

Boys Would Be Boys in 1938

By Eleanor Todd

FICTION

Contest First Prize



Now Charlie, take it easy," Ma said. "Boys will be boys, you know. He just wasn't thinking."

I had ducked and Pa's big hand had missed my ear and knocked my hat clean over to the back door. Good for Ma! I knew she was itching for a scrap with Pa and wasn't particular about a reason, so I retrieved my hat and just kept on going. I sat down on the back stoop to mull things over while my folks had a good old set-to over dinner. Pa was made about his ruined pen nib and the prospect of a puny potato crop and Ma wasn't letting on yet what was bothering her but she'd been building up to something for a couple of days and we were all going to fee a lot better when she finally came out with it.

I licked my thumb and rubbed my new bottle cap. It looked right at home on Granddaddy's old fedora. That was one time being the youngest had paid off. When Granddaddy died both of my big brothers had wanted his hat so Pa gave it to me to stop an argument. Now I'd started another by using his pen to pry out the cork. I guess I knew it would ruin the nib all right. I guess I just didn't think it mattered.

Pa was upset and Ma was upset, but I was mad too. Everybody and his uncle was talking about the big Joe Louis-Max Schmeling fight and how they were going to listen to it on the radio. I wanted to hear that fight too but I was low man on the totem pole at our house. Our crystal set had only two pairs of earphones and both Pa and my brother Sam had dibs on those.

If only Sam would get married and move out like Young Charlie did! It would be Pa and me listening together and I'd be in my glory. Well, there wasn't much chance of that happening, not even in time for the hockey season. Sam was seeing some girl over on the 4th Concession and I'd heard Young Charlie teasing him about getting hitched soon, but Sam just said, "What's the use in buying a cow when you can get the milk for free?" I didn't know what he meant then but it sure sounded like my dream of me and Pa and the earphones was still a long way off.

Lordy, it was hot on that back stoop! The cement was going to fry my hide right through my overalls if I didn't move soon. Pa had calmed down some and I could hear Ma telling him how she'd run into the schoolteacher up at the store, and how he'd said he was interested in the big fight too. He said he'd been a fight fan ever since Gentleman Jim Corbett knocked out John L. Sullivan in the 21st round in 1892. Ma seemed to think that if the schoolteacher liked boxing, it must be respectable. She was telling Pa that the schoolteacher said John L. Sullivan had been an evangelist before he died and went around preaching against the evils of strong drink. I could see that she was leading up to another tirade

over Pa's drinking habits so I got up and walked out to the front of the house.

It was a bit too soon yet but I looked up the hill anyway to see if Joe Fitchett had started out with his milk wagon. There was nothing moving the whole length of the road in front of our house, not a dog or a squirrel or even a window curtain. The coolest thing I could think of to do was to check my secret storehouse under the verandah. I had just about enough time before I walked down to my sister Fern's house. I wanted to work it so that I'd get there at about the same time as Joe and his milk wagon.

I crawled under where the lattice work had rotted away and pulled the boards and potato sacks from the hole I'd dug next to the stone foundation of the house. I had a tub full of sawdust in that hole and at the bottom of the tub I kept some broken chunks of ice from the icehouse at the hotel. Aunt Mary liked me and she'd let me go into the icehouse to cool off.

"I'll not have a whole passel of youngsters messing around in here, Gordie," she'd say. "But you come by your lonesome and you're welcome anytime."

I'm sure she knew I never left empty-handed but I suppose I should have asked her if I could take those chunks of ice. It never occurred to me that I was stealing, just like I never thought of taking that cream as stealing. All I thought about was how I was going to have the best time I ever had while Pa and Sam were listening to the big fight. I was going to have as much whipped cream as I could eat.

