

# JIMMY SEARS, A NAUGHTY BOY

## BOYVILLE STORY

by  
*William Allen White*



"A naughty person . . . walketh with a forward mouth."  
"He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers . . ."  
"Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy."

It was morning—the cool of the morning. The pigeons were gossiping under the barn eaves. In the apple tree a robin's song thrummed at intervals, and the jays were chattering incessantly in the cherry trees by the fence. The dew was still on the grass that lay in the parallelogram of shade made by the Sears dwelling, and in the twilight of grass and all the elf-people were whispering and uttering and scampering about in surreptitious revel. The breeze of dawn, tired and worn out, was sinking to a drowsy doze in the cottonwood foliage near by. In the lattice of the kitchen porch two butterflies were chasing their little brethren, the sun flecks, in and out among the branches of the climbing rose. Even the humble burdock weeds and sunflowers lining the path that led to the gate seemed to be exalted by the breath of the morning air, and they were not out of harmony with the fine, high soul of things. And yet, in that hour, James Sears stood near a rain barrel, bobbing up and down on a churn handle, with a green checked gingham apron tied about his neck. His back ached, and his heart was full of bitterness at the scheme of creation. For it was Saturday morning—his by every law, precedent or tradition known or reported in the Court of Boyville. But instead of inhaling the joys of the new day, James, whose courtly name was "Jimmy," looked for yellow granules on the dasher, and promised God that if he would let him grow up, his little boy should never have to churn.

Ever and anon, from some chamber in the house behind him, came the faint, gasping cry of a day-old baby. That cry drowned the cooing of the doves, the notes of the robin, and the chirping of the dwellers in the grass; to Jimmy the bleat of the little human lamb sounded like the roar of a lion. He could endure penal servitude on his Saturday with a patience born of something approaching a philosophy; he could wear a checked gingham apron, even as a saint wears an unbecoming halo; but the arrival of the new baby—the fifth addition to the family in the short period of years covered by Jimmy Sears' memory—brought a prickly pill of wrath and dropped it in the youth's brimful cup of woe. As the minutes dragged wearily along, Jimmy Sears reviewed the story of his thralldom. He thought of how, in his short-dress days, he had been put to rocking a cradle; how, in his laced days, there had been ever a baby's calico dress to consider; how, from his earliest fishing days, there had been always a tot tagging after him, throwing sticks and stones in the water to scare the fish; and how, now in his swimming and cave-dwelling days, there was a swarm of tow-headed Seares, a creeper, a toddler, a stumbler and a sneaker to run away from.

As the churn dasher grew heavier the wrath in Jimmy's cup began to sputter, dissolving into that which in his older sister's heart would have been tears; in Jimmy's heart it took the form of convulsive stifling. The boy could hear his sister's sizzling breakfast dishes in the kitchen. The thing that ground upon his heart was the firm foothold of Mrs. Jones, a neighbor woman, who was over-seeing the affairs of the household. Jimmy could not remember hearing that footstep except in times of what seemed to him to be the family's disgrace. He hated Mrs. Jones because she tried to cool his ire by describing the superior points of the particular new baby that had arrived each time she came upon her errands of neighborly mercy. Just as the yellow granules began to appear in the buttermilk pool on the churn top Jimmy heard a step on the gravel walk behind him. The step came nearer. When Jimmy lifted his eyes, they stared into the face of Harold Jones. Choler cooled into surprise, and surprise exploded into a rapid, grinning "Huh!" which was followed by another "Huh!" that gurgled out into a real laugh as Jimmy greeted the visitor. The younger boy gazed, and Jimmy found his tongue and asked: "Did you ever churn?" When Harold admitted that he, too, was a slave of the churn, the freemasonry of Boyville was established. A month later "Mealy," which was Harold's title in the court—was exemplifying the work. When Mrs. Jones came out of the house to take care of the butter, she saw her son and Jimmy lying on the grass. Half an hour later the boys in the barn heard Mrs. Jones's voice calling: "Harold, O Harold, don't you want to come and look at the baby?"

Now, James Sears, in the twenty-four hours of his new sister's life, had not let the fact of her existence form an expression on his lips. Much less had he lowered his hostile flag to salute her. But he knew instinctively that Harold Jones was the sort of a boy who would unsex himself by looking at a baby. When Mealy answered "Yes," and trotted down the back yard path to the kitchen, Jimmy Sears stared him heartily enough to fancy Mealy in the act of holding the loathsome thing in his arms. Further curiosity was beyond Jimmy's imagination.

When Mealy Jones came back, the barn wherein he had left Jimmy was empty, and only when Mealy had started homeward and a cloud came whizzing down the alley, hitting him under the ear, did Mealy know how Jimmy Sears resented an insult. Mealy looked around; no one was in sight.

