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McTabb

The LAUGH MAKER

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YOU can laugh too much. You can be too cheerful. You can look too much on the sunny side of life. You wont believe this and neither did Bobby McTabb. But McTabb proved it out. It took the girl to help him—Kitty Duchene was her name—tall and sweet to look upon, with those pure blue eyes, dark with the beauty of violets, that go so well with hair which is brown in the shadow and gold in the sun. They proved it out together, all of a sudden. It is their story. And it will never be believed. But it's the truth.

Bobby McTabb was born fat. He weighed fourteen pounds at the start—and kept going. He doubled up his avoirdupois at the end of the tenth month, was a fraternity joke at college in his twentieth year, and made the scales groan under two hundred and eighty pounds at the end of his thirtieth—when he came to Fawcettville. But don't let these facts prejudice you against Bobby McTabb. At least don't let them give you a wrong steer. For Bobby McTabb, in spite of his fat, was a live one. Fawcettville woke up the day he arrived and began to scrape off the age-old moss from round the hubs of its village institutions. For rumor had preceded Bobby McTabb. It endowed him with immense wealth. He was going to boom Fawcettville. The oldest inhabitants gathered in groups and discussed possibilities, while their sons and younger relations worked in the hay and wheat fields. Some believed a railroad was coming that way. Others that a big factory, like those in the

cities, was to be built. A few smelled oil, and Bobby McTabb's first appearance gave weight to every dream that had been dreamed. The villagers had never seen anything like him, from his patent leather shoes and his gaudily striped waistcoat to his round, rosy, laughing face. He was so fat that he appeared to be short, though he was above medium height, and everyone agreed at first glance that no soul less than that of a millionaire could possibly abide within this earthly tabernacle that disclosed itself to their eyes. But Bobby McTabb quickly set all rumors at rest. He had come to found a bank—the first bank in Fawcettville. At that minute he had just one hundred and twenty-seven dollars in his pocket. But he said nothing of that.

How Bobby McTabb started his bank has nothing to do with this story. But he did it—inside of a week, and prospered. The first part of the story is how he won CONFIDENCE—and met the girl. It was his fat, and his round, rosy, laughing face that counted. Within a month all the men liked him, the children loved him, and mothers and daughters were ready to trust him with anything. And never for an instant did Bobby betray one of their trusts. He was lovable from the boots up, and grew fatter in his prosperity as the months rolled by. He discarded his gaudy attire, and did as the other Romans did—wore a broad-brimmed "hay-ing" hat in summer, "wash shirts," and seamless trousers. He joined the village church, was elected Sunday-school su-

perintendent without a dissenting vote, and was soon the heart and soul of every country rollicking-bee for miles around. Bobby woke up every morning with a laugh in his soul and a smile on his boyish face, and he carried that smile and laugh about with him through every hour of the day. He was happy. Everywhere he preached the gospel of happiness and optimism. If your heart was sick with a heavy burden it would lighten the moment you heard his laugh. And it was a glum face that wouldn't break into a smile when it met Bobby McTabb's coming round the corner.

It was at the end of his second year that Bobby met Kitty Duchene. What sweet-eyed, blue-eyed Kitty might not have done with him Fawcettville will never know. She liked him. She would have loved him, and married him, if he hadn't been so fat. Anyway, grief didn't settle, very heavily upon those ponderous shoulders of B. McTabb. He never laughed a laugh less, and he didn't stop for a minute in making other people laugh. It was his hobby, and all the women in the world couldn't have broken it. "Make your neighbors laugh and you shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven," he used to say. "Drive out worry and care and you are clubbing the devil." And so it came to pass that by the time he had spent three years in Fawcettville, Bobby McTabb was greater in his community than the governor of the state or the president of the nation. And this was the condition of affairs toward which Bobby had been planning.

And then, one morning, he was missing.

