

ACCIDENTAL HERO

By John S. Halbert

Since I lived only 583 steps from the entrance to the high school building (I counted them one day when I went home to lunch), I always walked to and from school.

One afternoon near the end of the ninth-grade school year, as I was taking my usual route home, a gang of boys I hardly knew, and whom I regarded as not being my social equals, fell in step with me. Unsure how to disengage from them, I kept on walking along with them---block after block past where I normally turned off the main road to go home---all the time wondering how I was going to make a graceful exit. Before long, more boys joined the crowd, and I soon found myself surrounded by all sorts of fellows I would never have associated with under usual circumstances. Finally, after it seemed we were practically to the city limits, there was nothing for me to do but confess to the guys that I had long-ago passed my house.

"Then why did you keep walking with us?" they chorused.

"I just wanted to keep talking with you---" I mumbled, ". . . I was enjoying the walk and the talk, and all." Or something like that. I probably sounded pretty ridiculous.

I hung my head, expecting ridicule, but was astounded to be slapped on my back. Then another friendly-like jostle. And another. At once, I was surrounded by a dozen smiling faces and excited shouts and whoops of approval.

By the next morning, the story was all over school. People I didn't even know came up to shake my hand. More than one teacher mentioned the event in class as an example of how important it was in life to try to get along with others. Without intending to be one, I had become an instant celebrity.

The lesson I learned was not to judge people by appearances. These boys may have been from the other side of the tracks, but they had had the clout to make me into an accidental hero.