

The Cap

By Robert Parkinson

Dedicated to my best friend Rob Roy Boyd

Fort Plain Masonic Lodge # 433 Fort Plain, N. Y.

It was on a Tuesday night and I was running late for the seven-thirty lodge meeting. As Senior Warden, I did get there in time to conduct the opening ceremony. Seated in my chair, I glanced at the sidelines and spotted an elderly brother dressed in a plaid sports coat, white shirt, and tie. He was also wearing headphones and gripping a microphone. This was highly unusual. Evidently there had been no objection from the other brothers about the stranger's electronics so I didn't say anything, even though it didn't look right. During the meeting I kept an eye on the newcomer who obviously knew how to conduct himself as a Mason.

After the meeting everyone went downstairs for refreshments. As I entered the dining room, I noticed the stranger, minus the microphone, leaning on a cane with one hand and holding a cup of coffee in his other. Curious, I walked over to him and introduced myself.

"I'm Rob Roy Boyd," he informed me.

"Are you visiting?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I belong to this lodge." He must have noticed the dumfounded look on my face because he smiled and said, "I came here from Newburgh, New York three months ago. Decided to transfer my membership here. The secretary knows all about it."

"Very good," I said, even though I was never told about the transfer. "Do you live in Fort Plain?"

"Yes, across from the Post Office."

Trying to make more conversation I asked, "Why the headphones and microphone?"

"I'm hard of hearing. Background noise bothers me."

"I see. Did you drive tonight?"

He shook his head. "Walked. Don't have a car. It's about a half mile but I made it, even though it was rough going on my legs."

"I bet. Look, I'll be happy to give you a ride home tonight and every Tuesday we have meetings."

Rob smiled. "Great. I appreciate that. Thanks."

"My pleasure."

After some more socializing Rob and I left. Seated in my pick up I soon had a feeling I was going to be the listener all the way to his place.

"Bob," he said. "I was having it pretty rough in Newburgh. My place wasn't in the best part of town and I was alone. What relatives I do have knew where I was and that's about it. I survived on Social Security and doing odd jobs."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Oh, weeding gardens and washing windows. Stuff I can handle."

"Why did you choose Fort Plain to live?"

"Well, Bob, one day there was a knock on my door. I opened it to see Jim, the son of my father's best friend. I was shocked because I had met him only a few times. I must've made an impression on him because he said he asked my cousin about me, was told where I was living, that I didn't have too much, and that I refused charity. I told him that was about right and invited him in. I could tell he wasn't impressed with what he was seeing because he asked why I didn't move to Fort Plain where it's cheaper and nicer."

"What did you say?" I asked.

"That I couldn't up and move, and I wouldn't have a place to live. His answer was that he had a big house outside of town. Said he had a garage with an overhead guest bedroom. Told me that I was more than welcome to use it until I found a decent place of my own. Said it wouldn't cost me nothin'. All I had to do was bring personal items. I almost fell off my chair. Told him that I'd love to move there. He was planning on going home that Friday and said that I should be ready to leave at nine in the morning. I'll tell you that guy made me the happiest man in the world. I was finally getting out of the slum. Fort Plain just had to be better. I thought he'd change his mind but he picked me up at nine on the button and we headed out."

"How did the place turn out?" I asked.

"Fine. The room was clean and well furnished. Best of all, his wife was a great cook. And it didn't cost me nothin. About a month and a half later, Jim stopped by and said that he'd found an apartment for me across from the post office. Came with three rooms and a bath and the rent was reasonable. Had a stove, refrigerator, and the lights and heat were included. Still, I had to remind Jim that I didn't have any furniture. He said people get rid of things and that he had friends who would gladly give me what I needed. Said it wasn't charity He was so right. I got a used bedroom and living room set and a few other necessities and Jim moved me into my new place. I was so grateful that he had to tell me to stop thanking him. Almost forgot--he's the one who told me about the Masonic Lodge in Fort Plain, showed me where it was located. That's when I decided to transfer my membership."

"That's a great story, Rob," I said as we drove along. "Look, I usually go to Stewart's for coffee every morning about seven-thirty or eight.

What say I get some for us and I'll come visit you tomorrow and we'll shoot the breeze."

"That would be terrific," he said.

So the following morning with coffee I went to Rob's. "Good morning," he said. "I'm happy to see you. Come in. Take a seat."

I sat opposite him in his tiny living room and sipped my now lukewarm coffee. We had talked about an hour when he said, "You know, Bob. I had a great Dad and a loving and determined mother. When I was twelve I came down with polio and was bedridden. Infantile Paralysis is the fancy name for it. Back then the doctor made house calls and lots of them. My mother was my nurse day and night. I figured I'd never walk again and often said so. Mother told me to stop talking that way but I couldn't. And then one morning I woke up feeling stronger. Mother immediately sent for the doctor. He was so impressed with my progress that he told mother he wanted to measure my legs for braces so that I could at least get around a little. He also cautioned her that I would have to wear braces my whole life and that they were heavy and uncomfortable.