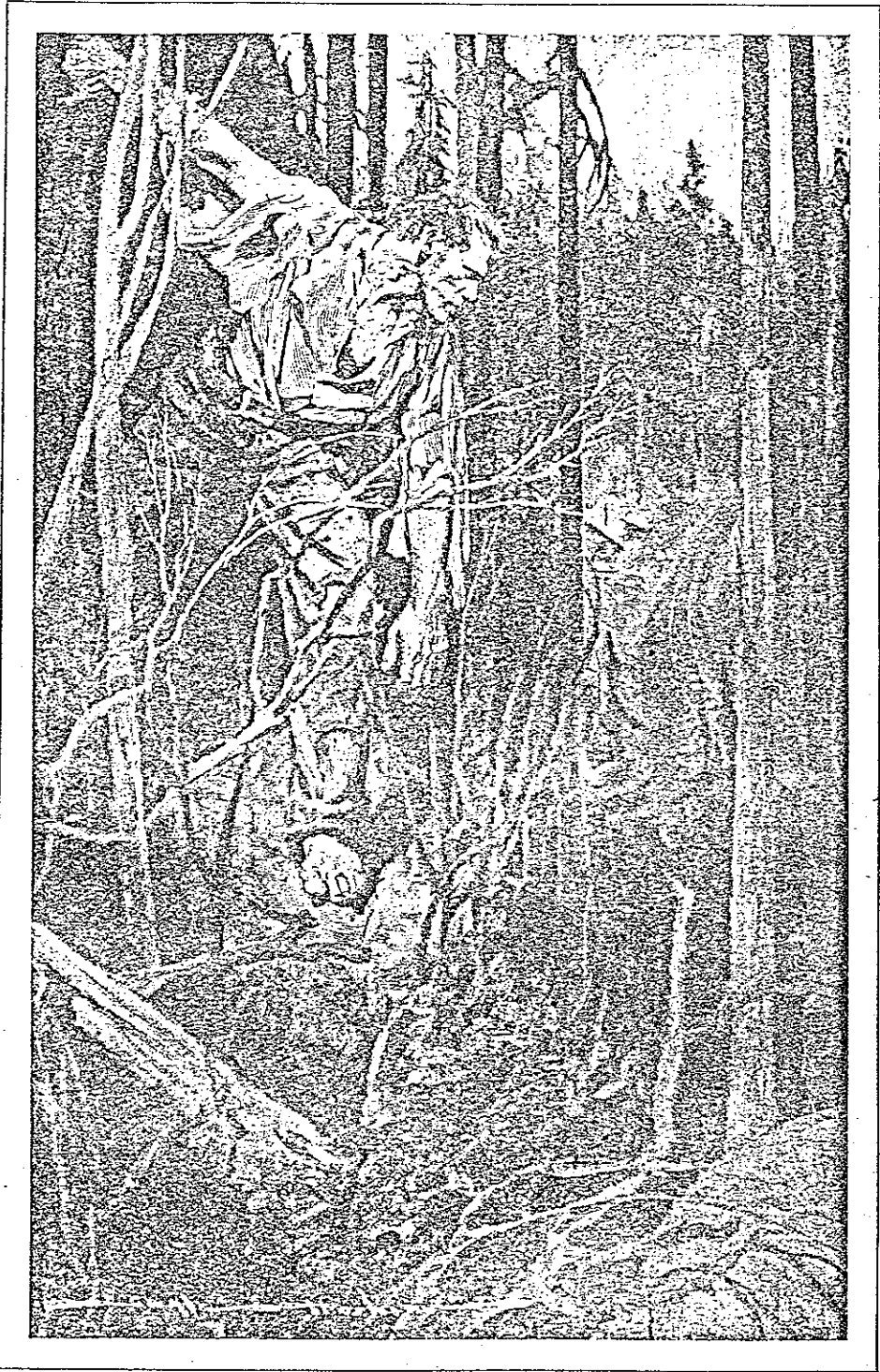
When the odds and ends of things had been counted out, and various columns checked up, it was found that just a hundred and forty thousand dollars had gone with Bobby McTabb.

II

It was the third of July that Bobby shook the dust of Fawcettville from his feet. So he had the third, and all day the fourth, which was a holiday, in which to get a good start.

