A BOLD ADVENTURE

Carl never planned to steal the knife. He'd gone to Beecham's Hardware, first thing in the morning, to buy a can of paint, in order to touch up the boards of his tree house. But the color he wanted was in the storage room, and as Mr. Beecham went to fetch the desired color, leaving him alone in the store, Carl's attention strayed to the merchandise displays. Because it was so early, no one besides Carl was in the store. He liked being alone with all the new things, gleaming fishing poles, handsome flashlights and transistors. Then, he noticed the usually locked case containing the expensive hunting knives. The case was open! Carl examined an attractive knife and thought how useful it would be in working around his tree house. "What a golden opportunity," he said to himself, "it could be days before anyone realized a knife was missing, and by then who could accuse me?" Carl slipped the knife into the deep pocket of his winter parka. When Mr. Beecham returned with the can of paint, Carl quickly paid the bill and left the store. Once out of the store, Carl raced on, exhilarated by his bold adventure, but nonetheless anxious that he might have been found out. As he rounded a corner, he unexpectedly collided with his friend Pete. Both boys went sprawling on the sidewalk. Luckily, neither was injured, and having regained their breath, Carl excitedly bragged to his friend about his deed. As the boys talked, Carl noticed that Pete had misgivings. Carl was annoyed.

"I don't care what you say, if you can get away with it, what difference does it make!" Carl looked admiringly at the knife he'd taken from the hardware store. Pete, obviously upset by his friend's disclosure of the theft, tried to persuade him to return the knife.

"Look," Pete cautioned, "you could still be caught. Like you said, you were the only one in the store, and that knife is worth a lot of money--they're going to miss it and when they put two and two together, they're going to be on top of you in no time. Maybe you could just take it back and put it where you got it."

"No way," Carl objected, "they've no proof, and besides you're the only one I've told. Since you're my best friend, you can't turn me in. So it's their word against mine, and I'm not about to admit anything. Sometimes you have to lie to save yourself--it's as simple as that. Maybe you're just jealous because I got away with it."

Just then Raphael ambled by. "What's going on you guys?" he asked cheerfully. Both boys were extremely agitated by now, and though Raphael was a classmate, they didn't feel they wanted to tell what had happened. Pete said that they were just talking about stealing and whether it's okay to steal if you can get away with it. Raphael listened attentively to his friends--Carl arguing it was okay, so long as you don't get caught, and Pete countering you shouldn't because you could get caught.

When he had the chance, Raphael broke in. "But it's against the law to steal whether we get caught or not. We have to obey the law don't we?"

"Laws are made to be broken," Carl snapped contemptuously, "and if you can get away with breaking the law, who's the wiser. Anyhow, people are always breaking the law, speeding on highways, cheating on taxes, shoplifting--the only thing that counts with them is whether they get caught."

"But they do get caught and how do you know you won't?" Pete put in quietly.

Carl became cocky. "It's just like taking a history test. If you study, the odds are with you that you won't fail, and if you're careful when you take something like a knife, the odds are with you that you won't get caught--otherwise, forget it."

The boys walked on down the street still vigorously examining the pros and cons of stealing. Soon they met Shirley and Glenda on their way to the pharmacy. The

boys hurriedly filled the girls in on the discussion, but continued to talk among themselves. Finally, Raphael, out of courtesy to the girls, asked for their opinions.

After a long pause, while the boys calmed down, Shirley hesitantly offered that, "even though you might not get caught and even though there might not be any laws against it, stealing could still be wrong."

The boys demanded to know how that could be. "Well," Shirley began, "what if everyone went around stealing, what then? No one could trust anyone; only the very strongest could survive in such a world. So, if you're going to steal, you better be sure you're the strongest."

The boys remained silent.

"What if you just don't like stealing," questioned Glenda, "would it make any difference about the consequences? Besides, even though I knew I'd never get caught and even though stealing wasn't against the law, I'd never steal just because to me it's wrong." Glenda then added, "I don't think I'd want a friend who did steal."

By this time Carl was looking very disturbed. He mumbled an excuse and left his friends still arguing. Out of sight, Carl ran on in the direction of Beecham's Hardware. He thought of his friends, especially of Glenda, of his fondness for her, of how she always seemed interested in his ideas and made him feel comfortable. To lose her friendship would be disastrous. When he reached Beecham's, he mounted the steps two at a time, but entered the store quietly. As before, no one, including Mr. Beecham, was in sight. Carl made his way to the case containing the hunting knives. He dug into his pocket and felt the knife at the same instant he felt the hand on his shoulder.

"What do have you there, Carl?" Mr. Beecham asked mildly.

"I just couldn't keep it, Mr. Beecham," Carl blurted out as he handed the knife to the tall burly man. "They convinced me it's wrong to steal."

As Mr. Beecham listened, Carl recounted the details of taking the knife and of his subsequent discussion with his friend. He didn't, however, tell of his feelings for Glenda. After Carl had finished, head down, tears uncontrollably filling his eyes and running down his cheeks, Mr. Beecham searched a long time for words. Just as Carl was convinced there was about to be a phone call to the police, Mr. Beecham spoke.

"You know what I think?"

"No, Mr. Beecham."

"It sounds to me like you have some pretty smart friends."

"I know."

"Well, what do you think should happen now?"

"I don't know, but I guess I'll have to pay for what I've done. Will I have to go to jail?"

"I'm not so sure you'd pay for it by just going to jail," Mr. Beecham said evenly. Carl wondered what Mr. Beecham could possibly mean; he was terrified that the very worst was upon him.

"Tell you what. Come on down here to the store the next three Saturdays and help me out. If you do that, the knife is yours. You'll have paid for it."

Relieved and grateful, Carl vigorously shook his head up and down indicating "yes," then quickly left the store. As before, when he had departed Beecham's with the knife, Carl felt exhilarated, but now, somehow, the feeling was different. He knew he had a lot to think about.

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