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A PLEA FOR OLD CAP
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Irvin S. Cobb

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For a good many years now I have been carrying this idea round with me. It was more or less of a loose and unformed idea, and it wouldn't jell. What brought it round to the solidification point was this: Here the other week, being half sick, I was laid up over Sunday in a small hotel in a small seacoast town. I had read all the newspapers and all the magazines I could get hold of. The local bookstore, of course, was closed. They won't let the oysters stay open on Sunday in that town. The only literature my fellow guests seemed interested in was mailorder tabs and price currents.

Finally, when despair was about to claim me for her own, I ran across an ancient Fifth Reader, all tattered and stained and having that smell of age which is common to old books and old sheep. I took it up to bed with me, and I read it through from cover to cover. Long before I was through the very idea which for so long had been sloshing round inside of my head—this idea which, as one might say, had been aged in the wood—took shape. Then and there I decided that the very first chance I had I would sit me down and write a plea for Old Cap Collier.

In my youth I was spanked freely and frequently for doing many different things that were forbidden, and also for doing the same thing many different times and getting caught doing

it. That, of course, was before the Boy Scout movement had come along to show how easily and how sanely a boy's natural restlessness and a boy's natural love for adventure may be directed into helpful channels; that was when nearly everything a normal, active boy craved to do was wrong and, therefore, held to be a spankable offense.

This was a general rule in our town. It did not especially apply to any particular household, but it applied practically to all the households with which I was in any way familiar. It was a community where an old-fashioned brand of applied theology was most strictly applied. Heaven was a place which went unanimously Democratic every fall, because all the Republicans had gone elsewhere. Hell was a place full of red-hot coals and clinkered sinners and unbaptized babies and a smell like somebody cooking ham, with a deputy devil coming in of a morning with an asbestos napkin draped over his arm and flicking a fireproof cockroach off the table cloth and leaning across the back of Satan's chair and saying: "Good mornin', boss. How're you going to have your lost souls this mornin'—fried on one side or turned over?" Sunday was three weeks long, and longer than that if it rained. About all a fellow could do after he'd come back from Sunday school was to sit round with his feet cramped into the shoes and stockings which he never wore on week days and with the rest of him incased in starchy, uncomfortable dress-up clothes—just sit round and sit round and itch. You couldn't scratch hard either. It was sinful to scratch

audibly and with good, broad, free strokes, which is the only satisfactory way to scratch. In our town they didn't spend Sunday; they kept the Sabbath, which is a very different thing.

Looking back on my juvenile years it seems to me that, generally speaking, when spanked I deserved it. But always there were two punishable things against which—being disciplined—my youthful spirit revolted with a sort of inarticulate sense of injustice. One was for violation of the Sunday code, which struck me as wrong—the code, I mean, not the violation—without knowing exactly why it was wrong; and the other, repeated times without number, was when I had been caught reading nickul liburries, erroneously referred to by our elders as dime novels.

I read them at every chance; so did every normal boy of my acquaintance. We traded lesser treasures for them; we swapped them on the basis of two old volumes for one new one; we maintained a clandestine circulating-library system which had its branch offices in every stable loft in our part of town. The more daring among us read them in school behind the shelter of an open geography propped up on the desk.

Shall you ever forget the horror of the moment when, carried away on the wings of adventure with Nick Carter or Big-Foot Wallace or Frank Reade or bully Old Cap, you forgot to flash occasional glances of cautious inquiry forward in order to make sure the teacher was where she properly should be, at her desk up in front, and read on and on until that subtle sixth sense which comes to you when a lot of people begin staring at you warned

you something was amiss, and you looked up and round you and found yourself all surrounded by a ring of cruel, gloating eyes?

I say cruel advisedly, because up to a certain age children are naturally more cruel than tigers. Civilization has provided them with tools, as it were, for practicing cruelty, whereas the tiger must rely only on his teeth and his bare claws. So you looked round, feeling that the shadow of an impending doom encompassed you, and then you realized that for no telling how long the teacher had been standing just behind you, reading over your shoulder.