Bobby was original, even in robbing a bank. In fact, this is not so much the story of a bank pillage as it is of Bobby's originality. Europe, Monte Carlo, and Cape Town played as small parts in his plans as did Timbuctoo and Zanzibar. He loved his own people too well to go very far away from them. So he went to Duluth, where a launch was waiting for him. On the Fourth of July he set out alone along the northern shore up Superior, which is unbroken wilderness from Duluth to Fort William. Three days later a fisherman found McTabb's boat wrecked among the rocks, and on the shore near the launch were Bobby's coat and hat, sodden and pathetic. Of course there were cards and letters in the pockets of that coat, and also a roll of small bills. So identification was easy. Close on the lurid newspaper tales of Bobby McTabb's defalcation followed the still more thrilling story of his death. And, meanwhile, Bobby thought this the best joke of his life, and with a kit of supplies on his back was hiking straight North into the big timber.

The joke lived until about ten o'clock in the morning of the first day, when the whole affair began to appear a little less clever to Bobby McTabb. It was hot, and not one decent half-mile of travel did Bobby find. Up and down ridges of broken rock, through tangled swamps and forests of spruce and cedar he went, hitting it as straight north as a tenderfoot could make it by compass. The water poured down his round, red face, wet his collar first, and gradually soaked him to the tips of his toes. But it was not the heat that troubled him most. He was fat and succulent, as tender as a young chicken, and the black flies gathered from miles around to feast upon him. By noon his face was swollen until he could hardly see. His nose was like a bulb; his feet were blistered; a thousand bones and joints that he had never supposed were in the human anatomy began to ache, and for the first time in his life his jolly heart went *loco*, and he began to swear. The railroad was forty miles north. He had planned



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to reach that, and follow it to some small station, whence he would take a train into the new mining country that was just opening up, westward. It was a terrible forty miles. He would look at his compass, strike out confidently toward the North Pole, and five minutes later discover that he was traveling east or west. Early in the afternoon he got into a swamp of caribou moss that was like a spring bed, three feet thick, under his feet. It held him up nicely for a time, and the softness of it was as balm to his sore feet. Then he came to a place where a caribou would have sniffed, and turned back. But B. McTabb went on—and in. He went in—first to his knees, then to his middle, then to his neck, and by the time he had wallowed himself to the safety of firmer footing there was not a spot of him that was not covered with black mud. At two o'clock Bobby McTabb struck firm ground. He believed that he had traveled thirty-nine miles. But he made up his mind that he would camp, and make the last mile in the cool of the morning. As a matter of fact the lake was only six miles behind him.

When Bobby awoke on the morning of the second day he was so stiff that he waddled and so sore that he groaned aloud, and then he made the discovery—the alarming discovery—that was the beginning of the making of a new man of him. His rubber grub-bag was torn to shreds, and what was left of his provisions could have been gathered into a salt cellar. All about the front of his tent were tracks as big as a hat, and though he had never seen tracks like those before he knew that they were the visiting cards of a very big and a very hungry bear. "My Gawd!" said B. McTabb. "My-Gawd!" he repeated over and over again, when he found nothing but crumbs and a bacon string.

Then he reflected that the railroad must be but a short distance away, and that he would surely strike some habitation or town before dinner-time. His shoulders were sore, so he left his tent behind him, stopping every time he came to a saskatoon tree or a clump of

wild raspberries. The fruit did very well for a time, but like many another tenderfoot before him, he did not learn until too late that the little red plums, or saskatoons, are as bad as green apples when taken into an uncultivated stomach. He began to suffer along toward noon. He suffered all of that day, and far into the night, and when the dawn of the second day came he was no longer the old Bobby McTabb, but a half-mad man. For three days after this the black flies fed on him and the fruit diet ate at his vitals. On the morning of the sixth day he came to the railroad, nearly blind, bootless, and starving, and was found by a tie-cutter named Cassidy. For a week he lay in Cassidy's cabin, and when at last he came to his feet again, and looked into a glass, he no longer recognized in himself the tenderly nurtured Bobby McTabb of Fawcettville. His round face had grown thin. A half-inch stubble of beard had pierced his chin and rosy cheeks. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, and there was a looseness in the waist of his trousers that made him gasp. Three days later he weighed himself at the little station up the line and found that he had lost sixty pounds.