Right here the reader should know that Jimmy Sears was not alone in his displeasure. There was natty in the Sears household. When the baby came, the four elder of the seven Sears children joined Jimmy in informal, silent sedition. They looked upon the newcomer as an intruder. For all who extended sympathy to the pretender the insurgents developed a wholesome scorn.

This scorn fell most heavily upon Mrs. Jones. The Sears children regarded her familiar familiarity with undisguised repugnance; and when Jimmy heard, Mrs. Jones tell his little sister Annie, that morning, that she was no longer the baby, Jimmy's rage at what he considered a British thrust at the innocent and forsaken child passed the bounds of endurance. He hurried at that anger in the cloud that hit Mealy Jones. Then Jimmy walked doggedly back to the house. He coaxed the little sister from the kitchen, took the child's chubby hand, and led her to the barn. There Jimmy nursed his sorrow. He assured the younger as she sat on the hay that he for one would not desert, "even if mamma had forgotten her." He suggested the wondering tot, until her ribs hurt, and in his lamentations referred to the new baby as "that old thing." The evening before when Mrs. Jones had mar-

shaled the other Sears children and taken them into the bedroom to see their new sister, Jimmy was not to be found. None of the older children had looked at the baby. They had turned their heads away deliberately, and had responded in guttural affirmatives when they were asked if it was not a pretty baby. But Jimmy had escaped that humiliation, and since then he had availed all snares set to lure him into his mother's room. He sat in the barn, fuming, as he recalled what he had heard while Annie was in his mother's room early that morning. There he heard this monologue in Mrs. Jones's voice: "See little sister's hands. Oh, what pretty hands!" Jimmy had reasoned and probably correctly that the pause was filled by the child's big-eyed astonishment. Mrs. Jones continued: "Twenty, twenty little feet! See little sister's toesses. What little bitsy, toesses. Baby touch little sister's toesses. Jimmy had chafed while he listened, but now that the scene came to him after reflection, he saw how inhuman a thing it was to dupe the child into an affection for her inevitable enemy.

"Does baby love little sister?" continued the voice. "Love nice, pretty little sister! Sweet little sister! Zhera! Zhera! Zhat's right; love little sister!" As he toyed with a wisp of hay, Jimmy Sears' blood froze in his veins at the recollection that his own mother had lent her countenance to this baseness. He knew, and he knew that his mother knew.

"HE TOOK GREAT BOUNDING STRIDES."

end of the cob-strown cow lot. The boy fixed his course toward the lowest length of fence. Then he kept his eyes upon the ground. He clinched his teeth, and skinned over the earth. The feathers in his hat—stuck there to satisfy the verities of his assumed Indian character—caught the breeze; so, rather than lose his hat, he grabbed it in the hand that held the chicken. He cleared the fence and plunged into the timber. Looking over his shoulder he saw a man's form on the fence: the thud of boots on the sod and the crash of branches behind him sent terror through the boy's frame, and he turned toward the creek that flowed sluggishly near by. He took great bounding strides, throwing his head from side to side as he ran. The boy knew the path. It led to a rocky knoll—a cattle-guard that crossed the river.

The boy was sure that no man would dare to follow him, even if the fence would hold a man's weight. He had scurried up the bank before his pursuer had reached the side Jimmy had leaped from so lightly. He scooted through the underbrush. Again and again did the "champeen fence-walker" smile to himself as he slackened his pace to dodge a volley of rocks, and again and again did James Sears—an exemplary youth for the most part, who knew his ten commandments by heart—look exultantly at his pullet. He glared in his iniquity. Lentulus returning to Capua with victorious

him. Half of the longest second Henry Sears ever knew passed before he dared turn his eyes toward the pace on the track where his son went down. Then he looked, and saw nothing but the clatter of the spinning rails. But an instant later he heard a familiar whoop and, starting around, he saw Jimmy sitting on a load of wheat which was standing between the railroad tracks. In this the boy had fallen after his sideways jump had thrown him from the moving train. When Henry Sears saw his son, Jimmy was holding his foot, jiggling it vigorously, and roaring, moved half by the hysteria of fright and half by the pain of a fresh laceration of his bruised toe. The boy's face was black with coal dust and wheat chaff, and tears were stripping his features grotesquely. The palsy of terror loosened its steel bands from the father's limbs, and he ran to the wheat wagon. Jimmy Sears, for all he or his father knows, may have floated to the ground from the wagon bed. But a moment later, in a frenzy wherein anger furnished only a subconscious motor and joy pumped energy at the wheel, the father spanked him, caring not how many times the little body wriggled and the little voice howled and the dirty little fingers fisted his big, bony hand as he fell.

