

The Laugh Maker

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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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 won't 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 “haying” hat in summer, “wash shirts,” and seamless trousers. He joined the village church, was elected Sunday-school superintendent 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 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.



On the morning of the sixth day he came to the railroad, nearly blind, bootless and starving.

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

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