From this day on McTabb was a different man. He had relieved himself of sixty pounds of waste, and the effect was marvelous. A new spirit had entered into him by the time he reached the mining country. He prospered—and grew thinner. Unfortunately there is no moral lesson to this little history of B. McTabb. If he had been an ordinary runaway cashier he would have been caught and sufficiently punished, and all the good world would have been warned by his miserable end. But McTabb was not ordinary. He made money with the savings of Fawcettville. He made it so fast that it puzzled him at times to keep count of it. He turned over three claims in the first six months at a profit of a hundred thousand dollars. This was what optimistic Bobby called a "starter." He was in a rough country, and once more he found himself doing as the Romans did. He worked, and

worked hard; he wore heavy boots and shoe-packs, and the more he worked and the more he prospered the thinner he grew.

He was richer each day. Good things came to him like flies to sugar. At the end of his second year in the new bonanza country he was worth a million. And this was not all. For B. McTabb was no longer short and thick. He was tall and thin. From two hundred and eighty he had dropped to one hundred and sixty pounds, and he was five feet ten and a half in his cowhide boots.

But this is not the story of the beginning or the middle of Bobby McTabb. It is the story of his extraordinary and entirely original end, and of the manner in which pretty blue-eyed Kitty Duchene helped to bring that end about.

McTabb was no longer known by that name. He was J. Wesley Brown, promoter and mine owner, and as J. Wesley Brown he met Kitty Duchene once more, in Winnipeg. Kitty was visiting a friend whose father had joined McTabb in a promoting scheme, and all of Bobby's old love returned to him, for in reality it had never died. The one thing that had been missing in his life was Kitty Duchene, and now he began to court her again as J. Wesley Brown. There was nothing about J. Wesley Brown that would remind one of B. McTabb, and of course Kitty did not recognize him. One day Bobby looked deep into Kitty's pure blue eyes and told her how much he loved her, and Kitty dropped her head a little forward, so that he could see nothing but the sheen of her gold-brown

hair, and promised to be his wife.

From this day on more and more of the old Bobby began to show in J. Wesley Brown. He was the happiest man in the North. His old laugh came back, full and round and joyous. He often caught himself whistling the old tunes, telling the old stories, and cracking the old jokes that had made Fawcettville love him. One evening when he was waiting for Kitty, he whistled softly the tune to "Sweet Molly Malone," and when Kitty came quietly into the room her blue eyes searched his questioningly, and there was a gentleness in them which made him understand that the old song had gone straight home, for it was Kitty Duchene



Kittie dropped her head and promised to be his wife.

herself who had taught him the melody, years and years ago, it seemed. She had told him a great deal about Fawcettville, its green hills and its meadows, its ancient orchards and the great "bot-toms," yellow and black with ox-eyed daisies. And to-night she said, with her pretty face very close to his: "I want to live back in the old home, Jim. Do you love me enough for that?"

The thrill in her voice, the soft touch of her hand, stirred Bobby's soul until it rose above all fear, and he promised. He would go back. But—what might happen then? Could he always live as J. Wesley Brown? Would no one ever recognize him? Trouble began to seat itself in his eyes. Misgivings began to fill him. And then, in one great dynamic explosion, the world was shattered about Bobby McTabb's ears.

He had taken Kitty to a carnival, and like two children they were stumbling through a "House of Mystery," losing themselves in its mazes, laughing until the tears glistened in Kitty's happy eyes, when they ran up against two mirrors. One of these made tall and thin people short and fat, and the other made short and fat people tall and thin. Before one of these stepped B. McTabb. For a moment he stood there stunned and helpless. Then he gave a sudden quick gasp and faced Kitty. There was no laughter now in the girl's eyes, but a look of horror and understanding. In that hapless moment Bobby's leanness was gone. He was the old Bobby again, short and ludicrously fat. The girl drew back, her breath breaking in sobbing agony.

"Robert," she cried accusingly. "Robert McTabb!"

She drew still farther away from him, and hopelessly he reached out his arms.

"Kitty—My God, let me explain," he pleaded. "You don't understand—"

But she was going from him, and he did not follow.

III

Now there were three things which might have happened to Bobby Mc-

Tabb. In all justice Kitty should have immediately reported him to the authorities, but she loved him too much for that, and was too loyal to herself ever to see him again. Or, in the despair and hopelessness of the situation, Bobby might have paid penance by drowning himself or hanging himself. There was one other alternative—flight. But, as we have stated, Bobby was an original thief, and he did just what no other thief would have thought of doing.

