The Big Brothers of the Conquest Class

By Helen A. Hawley.

"As there is no other special business before the class, will someone please make a motion that we resolve ourselves into a committee of the whole? I understand one of our members has a question he wishes to present informally." The president of the Conquest Class rose to make this request and announcement. The motion having been promptly made and carried, the president then named a chairman of this committee and nodded to someone on side of the room, as much as to say, "Go ahead."

At that, the member thus indicated slowly rose. John Andrews always appeared to get up in sections, he was so oddly deliberate about it. Once up, he was six feet—lean, long and sinewy—with a capacity for lightning-like movements.

"I just wanted to say," he began, "that I had a proposal from a girl the other day"—he waited a second for the applause which was sure to follow; when it subsided, he went on as if the sentence had not been interrupted—"and I accepted it. Perhaps I was guilty of undue haste, but—I accepted it."

Another burst of cheers, and various informal asides. "Can't want us all to be ushers an dbest men, can he?" "Have to be saving our spare cash for the class present." Yet most of the members suspected that back of John's drollery lay some strong purpose, and they waited.

"Let me explain." His face became serious. "Please excuse me for playing to the galleries. It's my way to start with a bit of fun, but I don't fancy the outcome of this proposal will be much fun for me. 'Twas a little girl asked me—not more than twelve years old she is—and she wanted me to be a 'big brother' to her brother, who is thirteen, and going to the bad, she feared, as fast as a youngster can. Oh, I see plenty of questions you wish to spring on me, so fire away. How did she know about big brothers. Well, she seemed to be a good little thing, and belongs to our school. She gets Sunday-school papers, and she'd read something about the Big Brothers. I was substitute for her teacher once or twice. The combination she had worked out in her own head. She was in dead earnest—tears in her eyes, and all that. Its being a softy, I know, but I can't stand feminine tears, so I made unconditional surrender at sight. Where's the father and and mother? Father lit out years ago—may be dead. Mother does laundry work. Too tired nights and Sundays to look after her boy much, even if she didn't have to do all the work of the house a girl of twelve can't accomplish. Any more questions?"

Some one suggested: "Let John go on with his story; we can ask questions later."

"Thanks. May as well steer straight to the climax, though I expect there'll be more climaxes to come. Well, this tearful little Miss wanted me to undertake her brother's reformation, get him into Sunday-school, and be responsible for him generally. He's been in Sunday-school off and on—usually on for the Christmas treats and off for the rest of the year—but lately he informs her that he's 'cut it' entirely. I judge he's quite ungovernable at home, and they are in a constant state of fear, lest he get into the police court, which the small damsel evidently thought would disgrace him forever. Privately, I thought it might not hurt him to be brought up roundly, but, of course, I didn't tell her so. She was a wise little thing—said it wouldn't answer for him to know she'd managed it. Well, I promised, thinking all the time what a big fool a grown man can be. She gave me such a radiant smile, though, as partly paid."

"Did you know him by sight, John?"

"How did you begin?" Two irrepressible members spoke at once.

"No, I didn't know him, but she told me what he looked like, and I made enough inquiries to identify him. He isn't bad looking, just bold and defiant. The beginning was by chance; if anything does come that way, which I doubt. I came on him in the nick of time, too. He was nearly at blows with another boy, who threatened to make it hot for him. It gave me the opportunity to interfere. 'What's the row?' I said, stepping up.

"The strange boy broke out, 'he stole my wheel. He was on it when I caught him.' A motorcycle stood there."

"'Didn't steal it,' says my youngster. 'Borrowed it. Was bringin' it back. 'Twan't doin' nothing—nobody usin' it—and I thought I'd like to take a joy ride, they bein' so fashionable.' He grinned delightfully, and before I knew it, I grinned back. 'Twas wrong, I suppose, but it's the old Adam in me, I expect.

"Then I pulled up and remarked rather severely, 'Only roughs or toughs care to use a strangers property without paying for it. Now you (emphasis on "you") want to be a gentleman. Do you happen to have any money with you?'

