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Reading Article GP2

Article #7: The Friendship

by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

The little boy had a policeman for a friend. He acquired him out of a clear sky. He ran out of the schoolyard to go home for his noon lunch, tripped over a rough spot on the sidewalk, and fell so hard and so flat that for gasping moments he could not draw a breath. The policeman happened to be passing by. Robert felt himself being lifted and pounded on the back. The first breath that came was agony and wonder, for drawing it had seemed impossible. It was only with the third that he realized his knees were hurting, and he looked down to see them

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The policeman nodded his head gravely. "I know your father," he said. "Isn't your house the large green-and-white one?"

"Oh, yes. With a big snow-apple tree in the yard."

The policeman again inclined his head. "My duties take me that way, Robert. I'll walk along with you."

The little boy was enchanted. The policeman's gravity was pleasing and complimentary.

"That was a bad tumble, young man. Are your knees painful?"

"Yes, sir, they hurt terribly."

"Will there be someone at home to fix you up?"

"Oh, yes; my mother. She's always there when I come home for lunch."

"You're lucky, Robert. I didn't have a mother when I was your age. Eight, I'd guess?"

"Just six. I almost wasn't old enough to begin the first grade." He glowed with pride that the policeman thought he was eight years old. "I thought everybody had a mother."

"Everybody has a mother to begin with."

"Even kittens and puppies and little birds."

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That's what my father told me, to ask for a policeman and tell my name and where I live. But I can't ever remember the number."

"The name and the street are what matter. Your father is well known in the area where you would presumably stray."

Robert did not quite understand all the words, but he was charmed with the truly adult conversation, with his father's being well known, and above all with the policeman. He sighed happily, and when the policeman took his hand in crossing a street, his cup of joy ran over, and he left his small hand inside the vast one. They walked in silence down another block.

He asked, "Do you have a little boy?"

"No, Robert. I should have liked a dozen, but I shall never have a single one."

"How can you tell?"

"Sometimes," the policeman said, "it is possible to know."

The sergeant at once took third place in omniscience behind God and his father, and it occurred to Robert that perhaps he should put him first. The only flaw in everything was that his protector had been unimpressed by his not crying when his knees did hurt so intensely. They reached the gate of his house. His mother stood anxiously on the front porch, since the accident had delayed him. He waved to her and she waved back.

The policeman said, "You might say to your mother that I suggest hot water first, and then an antiseptic and bandages." He cleared his throat. "You are a very brave young man. Many

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Robert cried out, "Mother, I fell down and I couldn't breathe, and see my knees, all bleeding, and a policeman picked me up and came home with me."

"How nice of him. Oh, darling, this is dreadful. You can't go back to school this afternoon."

"Of course I can go back. I'm a very brave young man."

His mother laughed and hugged him to her, and treated his injuries as the policeman had suggested, although he forgot to tell her.

He was a little late for the afternoon session, but he went boldly into the classroom with his bandaged knees. They were their own apology, and the teacher nodded to him and went on with the lesson. He was disappointed that she did not ask him any questions, so that he could tell of his peril and of his friend.

In the evening he could hardly wait for his father to come home. He hung on the gate, watching for him. When he saw him coming down the street, he ran to him and clasped him around the legs.

"Father, I fell down and hurt myself, and a policeman brought me home."

His father lifted quizzical eyebrows. "A policeman brought you home? Well, well. In chains, no doubt. What bad thing had you done?"

"Oh, father." He was accustomed to his father's jokes, and nothing could spoil his pleasure. "The policeman is my friend."

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take baby home. I ain't paid we'll beat you up. we don't beat up babies. but she pays him a dollar a week."

The idea had its unspeakable possibilities. His mother was often unduly solicitous. He did not dare approach her on the subject, but he did sound out the sergeant.

"Do you know my mother?" he asked one day.

"I don't have that pleasure. But as I said before, I am acquainted with your father."

Perhaps his father had hired the policeman. Perhaps his father had enemies and was threatened with the kidnaping of his son. This thought was exciting and acceptable, but it invalidated the friendship. He pondered over his next question. He felt very sly and clever as he asked it.

"A good policeman wouldn't take money for walking home with anybody, would he?"

The sergeant stopped and stared down at him.

"Somebody has been putting ideas in your head. No, Robert, a good policeman doesn't take money for anything."

He laid a huge gentle hand on the little boy's shoulder. "I am your friend. Always remember that friendship is a noble thing."

He was comforted. And then the snow apples on the tree in the yard began to ripen and fall. They lay each morning like rosy flowers in the soft grass. By family custom these were his

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on the ground. This was unreasonable, as the tree was still loaded. Robert watched from behind the hedge that evening, and saw Jimmy Thomas and his sister dash into the yard and swoop to the grass and dash away again. He was in a rage. It was his apple tree, his apples. He not only liked to use them as tribute to his friend but he was passionately fond of snow apples himself.

He ran toward the house to tell his father, then halted, and in triumph decided on a superior plan. Of what avail to have a policeman for a friend, if not to use him for his vengeance?

The next noon he prayed there would be no apples on the ground. There was a disappointingly large number, but still, he was sure, not nearly so many as usual. He turned haughtily to Sergeant Masters.

"Well," he said, "those Thomases have been over here again, stealing. I want you to arrest

them and put them in jail. Right now."

"Arrest the Thomases for stealing? Who are the Thomases?"

"A horrid boy across the street and his nasty little sister. They've been stealing my snow apples."

"I see. Robert, do they have an apple tree?"

"No. But they don't have any right to mine."

"Have you ever given them any of your apples?"

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Robert stared at the gilt apples discarded on the ground, then up at the beloved face far above him. It was sad and stern. He drew a gasping breath more painful than the one when he had fallen flat and the policeman had pounded him on the back and had become his friend. In a moment now Sergeant Masters would walk out of the gate and be lost to him forever. He threw his arms around the strong legs and gripped them tight and hid his face against them.

A sparrow flew into the tree and chirped cheerfully in the dreadful silence. An apple dropped with a thump. A cloud drifted across the sun and the autumn air was chill. He shivered. The big hand of the policeman dropped slowly to his head and ruffled his hair. A great arm encircled him.

"It's all right, Robert."

The little boy burst into loud sobs of relief and shame. Friendship was a noble thing and he

had proved unworthy.

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