"Doctor," she said. "There is no way my son will wear braces all his life. I told his father this very morning that Rob is going to learn to walk on his own no matter what. He's a strong boy. You'll see."

"Mother told me that the doctor smirked but didn't object.

"Okay, Mrs. Boyd", he said. "But if you change your mind send for me."

"Fair enough," Mother said. After the doctor left she returned to my bedside, put her hands on her hips, and looked me right in the eye. "Rob, from now on every day, for one hour, you're going to get out of bed. I'm

going to hold you up and you're going to learn to walk around the room until you can do it on your own."

"Well, Bob, like it or not, every noon she helped me up. At first, I was weak and the going was difficult but I did it. Then, one day she came into the room carrying a wooden chair.

"New trick," she told me. "I want you to place your hands on the back of the chair and push it."

"I can't do that," I said.

You can and you will!" she said.

To my astonishment she was right. From that day on, mother sat on the edge of my bed and watched me go around and around the room for an hour, not listening to my complaints. As time passed, my legs grew stronger and I went faster. My cheerleading mother never failed to encourage me. And then one day she entered the room with two canes. "Okay, Rob," she said. "No more chair. These are your new props. Let's see what you can do with them."

I shook my head. "I don't know if I can walk with those."

"Nonsense. Get up and get going."

"I did as I was told and got around so good that mother clapped for me."

"I knew they'd help, Rob," she said. "No stopping you now." She told me to sit on the edge of the bed beside her. I sat and she said, "Rob, you're doing so well I think you should go back to school."

"I often dreamed of returning to my class but thought it was out of the question. When can I go?"

"How about tomorrow?" she said.

"Well, Bob, that night in my bed I felt sick wondering how my classmates were going to react seeing me with canes. I soon found out. All

eyes focused on me when I hobbled to my desk. During recess in the schoolyard the teacher had her back turned so she didn't see the class bully come over to where I was standing on the sidelines and kick both of my canes out of my hands. I fell. Kids laughed. The next day the bully did the same thing. Only that time the teacher saw him. He was sent to the principal who punished him by having him stay after school for a week. That was the end of his picking on me. School was fun after that. I craved studying until I graduated at age nineteen. Mission accomplished."

"Life can be so hard," I said.

"And wonderful," Rob said.

I nodded. "You're right. What interested you the most after graduating?"

"Well, one evening I was sitting in the living room reading when Dad came downstairs in a black suit, white shirt, bow tie-shined shoes, and went out the front door." Mother appeared. "Where's Dad going without you?" I asked.

"Masons," she said, sat down, and started reading a magazine.

I wanted to ask more questions but also didn't want to disturb her after a long day of housework and cooking for me and Dad.

Around ten Dad came into the living room. I couldn't wait to question him. "Did someone die? Why did you leave all dressed up without Mom. Is there somebody else or what?"

Dad laughed. "Rob," he said, "I joined the Masons. I go to lodge meetings twice a month. This is why I'm dressed up. Your Mom knows about it."

Relieved there wasn't anything wrong I said, "Gee, Dad. That's great. Can I be a Mason?"

"Yes, Rob. But you have to be twenty-one to join. You also have to be investigated, and you must take three degrees."

It didn't matter to me that I didn't know what Dad was talking about having to be investigated and taking three degrees. What did matter was that he said I had to be twenty-one and I was only twenty.

Finally, on my 21st birthday I approached Dad and asked him to get me an application to join the Masons. "Absolutely, Rob", he said. "I'll go get one right now. Happy Birthday!"

I filled out the application, furnished the names of required references, and eagerly awaited my fate. It wasn't long after I was investigated that I was voted in and took the three necessary degrees. At last I felt like I was somebody. Dad was so proud of me. We never missed a meeting, although we never got involved in the chairs or anything. It was always the sidelines for us until he became sick and passed away. I stopped going to meetings after that, but made certain to set enough money aside to pay my dues. And then I lost mother and I was alone. I couldn't keep up with the house. I had to move. Awful sad time."

"Darn, Rob," I said. "That must have been awful"

"It really was, Bob, but I took things day by day. And then World War II broke out and I said to myself, "Oh my Gosh! I'm going to join the Army. Of course they classified me 4F, due to my disability but at least I tried."

"That's right I told him."

"Well, Bob, I felt bad until a friend suggested I become an Air Raid Warden. You know, wardens walked neighborhoods at night making certain all lights were out. There were lots of drills. I was a warden until the war ended."

"I remember those days," I told him, glanced at my watch, and stood. "Sorry, but I have to go now. This has been fun."