He turned his properties into cash as quickly as he could, and bought a ticket for Fawcettville. He arrived in the village on a late night train, as he had planned. The place was deserted. People were asleep. With a big throb at his heart he saw that the building which he had once occupied was empty. It was just as he had left it on that third of July morning. Something rose in his throat and choked him as he turned away. After all he loved Fawcettville—loved it more than any other place on earth, and the tears came into his eyes as he passed reverently the old familiar spots, and came at last to Kitty Duchene's home, with the maples whispering mournfully above him. He almost sobbed aloud when he saw a light in Kitty's window. For a long time he sat under the maples, until the light went out and he could no longer see Kitty's shadow against the curtain. All about him were the homes of the people who had loved and trusted him, and he groaned aloud as he turned back.

No one in Fawcettville knew of Bobby McTabb's visit that night. No one in the world knew of the scheme which Bobby carried away with him. On the second day the owner of the bank building received a letter, signed by a stranger, asking him to clean and repair the old building, and enclosing an one-hundred dollar bill for the first quarter's rent. It was twice the rent Bobby McTabb had paid in the old days, and the mystery became the talk of the village.

Bobby came again on the late night train, got off at Henderson, three miles west of Fawcettville, and drove over in

a rig. The rig was heavily laden with various things, but chiefly with a big gilt and gold lettered sign, such as Fawcettville had never known. There were a few who heard the driving of the midnight nails in that sign as it was hung over the new building. After that two men went through the village, as stealthily as thieves, and on every barn and store, and even on the fronts of houses, were pasted bills two feet square; and at dawn other messengers began delivering sealed letters to the farmers for miles around.

The first bright rays of the morning sun lighted up the gilt and gold letters on Bobby's sign, and those letters read:

ROBERT McTABB
Loans, Real Estate and Insurance

Sile Jenks, the milkman, was the first to read the bill in front of his house, and with a wild yell he began awakening his neighbors. Inside of half an hour Fawcettville was in an uproar. Men and women came hurrying toward the old bank building, and in front of that building, with a happy smile on his face, stood Bobby McTabb. Men rushed up to him and wrung his hands until it seemed as though they must pull out his arms; women crowded through to his side; children shouted out his old name; the dogs barked in the old way—he heard the old laughter, the old voices, the old greetings—even deeper and more affectionate now; and then there came the first rigs from the country, followed by others, until they streamed in from all sides, just as they do when a circus comes to town. For three hours Bobby stood up manfully, and then the climax came; for straight up to him, with glorious, shining eyes and love in her face, came Kitty Duchene. She paid no attention to those about them, but put her arms up about Bobby's neck and kissed him.

"NOW I understand," she whispered, looking at him proudly. "But why didn't you tell me—up there, Robert?"

And for the first time in his life Bobby McTabb's voice choked him until he could not speak.

This was what the people of Fawcettville and the country round had read on Bobby's bills and in his letters:

Dear old friends—

You will remember one summer day, nearly five years ago, when I came into your town—Bobby McTabb. I was without friends, without introductions, without money—but you will remember, too, how you received me with open arms, and for two years made life for me here happier than any life that I had ever dreamed might exist for me. You made me love you, as I would have loved my father, my mother, my sister; and I schemed and schemed to think of some way in which I could repay you. At last the time came. I saw an opportunity of making a great deal of money, but to make that money I required a large sum in cash. I believe that most of you would have responded to my call for that cash—but, perhaps foolishly, I had the childish desire TO SURPRISE YOU. So I went away and took your money with me. I have realized, since then, that the joke was not a good one—but never for an instant have I believed that you would lose confidence in me.

Dear old friends, what I went away to achieve I HAVE achieved, and my heart is near bursting with joy at the knowledge that once more I am to be one of you—until the end of life. Friends, I took with me just one hundred and forty thousand dollars of your money, and I have brought you back just six dollars for every one that you have loaned me during that time. Is this work well done? Is it, at last, a proof of the deep love and reverence I hold for you all? I have the money in cash, and every depositor of the old bank, when he calls upon me, will receive just seven dollars in place of every dollar he had deposited.

But it is not money, but love, that counts, dear friends, and I ask that you measure me—not by the gift I am making to Fawcettville—but in that almost immeasurable devotion which I hold for you all.

Affectionately,

Bobby McTabb.