"My boy—his name is Joe Slattery—opened his eyes and his mouth in broad astonishment.

"'Nary cent.'

"'Very well.' I said gravely, 'I will advance the money, and you can pay me later.' With that I took out a quarter and almost forced it on the other boy, who began to look sheepish. 'That'll be fair, won't it?' He thanked me, mounted the wheel, and rode off. That's the way it began." John stopped.

"Go on! Go on!" The words came from several mouths. Don't stop in the most interesting place. Whatnext?"

"That's just the question I asked myself," Andrews said, "but my youngster forestalled the answer. 'Xpect me to pay that, Mister?' Joe opened rather brazenly. We were walking away together.

"'Certainly,' I answered, 'and at once. As you have no money, you can work it out. Come along with me, and I'll have you use a lawn mower for an hour or so.' I knew my landlady wanted her yard trimmed.

"I think the boy was really so surprised at my bluff, that he didn't realize he could run away,, though there was another reason which soon came out. For, as we walked along, he sidled a little closer, and said, 'Say, Mister, will you show me the trick?' 'What trick?' says I, not knowing more than the man in the moon what he was driving at. 'The trick you did when you slung Bill Hoster over the bridge the other day.' No need to enter into particulars—'twas just a sleight-of-hand exhibition I'd felt called to give."

"Story! Story!" shouted the class.

"Well, if you will have it. Only last week I was out on the river road, and on the bridge I saw two boys holding a kid about five years old over the water and, making believe they were going to chuck him in. The child was pale as death,, too frightened to cry. Their backs were toward me, and I covered the ground rapidly. Before they knew what was up, I had freed the kid with one hand, lifted the biggest boy over the parapet with the other and dropped him in. The water wasn't deep enough there to do any hurt. The other chap ran away, but he had time to take my measure. He was my Joe Slattery, and it seemed he was both pleased with the fact that Bill Hoster had his match while he himself got off scot free, but he was also filled with admiration at my dexterity."

"What did you tell him, John?" The class were as eager as boys themselves.

"I told him"—John Andrews' eyes twinkled—"I would surely show him the trick, only he would have to promise me certain things. 'Fer instance?' the youngster said boldly. 'One thing, for instance, that you will never use the trick except to help someone who needs help.' Do you know, he thought a minute before answering, 'I guess I could go for that—'less I wanted to too-bad.' Didn't I know, brothers of the Conquest Class, just what that meant?" John's voice had taken on a deep sonorous ring of earnestness.

"I think you are well on the road to winning him," the president said.

"What are you going to do with him?" another asked.

"Don't know yet—haven't got so far. One thing, I'll see he goes to school, and doesn't play truant. Oh, I expect there are plenty of hard rows to hoe, but I'm in for it, and don't intend to flunk. I've talked more about myself, fellows, than is pleasant for a humble person"—again his droll smile shone out—"but it has been for a purpose. I want to propose this question, not as a motion today, but as something to be thought over and thought out before our next business meeting. Shall we, as a class, take up the Big Brother business as one branch of our class work? I'm in for it as an individual, but when one of our number gets on to a good thing, I think he ought to be unselfish and pass it around."

A smile rippled over the fifty faces present.

"Please be patient a minute longer," John Andrews continued, "for there's one thing more I want to say. Having this boy thrust upon me, has opened my eyes to one thing. We belong as a class to the Sunday-school, but with our separate room and our separate exercises, how very little we know about the school as a whole. Isn't there work right here at our hand to look out for stray-away boys and for those who have never been in? We could be Big Brothers to those who have not yet become criminal, but are perilously near to being on the road. In this day I believe the doctors consider prevention better than cure.'

Andrews ceased, and the president said, "What will you do with this proposition?'

