

The Free Press' Short Story

THE PHILOSOPHERS' CLUB

RUSSELL GORDON CARTER

GEORGE WOOD, seated cross-legged with his three companions under the big oak in the grove behind the Wood house, looked gravely from Jinky Jenks to Custard Peyser to Chilly North. "Never was a Philosophers' Club at school, far as I know. Ours will be the first—"

"And maybe the last," suggested Chilly. "Say, why not make it a literary club or a hikers' club or something useful?"

"Sure," added Custard. "I don't know much about philosophy. What good is it?"

"Neither do I," Jinky admitted. "A high school junior isn't supposed to know things outside the course of study."

George looked grieved. "If you don't know anything about it, that's all the more reason why you ought to learn."

"How so?" inquired Jinky.

"Take my kid brother, Splinter," George replied earnestly. "You know how he is—the freshest kid in Dobbville, always doin' something to get a fellow sore, thinks the world is his watermelon, you know—"

"Just like my kid brother," Custard interrupted him, sympathetically. "He's a mean little egg."

"Yes, and like mine, too," added Jinky.

Chilly had no small brother, but he owned a fox terrier named Bobo, and Bobo considered the world his bone.

"That dog of mine is worse than any kid brother!" Chilly declared.

"Well, there you are," said George. "Custard and Jinky and I all have fresh kid brothers, and Chilly has a fresh dog, and we all complain about 'em. Now if we were real philosophers we wouldn't let kids or dogs or anything worry us; we'd take 'em philosophically."

"Huh," said Jinky in some doubt. "I've tried that lots of times, but it didn't work."

"That's because you're not a philosopher," George pointed out. "Didn't you admit you didn't know beans about philosophy? I've got a book on it, and what I propose is that every week we meet here under this friendly, spreading oak and read together. It's a great idea, fellows—something that'll affect your whole life. You'll see what a big difference it'll make. We'll all be happy, and"—George paused impressively—"we'll know just how to handle kid brothers and fox terriers."

The others made no immediate reply, but it was clear that the remark about kid brothers and fox terriers had impressed them. In the end they agreed to form the club. Jinky and Custard said they didn't care much about philosophy for its own sake.

"All right!" said George enthusiastically. "We'll meet here to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock."

That evening after supper George encountered Splinter in the living-room; the small boy had been christened Edison, but few persons besides his mother seemed to know it. "What great things have you been doing to-day, kid?" George inquired.

"Do I have to tell you?" retorted the boy, with a lift of his nose and a flash of his blue eyes.

"You get fresher an' fresher every day, seems to me," said George.

"I mind my own business, though; that's more than some people do," George bit his lips. Young Splinter certainly was a thorn in his side! Well, the kid was due for a jolt. A few hours spent with Plato, Aristotle & Co. would teach George just how to handle him without pricking his thumb, and before long the Splinter would be eating out of his hand. George's intentions were better than his metaphors.

"Ever hear of philosophy, kid?" he inquired. "He was so filled with the subject that he was willing to discuss it even with his insignificant brother."

"No," said Splinter.

"Again George bit his lips; he never could get used to his brother's short answers. Oh, well, a few hours spent with Plato, Aristotle & Co.—"

Splinter drew from his pocket a wide rubber band and with a quick movement jerked it over his head and let it snap around his neck. For a moment his eyes bulged; then as he got used to the pressure they popped back where they belonged. Splinter took the band off and put it into his pocket again.

George regarded him curiously, wondering what the boy meant to do with the band. Splinter always had some crazy plan or other, and George was sure that the rubber band was part of the next one. But he knew better than to ask what it was.

"Say, kid, don't you want me to tell you something about the old philosophers?" he continued.

Splinter grinned. Philosophy! Philosophers! Huh, what did he care about things like that? What he cared about was deep-sea diving. That old rubber band was just the thing he needed, his last piece of apparatus. A little more work on the diving helmet and he would be able to walk along the bottom of the river and see fishes and maybe sponges and coral and everything!

Early the next morning young Splinter, deep-sea diver, continued work on his helmet; his workshop was a thicket

patch of green in front. The next instant the light went out, and he was strangling! Poor Splinter was in a panic! He dropped all of the stones and, clawing at the helmet, came spluttering and gurgling to the surface. He turned blindly and started for the shore. Water cascaded down his shoulders and flew from him in a sparkling shower.

He stumbled up the bank and, dropping to the ground, made all sorts of strange, choking noises that sounded all the more strange because they were coming from inside the box. He tried to loosen the twine, but he couldn't do it; the water had tightened the knot. For a while he poked at it; then at last he started back toward the place where he had left his penknife.

It was at that important moment that the Philosophers' Club, concluded its first meeting. George closed the book and stood up, eager and triumphant. "Great stuff, what? I tell you Diogenes had the right idea! Now remember what I said; if anything bothersome comes up, keep cool and—"

George dropped the book. Happening to glance down towards the brook, he had seen to his amazement a strange-looking box floating among the willows that fringed the stream! He didn't realize that it was his tool chest; he didn't realize anything. He was dumfounded. For the lower part of Splinter's body was hidden by the tank, and as far as George was concerned the box was just simply bobbing along as if it were filled with some strangely buoyant gas!

"What's what's the matter, George?" cried Jinky, starting up.

The others got hastily to their feet.

"Oh!" said George in a weak voice. Splinter had stopped upward, and now George could see what made the box float. His amazement changed swiftly to anger.

"My kid brother!" he cried. "My tool chest!"

"Hey, George—"

But George was already halfway down the bank.

The tool chest had stopped, and was staring out of its square, single eye at the indignant, onrushing brother. As he drew close it said in a hollow voice, "George, cut this hunk o' string around my neck, will you?"

George stopped short; his eyes were blazing, and his hands clenched. Tool chest ruined! Tools all scattered about! And if he weren't mistaken, that looked like part of his raincoat. Gone now was all thought of Diogenes. Unable to speak, George seized the deep-sea diver by the arm, gave him a pull and then a push that sent him reeling toward the water.

As Splinter went to his knees up came both hands, and eight fingers closed round the stubborn twine. The small boy gave a yank that certainly would have gallotted him if he twine, fortunately, had not broken. Splinter bent over and scraped the helmet from his head.

"What's the idea, puhlin' me like that?" he demanded.

George simply glared at him. Words could not express his thoughts.

Splinter glared back at his brother, then, whirling in an ostentatiously casual manner, he started slowly up the hill. He had had enough thrills for one day.

Jinky and Custard and Chilly, who had been silent onlookers, tried hard not to grin; it was especially hard because Jinky and Custard each could see in Splinter his own brother, and Chilly thought he could see in him his fox terrier. Only when the savage blint had gone from George's eyes, and he was beginning to look as if he realized that he hadn't acted quite as a philosopher should have, did one of them venture to speak. Then—

"Say George, would old Diogenes have acted the way you did toward Splinter just now?" Jinky inquired slyly.

"No," replied George. "Diogenes would have banged him over the head with that tub of his! Anyway, Diogenes didn't have a kid brother; I guess that's why he was so happy."

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Arthur, aged seven, had carefully bitten out all the soft pieces of his alien of loaf, neatly piling the crusts on the edge of his plate.

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"Of course I did," lied the father, slyly.

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