

Bobby

Martha Gentry

I HEARD the slapping of a loose shoe sole on the rubber stair treads. My eight-year-old neighbor came trudging down the hall to my desk. He was bundled in a frowzy pea coat and corduroy pants, nicked at the creases and whistling when the legs rubbed together. Bobby was a fighter, square-shouldered, thick-armed, nimble and tough. He seldom smiled. When he did, it was with a quick crease of his lips, curved slightly upward toward his cheeks. When he talked, out came the chin, up came a flash of wise brown eyes, challenging one and all.

"Wanna buy some tulips, Marfa?" he blurted. Out came a dirty fist, full of tulips, long-stemmed red ones.

My Darwins, I thought, my Princess Elizabeths, the regal center of my flower bed! I was furious. I fenced. "Bobby, where did you get those tulips?"

"Oh, a lady down the street gived 'em to me," he replied, eyes still leveled at mine.

"You know, Bobby, people like their flowers best when they're growing in the yard." I heard the edge in my voice, struggled with it. "Especially tulips," I went on. "You're sure the lady knew you cut the tulips?"

"Sure, I'm sure." Now he was getting impatient.

Change the subject, I thought. You're not eight years old.

"What did you do in school today, Bob?" He liked "Bob" better than "Bobby." I shuffled the papers on the desk.

"Din't go." Then he added quickly, "Wanna sell the tulips to buy some crayons."

Again I hedged. "Why didn't you go to school?" The dirt on his face didn't conceal the glow of good health.

"Din't have no shoes, see?" Up came a foot; he thumped the loose sole back over the heel.

"Well, that one's gone," I agreed.

"Th'other one don't have none atall." Up came the other foot, the bottom covered only with a dirty sock.

A wave of sympathy rolled over me; his eyes received the message.

"Marfa, I b'lieve I'll just give you the tulips," he said, thrusting them toward the desk and disappearing down the hall. The shoe soles flapped, the trousers whistled, and the little battler retreated.