I lifted out my two jars. One held the milk I'd saved from dinner the day before, and the other held the precious cream I'd spooned from the top of the milk bottle. Ma had given me a piece of her mind when she thought I'd helped myself to a glass without shaking the bottle. Today I'd have to try something different or she'd give me more than a piece of her mind, but I had it all worked out. I felt around in the west sawdust. My ice chunks were just about gone so I'd have to visit Aunt Mary too. I put my two jars in a boot box and headed down the road for Fern's place.

When I turned the corner I could see Fern sitting on her doorstep and Joe's wagon already stopped in front of the house next door. I hightailed it as fast as I could so I'd get there before Fern went back into the house.

"I'll be happy to put your milk in the cellar for you, Fern, so's you can go right up to Millie Vanhorn. Truth to tell, I couldn't picture Fern hurrying anywhere. She was pregnant and already so big that Ma thought it was disgraceful that she was still walking out every day to the post office.

"Why thank you, Gordie," she beamed. "I'll take your offer." And off she went without so much as a backward glance.

It was so easy I almost felt guilty. Before I put Fern's milk

away I spooned out some of the cream and refilled her bottle from the jar of milk in my boot box.

I cut across the fields and pulled the same stunt at Young Charlie's place. I knew nobody would be home there because Alma was helping out at Mackenzie's while they got ready for their auction. Then when I got to the hotel I hit the jackpot. Aunt Mary was baking and had half a bottle of cream on the kitchen table. I helped myself to a couple or three spoonful while she went out to the barroom to tend to a customer. There was now close to a cup of cream in my jar and I figured it would do, so after I scrounged around in the sawdust for some ice, I headed straight home with my treasure.

When I finally went in to see what was cooking for supper, Pa and Sam were home already and they all stopped talking and looked at me. I thought the jig was up for sure and my heart skipped a beat. It was no time to forget to wipe my feet and hang up my hat, so I did. "I'll just get a towel and go wash up, Ma," I volunteered. Then I noticed that she looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary, and Pa had something close to a grin on his face.

"Go into the parlor first, Gordie," said Ma. "There's something you ought to see."

Holy cow! Ma letting me into the parlor in my overalls had to be some kind of miracle! I opened the door and went in, with Ma and Pa and Sam tripping all over themselves to come in right behind me.

"Ain't it a beauty Gordie?" and Ma hurried past me to rub the hem of her apron over a brand new Rogers-Majestic radio, deluxe model, with short wave and police bands as well as standard, and it stood almost as high as my still underdeveloped Adam's apple.

"Five dollars down and a dollar a week," said Pa. "No more humbugs on Saturday nights 'till we pay for this baby."

The potato crop must have started to look a lot better after Ma got through with him, I thought to myself.

"Darn near as much as a car," added Sam. He'd been hinting at Pa for weeks to sell him our old McLaughlin and buy a new '38 sedan.

Ma turned the knob just in time for the fanfare that introduced the 6:30 news. You could hear it all over the parlor. If you left the door open you could even hear it in the kitchen, and I could almost make out what Jim Hunter had to say out in the woodshed while I scrubbed my hands and face.

The next day when Pa came in for dinner, Ma was brim full of excitement. She'd been talking to the schoolteacher again and had invited him and his wife over to listen to the fight on our new radio. We were owners of the first electric radio in the village and she didn't intend to keep it a secret. She said that Nettie Jackson had offered to bake a batch of oatmeal cookies and the parson's wife

would bring some lemonade, and the two Miss Coopers had expressed an interest in joining us on this auspicious occasion. But Pa had some news of his own. He'd been talking to folks at the post office and the men hanging around the railway station and he'd been inviting all and sundry to our house as well. Our parlor wasn't big enough for that crowd.

I could see that Ma was getting ready to blow a gasket but Pa headed her off by saying they'd move the radio out to the front verandah and it wouldn't matter if the entire village dropped by to listen while the Brown Bomber evened the score with the Hun. There wasn't a doubt in Pa's mind that Joe Louis could do it but Ma wasn't so sure. The school teacher had said that Schmeling could take anything Joe Louis dished out. What was more, Schmeling was the only man who had ever put Joe flat on his back. Well, Pa wasn't about to let Ma think that the school teacher was the only authority on boxing so he told her that when Schmeling had won the heavyweight championship he was in such bad shape that he had to be crowned on his knees. While Ma was thinking that one over, Pa and Sam carried the new radio outside.

