approaching the corner of Dr. Kirby's fence, where we would turn into the main street not far from Papa's store. For me, fighting anywhere was bad enough, but fight in sight of Papa was a calamity to be avoided at all costs. The very thought that he might be standing in the front door of the store filled me with panic. More than once had he warned me to "steer clear of that roughneck boy." I had to do something and do it now.

Throwing caution to the wind, my books to the ground, and my arms round Bully's neck, I flung him with all my might against Dr. Kirby's fence. It was an old rusty fence, and the weight of his body tore the wire loose from the ground board to which it was nailed. He fell flat on his back between the wire and the board, and both hands got caught in the wire. Following up my advantage, I fell on top of him and pummeled his face with all the strength I could put behind my fists, until he hollered nuff. Then I got off of him and picked up my books.

Dixie helped him get his hands free. Then he stood up and brushed his clothes. Then, without once looking at me, he took his books back from the boy who had been holding them and headed straight for home without saying a word.

I was a hero. Glory and honor were heaped upon my unbowed head. I was in a class with Philip and Jack McWhorter. No longer was I a scrawny scary-cat to be pushed around.

About a week after that, I was down on the wharf alone, fishing for sheephead. A tall long-armed boy came down there on a brand-new bicycle. It was equipped from stem to stern with all of the latest fads. It even had a coon's tail and a rabbit's foot dangling from the handlebar. I asked the boy where he got such a fancy bicycle, and the next thing I knew he had me off at arm's length and was pounding a galaxy of stars out of my head. He would teach me, he said, not to make fun of his bicycle. If my younger brother Luke hadn't come to my rescue with a brickbat in one hand and a huge stick in the other, there might have been a new grave in the Bluffton Cemetery. But that's another story.



A brush with Philip usually lasted a bully a lifetime.