An hour later Jimmy Sears had washed the dirt from the interior of an irregular circumference that touched his ears and his chin and his hair. Until the twilight fell he stayed in the conning tower in the Pennington barn and watched his home through a crack between two boards, through burdock weeds and sunflowers. There was a light in the kitchen, and through the window he could see Mrs. Jones moving about. He observed that the supper dishes were being put away. He saw his eldest sister, with the tea towel in her hands, chatting happily with Mrs. Jones. The spectacle filled him with rage. He felt that the other children had deserted him and that, in the war against the new baby, they had left him to fight unaided. He met a little brother who greeted him with, "Uh-huh, Mr. Jimmy, you just wait till pa gets you!" "Oh, Jimmy!—where-you-been?" demanded the eldest sister. "Mamma's been asking for you all day. I'd be ashamed if I was you." The boy did not deign to speak to Mrs. Jones, and kept his back to her when he could. He did not answer his sister's question. "Got anything here fit to eat?" he asked as he threw open the cupboard doors. The insult to Mrs. Jones was not accidental. Jimmy supposed that she had cooked the supper. He put two or three plates of food on the table, and drew up a chair, sneering triumphantly. "What's this?" as he dived into each dish. His sister's "Why, Jimmy," and her warning frowns did not change his course. Mrs. Jones went to the front of the house, diplomatically leaving all the doors open behind her, that Mrs. Sears might hear her son's voice. In a moment the boy caught the faint sound of his mother calling from the distant bedroom: "Jimmy, Jimmy, come here! I want you." The boy pretended not to hear. She called his name again. "Yes'm," he answered. When she repeated her request he filled his mouth with pie and replied: "I'm a-eatin' now." He slipped a piece of ice down the back of his adoring sister, who sat near him. When she wept noisily he laughed under his breath and spoke aloud to his sister at the dispan: "What'd you want to take Annie's doll away from her for? Give it back, why don't you?" "Why—Jimmy—Sears!" retorted the girl. Then, lifting her voice: "Mamma, Jimmy's put ice down—" But the lad pressed the ice against the child's back, pretending to remove the source of the trouble, and the child's lusty howls drowned the girl's protest. When he heard the bedroom door close to shield his mother from the turmoil, Jimmy knew that he had outwitted Mrs. Jones, so he quelled the disturbance he had caused. When Mrs. Jones returned to the kitchen the boy was sitting on the porch steps with his little sister, telling her about Raw-head and Bloody-bones, greatly to the child's horror and indignation. Jimmy heard his elder sister inquire, "Did mamma eat her supper?" He heard Mrs. Jones respond, "Not very much of it; but she will after a while, I guess. She said to leave it in there." "Couldn't she eat any of that nice chicken Mrs. Pennington sent?" "No, nor Mrs. Carpenter's lemon jelly." "Poor mamma," sighed the girl. But Jimmy had other reflections. Ten minutes later he walked past his mother's open door, and fumbled around in the sitting-room. "Is that you, Jimmy?" asked his mother. "Yes'm," rejoined the boy. "What are you doing?" "Lookin' for my other coat." "Won't you come in and see me, Jimmy? I haven't seen you for two whole days." "In a minute," returned Jimmy. Standing awkwardly in the doorway, he asked, "What of you want?" "Come over here, Jimmy," returned the mother. "My poor, neglected boy." He would not let his eyes find the new baby. He stood stiffly on one foot, and gave his mother his side as he drew him down and kissed his cheek, while he pecked at her lips. As Jimmy rose his mother smiled. "Are you hungry, Jimmy?" The boy nodded a vociferous affirmative, being a boy, one of the lowest orders of human creatures in point of intuitions, Jimmy could not know that his mother understood the rangle in her son's heart. Nor could he divine that she kept the supper dainties as peace offerings. "Won't you have some of my supper?" "Don't you want it?" returned the boy, to justify his greed. "No, Jimmy, I'm not hungry. I kept it all for you." While her son sat on the floor, eating of the tray on the chair by the bed, his mother's hand was in his hair, stroking it lovingly. His sister and the other children looked on, and saw him. Jimmy knew they were whispering "Hoggy," but he did not heed them. As his stomach filled, his heart overflowed, a common confidence even with older and better boys than Jimmy, and the tears came to his eyes. At last when the plate was cleared, he rose and went to the place where the newcomer lay. He bent over the little puff in the bedclothes and grinned sheepishly as he lifted the cover from the sleeping baby's face. He looked at the red features a moment curiously, and said in his loud, husky, boyish voice: "Hullo, there, Miss Sears; how are you this evening?" Then he plucked his mother's arm and walked out of the room, his soul at peace. (Copyright by the S. S. McClure Co.)