It seemed like it was taking the whole afternoon to get that radio operational again and I was worried that I'd never get an opportunity to retrieve my cream from under the verandah. Not that it mattered so much now that I was going to listen to the fight too, but I'd gone to a lot of trouble to acquire that cream and it was a shame to let it spoil.

Sam had to go clean to the Blackburn farm to borrow an extension cord and Pa sent me running to find an iron rod for the ground wire while he shimmied up the verandah post to attach the aerial. Ma kept running back and forth from the kitchen in her supervisory capacity. I returned with the poker from the stove in the parlor and breathed a sigh of relief when Pa let me drive it into the ground myself. I was afraid that if he did it he might notice the rotting lattice work and get too curious about the size of the hole. But Pa had other things on his mind. He decided that the reception might be better if he strung the aerial up higher, so he got the ladder and Ma held it for him while he fastened the aerial to the chimney and then stretched it across to the big maple. Meanwhile neighbors kept stopping to pass the time of day and offer advice, and I was getting downright edgy about my cream.

I finally got my chance to move it while Pa was putting the ladder away. The phone rang, two longs and a short for the Jackson house, and Ma went inside to listen in. I stashed my cream under the lilac bush behind the woodshed.

After that it was smooth sailing all the way. I got a big bowl and the egg beater while everybody was out front waiting for the boxing match to begin. The new radio

was such a marvel that even the kids and dogs stayed close by so they wouldn't miss anything and I had the backyard all to myself. I sugared my concoction and gobbled it fast because, from the sound of the commotion on the verandah, the fight must have started.

I hurried out along the north side of the house, but all of a sudden I wasn't feeling so good and just before I reached the corner I upchucked - whipped cream, supper, and my boots too if I wasn't mistaken. I could see them there in the mess. As soon as I had my wits about me I looked up to see if anybody had noticed, and there was the entire village peering from the verandah, every eye on me and not a sound coming from the radio.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Folks started murmuring and averting their eyes, not quite sure of the social niceties appropriate for a situation like this, and one by one they began taking their leave. Ma was mortified. It was all she could do too politely at her departing guests but I could see her getting redder and redder. Pa was trying to laugh it off like some kind of joke but he wasn't coaxing folks to stay. Surely my disgrace wasn't serious enough to spoil everybody's enjoyment of the biggest fight of the century!

"What's wrong?" I repeated to Joyce Vanhorn's dog. He was the only one still looking at me. Joey heard me and turned around.

Fight's over," he said. "Joe Louis knocked Max Schmeling out cold, two minutes and four seconds into the first round.

"And to think I wasted a whole afternoon scheming and finagling for that!" Pa was saying to the schoolteacher.

I looked over at Ma again. She had me in her sights and was getting ready to spit bullets as soon as the neighbors were out of ear shot. I wasn't the only thing that had spoiled her chance to be queen for a day, but I was the only thing she could lay her hands on. I decided to make myself scarce.

"Now, now, Lizzie," I heard Pa say, as I crawled beneath the lilac bush. "Boys will be boys, you know. He's learned his lesson."

We have a winner!

Eleanor Todd of Goodwood has won the first-ever Tribune Fiction Contest. One of our judges said "I know these people! The language and voices are true. A fine work." Eleanor wins a \$400 gift certificate from Stonehouse Travel in Stouffville. Second prize went to Vivienne Gornall for her tale 'Old Jay and Dirty Bert'. She wins a dinner for two and third prize went to Kent Wideman of Stouffville for 'Miracle of Fainting'. He wins tickets to Canada's Wonderland. Congratulations to all.