And at home were you caught in the act of reading them, or—what from the parental standpoint was almost as bad—in the act of harboring them? I was. Housecleaning times, when they found them hidden under furniture or tucked away on the back shelves of pantry closets, I was paddled until I had the feelings of a slice of hot, buttered toast somewhat scorched on the under side. And each time, having been paddled, I was admonished that boys who read dime novels—only they weren't dime novels at all but cost uniformly five cents a copy—always came to a bad end, growing up to be criminals or Republicans or something equally abhorrent. And I was urged to read books which would help me to shape my career in a proper course. Such books were put into my hands, and I loathed them. I know now why when I grew up my gorge rose and my appetite turned against so-called classics. Their style was so much like the style of the books which older people wanted me to read when I was in my early teens.

Such were the specious statements advanced by the oldsters. And we had no reply for their argument, or if we had one could not find the language in which to couch it. Besides there was another and a deeper reason. A boy, being what he is, the most sensitive and the most secretive of living creatures regarding his innermost emotions, rarely does bare his real thoughts to his elders, for they, alas, are not young enough to have a fellow feeling, and they are too old and they know too much to be really wise.

What we might have answered, had we had the verbal facility and had we not feared further painful corporeal measures for talking back—or what was worse, ridicule—was that reading Old Cap Collier never yet sent a boy to a bad end. I never heard of a boy who ran away from home and really made a go of it who was actuated at the start by the nickul librury. Burning with a sense of injustice, filled up with the realization that we were not appreciated at home, we often talked of running away and going out West to fight Indians, but we never did. I remember once two of us started for the Far West, and got nearly as far as Oak Grove Cemetery, when—the dusk of evening impending—we decided to turn back and give our parents just one more chance to understand us.

What, also, we might have pointed out was that in a five-cent story the villain was absolutely sure of receiving suitable and adequate punishment for his misdeeds. Right then and there, on the spot, he got his. And the heroine was always so pluperfectly

pure. And the hero always was a hero to his finger tips, never doing anything unmanly or wrong or cowardly, and always using the most respectful language in the presence of the opposite sex. There was never any sex problem in a nickul librury. There were never any smutty words or questionable phrases. If a villain said "Curse you!" he was going pretty far. Any one of us might whet up our natural instincts for cruelty on Fore's Book of Martyrs, or read of all manner of unmentionable horrors in the Old Testament, but except surreptitiously we couldn't walk with Nick Carter, whose motives were ever pure and who never used the naughty word even in the passion of the death grapple with the top-booted forces of sinister evil.

We might have told our parents, had we had the words in which to state the case and they but the patience to listen, that in a nickul librury there was logic and the thrill of swift action and the sharp spice of adventure. There, invariably virtue was rewarded and villainy confounded; there, inevitably was the final triumph for law and for justice and for the right; there embalmed in one thin paper volume, was all that Sandford and Merton lacked; all that the Rollo books never had. We might have told them that though the Leatherstocking Tales and Robinson Crusoe and Two Years Before the Mast and Ivanhoe were all well enough in their way, the trouble with them was that they mainly were so long-winded. It took so much time to get to where the first punch was, whereas Ned Buntline or Col. Prentiss Ingraham would hand you an exciting jolt on the very first page, and sometimes in the very

first paragraph.

You take J. Fenimore Cooper now. He meant well and he had ideas, but his Indians were so everlastingly slow about getting under way with their scalping operations! Chapter after chapter there was so much fashionable and difficult language that the plot was smothered. You couldn't see the woods for the trees, But it was the accidental finding of an ancient and reminiscent volume one Sunday in a little hotel which gave me the cue to what really made us such confirmed rebels against constituted authority, in a literary way of speaking. The thing which inspired us with hatred for the so-called juvenile classic was a thing which struck deeper even than the sentiments I have been trying to describe.

The basic reason, the underlying motive, lay in the fact that in the schoolbooks of our adolescence, and notably in the school readers, our young mentalities were fed forcibly on a pap which affronted our intelligence at the same time that it cloyed our adolescent palates. It was not altogether the lack of action; it was more the lack of plain common sense in the literary spoon victuals which they ladled into us at school that caused our youthful souls to revolt. In the final analysis it was this more than any other cause which sent us up to the haymow for delicious, forbidden hours in the company of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok.

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