



O L D M u f f ' s F r i e n d

SUMMER HAD COME. FOR SEVERAL MONTHS THERE WOULD BE NO school.

Tom discovered that the days were too long. He did not have enough to do.

He decided to make a record of everything that happened. But nothing happened during three days. He decided that a record would be of no value.

Becky Thatcher had gone away. During the summer she was living in another town with her father and her mother.

The thought of the fearful killing in the graveyard was always in Tom's mind. It was like a pain. It would not go away.

Then Tom became sick.

For two long weeks Tom remained in bed without knowing what was happening in the village. He was very ill. He was interested in nothing. Then he seemed to be better. But after a day he was ill again. He was in bed for three more weeks.

In the warm, sleepy village something began to happen. A judge was coming to listen to the story of the killing in the graveyard. He

would decide what to do about Muff Potter.

Every person in the village talked of this. Tom could not escape from it. Every word made his heart beat faster. He was always afraid when people talked to him about it.

He took Huck to a lonely place. He wanted to be sure that Huck had not told the story.

“Huck, have you told about—that?”

“About what?”

“You know what.”

“Oh. No, I have not.”

“Never a word?”

“Never a word. Why do you ask?”

“I was afraid.”

“Tom Sawyer, we would not live two days if that story was told. You know that.”

“Huck, could any person make you tell?”

“If I wanted that Indian Joe to drown me, they could make me tell.”

“Good! I think that we are safe if we do not talk. But we should make another agreement. It will be more sure.”

They made an agreement, as before, signed in blood.

“What is the talk that you hear, Huck?”

“Talk? It is all Muff Potter, Muff Potter, Muff Potter. It makes me want to go where no one can see me.”

“I hear the same talk. They are going to hang him. Do you feel sorry for him sometimes?”

“Almost always—almost always. He has never done anything to hurt any person. He only fishes to get some money so that he can get drunk. He is really good. Once he gave me a fish, when he really did not have enough for himself. And he helped me at other times when I needed help.”

“He helped me, also, Huck. He helped me to catch fish. I wish that I could get him out of jail.”

“We can’t get him out, Tom. And if we did, they would catch him

again.”

“Yes. But I do not like to hear what they say. For he never did—that.”

“And I do not like it, Tom.”

The boys talked for a long time, but it did not make them happy. As night came, they were near the little jail. Perhaps they hoped that something good might happen. But nothing happened.

They went to the window and gave Potter some tobacco. They had done this before.

He was always very thankful for their gifts, and his thanks always hurt them. This time the hurt went deeper when Potter said:

“You have been good to me, boys. Better than the others in this town. And I won’t forget, I won’t. Often I say to myself, ‘I was good to all the boys. I showed them where the good fishing was. I was their friend when I could be a friend. And now they forget old Muff in his trouble. But Tom does not forget, and Huck does not—they do not forget him,’ I say, ‘and I won’t forget them.’

“But, boys, I did a fearful thing. I was drunk. That is the only way that I can explain it. Now I must hang for it, and that is right. It is best, also. I hope that it is. But we won’t talk about that. I won’t make *you* feel sad. You have been my friends.

“But what I want to say is this. Never get drunk. Then you won’t ever be where I am now.

“Stand where I can see you. It is a pleasure to see friendly faces when a man is in trouble like this. You are the only ones who come here. Good friendly faces—good friendly faces. Stand on each other’s shoulders and let me touch your faces. Good! Let me touch your hands, also. Little hands, and weak, but they have helped Muff Potter. And they would help him more if they could.”

Tom went home feeling very, very sad. His dreams that night were full of fearful things. During the next two days he went to the town meetinghouse. The judge was there, listening to the story of the killing. Tom wished to go into the meetinghouse to hear what was happening but he forced himself to stay outside.

Huck was having the same experience.

They were careful not to meet each other. They would go away from the meetinghouse, but soon they would return. Tom listened when people came out. The news was always bad. At the end of the second day people said that Indian Joe's story never changed. There was no doubt what the judge would decide.

Tom was out late that night, and he entered the house through the window. He could not sleep for several hours.

All the people in the village went to the meetinghouse the next morning. This was to be the important day. Potter, who appeared to have no hope, was brought in. All eyes were turned to him. And Indian Joe was there, too. Then the judge arrived.

Now a man was asked to tell what he knew about the killing. He said that he had found Muff Potter washing his hands in a stream. It was very early on the morning after the killing.

Another man was asked to tell his story. He told about finding the knife near the doctor's body.

Then a second man spoke about the knife. He knew that it belonged to Potter.

A man who had studied law sat beside Muff Potter. He was there to help Potter. But he asked no questions as these men told their stories. It seemed strange. Was he not trying to prove that Potter had not killed the doctor?

More men told their stories. And the man beside Potter asked them no questions.

After a while, all the stories against Potter had been told. Then the man beside Potter stood up. He spoke to the judge:

"Your Honor, we planned to prove that Muff Potter was drunk that night. We planned to prove that he did not know what he was doing. But we have changed our plans. We wish to ask Thomas Sawyer some questions."

Surprise appeared on every face, including Potter's. Every eye was watching Tom. He stood up and walked forward. He looked very wild, because he was deeply afraid.

The questions began.

“Thomas Sawyer, where were you on the night of the killing at about the hour of twelve?”

Tom looked at Indian Joe, and he could not speak. The people listened, but the words did not come. After a few moments, however, the boy had more strength. Some of the people could hear as he said:

“In the graveyard!”

“Louder, please. Do not be afraid. You were—”

“In the graveyard.” A cold smile appeared on Indian Joe’s face. Then it was gone.

“Were you near Hoss Williams’s grave?”

“Yes.”

“Louder, please. How near were you?”

“As near as I am to you.”

“Could you be seen?”

“No. I was behind the trees at the edge of the grave.”

“Was another person with you?”

“Yes. I went there with—”

“That is enough. We will call him when we need him. Did you carry something there?”

Tom did not answer.

“Speak, my boy. The truth is always honorable. What did you carry there?”

“Only a—a—dead cat.”

There was a little laughing. The judge ordered it to stop.

“We plan to show the bones of that cat. Now, my boy, tell us everything that happened—tell it as you wish, but tell it all and do not be afraid.”

Tom began slowly. Then his words came more and more easily. Every eye looked at him. With open lips the people listened to his words, forgetting everything but his story.

Now he came to the end. Interest became greater and greater.

“—and as the doctor hit Muff Potter with the board and Muff Potter fell, Indian Joe jumped with the knife and—”

Indian Joe jumped toward a window, striking all who tried to hold him. In a moment he was gone.