

A KINDNESS

By Robert D. Culp

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August reached its end. Two more weeks and I'd be everyday hoofing back to White Chimney, to school and Miz Martin. I had that queer, butterfly stomach I got towards the close of every summer. Sort of a feeling there was too much I'd forgot to do, summer'd slipped by, and now it was too late. Time rolling on and me growing up against my will.

If Cotton had been with me I'd have felt some better. But he was fence-mending with his pa. I was on my own, fishing the upper end of the pond. Flitter's new pups were too rambunctious to settle for anything as peaceful as fishing, and Pa had taken our one remaining year-old pup with him to the high pasture. Not even Gramps Rana was around. That old bullfrog had disappeared into the deep when he spotted a tarnal big watersnake slipping through the cattails. I doubted the old windbag would come back afore evening.

Fishing was good. It always was with my lucky bobber. I had a fine string of punkinseeds, a couple of crappie, and even a red horse that'd go two, three pounds. I planned to drop the red horse by Uncle Jake's on the way home. A red horse is a bottom-feeding sucker, bony and big. Lot of folks, including Uncle Jake, swore it was the sweetest fish-flesh ever come out of clear water. Me, I'd as soon have sunfish.

I hauled in another crappie—they were just commencing to bite—and got my line back in as quick as I could. When it hit water, my lucky bobber kept right on going down. That's how hungry those crappie were. Took me a minute to realize I had one on. By the time I heaved on the pole, that ornery devil had run with the hook into some brush or something. Anyhow, I was snagged good and proper.

No matter. The crappie were biting too fast for a lazy afternoon. Time to take a break. First I had to someway retrieve my lucky bobber. A couple of yanks on the line, a few loud words, and a half-minute of thrashing with my cane pole didn't help at all. Somewhere down in the bottom silt my lucky bobber was caught fast in the water-logged brush. And the feisty crappie that caused the problem was no doubt long gone and laughing. I eased up. Didn't want to break the line so's there'd be no way to find my bobber when I gave up and went diving for it.

I sat down to cogitate on my problem. I had all the fish I really wanted. If it weren't for my lucky bobber and the reputation it had gained around these parts I'd been sore tempted to plain bust the line and quit for the day. I took one last look along the bank for Gramps Rana, figuring maybe that old bullfrog would fetch my line loose once again. No luck. I was on my own. I'd just have to jump in and follow the line down to the snag. I sat there in the sun trying to collect the energy to shed my pants and hop in.

I spied a movement in the woods up the ridge away. Someone was coming along the trail from upstream of the pond. That was some unusual: nobody lived in the hollow up beyond Uncle Jake's place. Plus nobody 'cept Uncle Jake ever even hunted that neck of the woods, and I knew for a fact he was holed up in his cabin fixing a horse collar for Silas. I was a mite curious to see who was coming.

When he came clear of the woods, I was powerful glad I'd taken an interest. It was that ornery, pig-murdering thief, Garvey Bockenweiler. The sight of that critter raised my hackles like as if I was some scared cur-dog facing a she-bear. In a blink I ducked down and wormed my way back into the sumac thicket a ways off the path. I didn't have time to go farther, but I was well-hid. My heart was thumping as I watched Garvey come around the pond towards me.

He was in whistling distance of me, stomping along the path that led past my fishing spot, when I chanced to look where I'd been a minute earlier. For a second I quit breathing and for all I know my thumper stopped, too. My fishing pole lay smack across the path. Garvey couldn't help but see it—if he didn't, he'd sure trip on it. Maybe bust his fool neck. I groaned. Worse luck. My can of fish worms sat in plain sight on a smooth rock by the water. Wouldn't take the old man half a thought to figure there was a kid fishing here, maybe hiding ten feet away. I looked behind me for a means of escape.

Too late. Garvey's boots stopped sudden-like. I peeked out at him. He was staring at my cane pole, then he turned and looked at the water. He stepped to the edge and leaned over. He lifted my string of flopping fish and eyeballed 'em good, then looked up and down the path, puzzled-like. 'Peared that cuss was gonna steal my catch. But he dropped it back in the water and reached for my pole.

Garvey lifted my pole high. I could see his head turn as his eyes followed the line till it disappeared into the water where it was snagged. He gave a couple of testing tugs. If he busted that line I never would find my lucky bobber!

But he didn't haul on the line like an ignoramus. Garvey wiggled the line easy-like, reaching this way and that with the pole. He even moved up the shore to get a different angle at it. I began to get the idea old man Garvey was a pretty fair

fisherman. Sure nuff, a couple more maneuvers with the pole, a little flip of his wrist, and my lucky bobber was bouncing free on the water like a red-ripe cherry. I near forgot myself and stood straight up.

But Garvey wasn't through. He commenced rolling the line in on the cane pole, spiraling it down towards the big end. When it was all wrapped in neat, he stuck the hook into the butt of the pole.

I got a horrifying thought. That thief aimed to steal my lucky bobber—pole, line, and all! I struggled with my fear of Garvey, trying to force myself to step out and claim my property. My body seemed stuck where it was. Nary a finger would move.

I'm glad now I couldn't make myself jump out right off. Otherwise I never would have known. It's hard to explain how much it changed me, what happened next. But, sure as spring rain, my feelings toward Garvey did a complete turnabout.

As carefully as if he knew how valuable it was, Garvey laid my pole and line—lucky bobber shining in the sunlight—across the rock spang beside my can of worms. Then, without even looking around, he started on up the path.

I was flabbergasted. Tweren't necessary to clout me up aside the noggin to make me understand. That was a kindness Garvey did me. With no idea anyone saw, he'd taken time to un snag my line and save my hook and bobber. And, for sure, he knew it was my lucky bobber. Everybody in the county knew it.

Like I say, it was a small thing, with a whopping big effect on me. I knew right there I'd been making a serious misreading of Garvey's character. What a body does when he thinks no one sees him is a beeline to his character.

Garvey had reached the turn in the path. I stepped out from the tangle of bushes and hollered after him.

"Thanks—thank you, Mr. Bockenweiler."

He stopped and looked back at me. He didn't say a word. Just stared at me for a long minute. He didn't smile. Maybe he'd forgotten how. But his eyes got softer. I could see it. They just went easy and sorta glowed, warm and happy-like.

Then Garvey turned and went on around the bend walking slower then. I waved again, as he disappeared.

"Thank you, Mr. Bockenweiler." I whispered it. He was out of earshot anyway. I said it for myself.