

A popular, warmhearted author recalls a momentous boyhood experience: the day he discovered something worth shouting about

course it is always pleasant for a boy to be nicely integrated, because if he isn't, why should any girl bother to look at him twice instead of once, or speak to him, or want to be near him, or like him? Or why should anybody, or God, or fate, or luck? But it wasn't handsomeness, either.

Was it swiftness? Well, of course being able to move swiftly, walking, running, or riding a bicycle was always exhilarating and frequently also useful; and being able to think swiftly and make a decision swiftly and to behave decently swiftly was always a good thing, but it wasn't swiftness, either.

Well, just *what* was he trying for, then?

He didn't know. It was more, that's all. It had to do with everything, but he didn't know *how*.

BUT AFTER SCHOOL every day, watching the people in the streets, he was trying to find out, and he was trying at school every day, and at church every Sunday, and every night before going to sleep, but he wasn't making it, although once or twice during the instant just before he fell asleep he almost made it, he almost *had* it, and then it was too late again, he was fast asleep. He had *almost* had it but he had permitted himself to slip away into the luxury of sleep, so that when he woke up in the morning the world was still cold, crazy, and crooked. And it didn't seem worth the bother to get out of bed.

On Aug. 31, 1921, he was 13 full years of age and still nowhere.

The whole natural world was breathing deeply at the height of another summer: the grapes on the vines were ripe and ready, the figs on the trees were fat and black, the branches of the peach trees were barely able to carry the weight of their fruit, laughing water raced around rocks in the Kings and San Joaquin Rivers and through thousands of miles of irrigation ditches. Dragonflies hovered over the cool waters, dazzling in the light and the reflected light. At sundown doves cooed memory and love, and killdeer called quick sharp lonely reprimands to the sun for sneaking away again with the light. Unseen frogs and crickets tuned up their instruments, chose their music, and then performed a perfectly constructed symphony with-

out conductor or effort. All reality felt its truth and immortality, and only a small boy, a member of the ridiculous human race, stood and listened in the empty lot next to his house and didn't understand.

Thirteen years of age right down to the last minute, and still a fool.

The world meant something, to be something alive meant something, but to be a *man* alive, to belong to that incredible family, the human race, meant *more* than something, it meant everything, only nobody seemed to know what, and nobody seemed to care, either.

Except *him*. He knew there was everything to know, and he knew that he knew nothing. He knew he cared, too, and it was damnably tiring.

Before he knew it, September was gone, and then October. And then came November and December and January, and the New Year, and the only difference was that now the world was cold, frozen stiff, and stupid.

He was reading all the time: a leftover copy of the paper he sold every night, *The Fresno Evening Herald*: a leftover copy of the magazine he sold every Thursday, *The Saturday Evening Post*; *Boys' World* and *What to Do*, Sunday School papers: school books, and books from the public library.

AND THEN one day in February it happened, like zowie, but inside, and in silence. He was at Tech High, because there was a typing course at that school and he wanted to be a writer. There was also a small library where he went whenever he had a study period, only instead of studying he wandered around looking for a book that might let him know what he was looking for.

One afternoon he took a book of short stories from a shelf and sat down and didn't even bother to open the book. What good was it? It was just another book, just some more stuff about rich people, fancy stuff, more lies.

At last, though, he opened the book to the title page to see who the writer was. It was somebody named Guy de Maupassant.

Well, he'd try *him*, too. He didn't read the first story, he didn't read the second one, he just opened the book, turned a few pages until he came to

the beginning of a story, and began to read the story, which happened to have the name, in English, of *The Bell*.

He read the story straight through, and then sat a moment just thinking, because now he knew, the reading of the story had finally made him know what it was all about, and he wanted to think about this a moment.

A bell rang, and school was over. Everybody in the library began to race around and out, but he still sat.

WHAT THEY DID was kill the beggar who was called The Bell, and they were all honorable, decent, respected members of the human race in France. They refused him employment, money, food, understanding, and their children called him names, threw stones at him, chased him. When he tried to steal a chicken, he was brutally beaten by a farmer and left lying in a ditch. The village police dragged him to jail the following morning, locked him up, and went away. He waited, saying nothing, thinking nothing, but nobody came. He heard voices and sounds all day, and then it was night, but still no one came.

The next morning when the police went into his cell, they found him dead. Nobody knew when he had died, or how, and it didn't matter. He was just dead. Nobody knew how he had lived, either. Nobody, that is, except a man named Guy de Maupassant.

And now he knew what Guy de Maupassant had known. Guy de Maupassant was dead, but he wasn't, and like Guy de Maupassant he was a writer. At last he knew what it was all about: without pity it doesn't mean anything.

The revelation was so enormous he was speechless. Even after he had left the library and had walked to *The Herald* and had picked up the newspapers he was to sell, he continued to be speechless.

He couldn't even whisper, let alone holler a headline. He was still living out the awful responsibility of being a man of pity, intelligence, honor, love, and perhaps genius, whatever that is, but finally he had it all straight, so then he hollered. The people in the street stopped and turned and looked and listened, because even though he was only hollering the headline, he seemed to be trying to tell them something they ought to know.

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