A man in one corner—a hard-working mechanic—rose, and in a voice rather tremulous prefaced his motion. "As a boy, I knew what it was to run wild, and the danger of it. I move that this committee of the whole have leave to sit again at our next meetong, and that the Big Brother question have precedence in the order of business." This motion was carried unanimously, and a motion to adjourn was then in order.

The next business meeting was one of very serious, if informal, discussion. In the interest of time and brevity, the various motions put, and amendments offered, will not be related here in detail—only some things which were said and the conclusions reached. The meeting was full. It was felt that no more important work had ever been presented, or one which called for more real selfdenial. To hand out money in charity, to work in cooperation with others for civic good, seemed now quite simple compared to this dealing with individual boys—boys restive under restraint—and becoming in a large degree responsible for their present and future well-being.

The teacher always attended the business meetings as an unofficial member. He now rose, and, in a voice somewhat husky with its intensity of emotion, said, "Mr. President, if it is not out of order, mak I offer prayer?'

The president inclined his head, and every head was bowed, while some prayer, for the wisdom so much needed, ascended to the Father's ear. Somehow it seemed to clear the air, and there was more freedom of expression. As usual, some were more timid than others about new ventures, but soon one coraageous man put the mind of the majority in these terse words: "We bear the name, 'The Conquest Class.' The name means very little unless we expect to make conquest over difficulties. This work comes to us unsought—it looks to me like a call." When the vote was taken soon after, there was no dissent—the Conquest Class was committed to this new service of brotherhood. When methods of approach were talked over, John Andrews was asked if he had any additional information to give concerning his own experiment.

John answered, "I've kept Joe pretty well insight since last week, and we've had several conversations. I've told him that I'm going to stand by and see that he has a fair chance, but he must be fair to me. I expect him to go to Sunday-school. At that, he said, 'What for? Sunday-school's for kids.'

"'Well,' I said, 'I'm not very much of a kid myself, and I go every Sunday.'

"'You! Gee!" It seems he didn't know about our class—another proof that we're too much aloof from the main body. 'Yes,' I said, 'and about fifty others go who are no more kids than myself.' I'm Joe doesn't seem much in awe of afraid I'm not very dignified, for me." John's sunny smile spread over his face. "The boy sprang this question at once: "Say Mister, did you go when you were as old as me, an' keep right on?' Fellows if ever I was glad of one thing, it was for a mother who made me go to Sunday-school, whether I wanted to or not, and I could say 'Yes' to his question. He looked up rather admiringly, I thought, and then coolly remarked, 'I guess I'll do it, if you'll be teacher.' That stumped me for a minute, but I didn't give in—it wasn't best to let the youngster think he could run me. So I said, 'I am not a teacher; I am in a class myself, but you shall be put under a good teacher, and in a class with boys of your own age.' As to the week day side of Joe's life, I have about decided to make him my office boy out of school hours."

"That's a good deal of trust to put in such a youngster," someone suggested.

"Well, the way to make him trustworthy is to trust him." Then with his droll twinkle, John added, "I don't say I shall leave every drawer unlocked or give him the safe combination at present.'

This was nearly a year ago. While the Big Brothers of the Conquest Class do not think they have wrought any wonderful works, they are happy in the knowledge that at least a dozen vulnerable boys who were fast slipping away from good influences have been reduced to something like control, and have returned to membership in the Sunday-school through their direct efforts. At first, the plan proposed was to form these wild youngsters into a Junior Conquest Class, but a wiser thought prevailed. It was better to scatter them among other and better trained boys, than to let them become a clan by themselves.

"After all" one Big Brother said to another, "there is something in muscular Christianity. Our Big Brother work really began with John Andrews pitching that young rapscallion into the river. He won Joe Slattery by that action."

"Yes," the other quietly answered, "but if John Andrews hadn't possessed also heart Christianity, the movement would never have come to healthy life."

"That's so! And that reminds me. I heard Joe saying that Bill Hoster has promised to come in next Sunday. He's the fellow who was pitched in. Joe seems to be doing some work on his own account."—Selected.

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