"It sure has. I get lonely sometimes."

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon." He started to get up. "Stay put", I said. "I'll see myself out. And don't forget-you're going to ride with me to the meetings."

"I look forward to it."

As time passed, Rob and I went together to meetings. He never failed to tell me stories coming and going. I soon considered him to be my friend as well as a fellow Mason.

Going through my Masonic belongings one night, I found a blue cap, one of several that I had made a long time ago for the brothers. The lodge emblem *Fort Plain Lodge #433* was on the front. For old time's sake, I tried it on, looked in the mirror, and wondered if Rob would like to have it.

When it came time for the next meeting, I put the cap in a bag and brought it along. During refreshments I pulled the cap out of the bag. "Hey, Rob," I said. "Way back I made a bunch of caps like this one for the lodge. Would you like to have it?"

Rob took the cap from me and plunked it on his head, adjusted the visor, and beamed. "Thanks, Bob. This means a lot to me." He wore that cap the rest of the evening and on the way home. As he was getting out of my truck I said, "I'll be over in the morning with coffee. Have a good night."

"I already have," he said and touched his cap.

The next morning, our coffee in hand, I headed for Rob's. He opened the door still wearing the cap. I couldn't help but wonder if he wore it to bed.

Over coffee I said, "You know, Rob, we have District Deputy meetings once a month. They provide a meal and there's a social hour. The District Deputy updates what's happening, and if you'd like to go with me I'll pick you up. Actually, there's a meeting this Thursday."

"Sure, Bob. I'd enjoy that."

"Good enough. You'll have a good time." It was getting late and I told him that I'd better go home. See you Thursday."

"You bet."

On Thursday, I picked up Rob who was still wearing the cap. I pointed at it. "You know you don't have to wear that all the time."

"I love it," he said firmly.

During the social hour at the meeting, I bought him a drink and paid six dollars each for two meal tickets. "How much do I owe you?" Rob asked when I gave him his.

"You don't owe me anything."

"Huh?" he said.

"That's right. You've been a mason for almost fifty years so you get to eat for free."

"How come I didn't know that?"

I shrugged. "C'mon. Let's eat. The food is wonderful."

I was amazed at how much Rob ate every time we went to the District Deputy meetings. I asked him if he had enough food at home. He said he did but I still wondered.

That year I became Master of the lodge and I asked Rob if he'd like to become an officer. He eagerly agreed so I made him a Steward. They don't have to read or anything, but nonetheless, they are officers.

Our District Deputy meeting was coming up the following week. I had to have fifty programs printed with the officers listed on the back. My daughter-in-law helped me. I told her that I couldn't wait for Rob to see his name in print. When the programs arrived I noticed Rob's name listed as *Robert Roy Boyd*. Using white-out pens my daughter-in-law and I erased the *ert* on all fifty programs.

The night of the District Deputy meeting, Rob and I took our seats and I eagerly handed him a program and told him to read the back. He turned it over and glared at me. "Bob! You know my name is not Robert Roy Boyd..."

"Oh, no," I said. "Apparently my daughter-in-law and I missed correcting the one I gave you. She puts the programs together. She also has a son named Robert. It was a mistake. She's so used to calling her son by that name. We used white-out pens to make the corrections. Sorry, Rob. Looks like we missed one."

Rob sighed. "That's okay, Bob. Everyone makes mistakes."

"Then let's go eat ROBERT!"

"You think you're funny," he said and we both laughed.

The following morning I was seated at the table when I got a call from Saint Mary's Hospital. The person on the other end of the line asked if I could pick up a Mr. Boyd at eleven.

"What!" I said. "I was with him last night and he seemed fine. What's wrong?"

"All I can tell you is that he's being released at eleven."

"Okay, I'll leave right away."

I went over the speed limit driving to St. Mary's where I found a pale Rob in bed wearing a Johnny. I asked him what was wrong.

"Hi Bob. Thanks for coming. After you dropped me off last night I had chest pains. I thought I was having a heart attack. Tried calling you but you didn't answer. Joan upstairs heard me yelling for help and called an ambulance. Doctors checked me over. They don't know what caused the problem. Could've been food or tension. Oops, wait a second while I use the bathroom." He stood and shuffled in that direction.

When Rob came out he said, "Bob come with me for a minute. I want to show you something."

"Sure," I said and stepped into the hallway ahead of him. He caught up with me. I glanced at him and couldn't believe what I was seeing. His Johnny was completely untied and his entire backside was exposed. Before I could say something a nurse appeared.

"Mr. Boyd," the nurse said. "Stay put. I'm going to get you a robe NOW!"

To my relief, the nurse returned with a blue robe and helped Rob put it on. He thanked her and so did I. Continuing our walk I asked Rob where we were headed.

"You'll see," he said. Soon we came to a stop in front of a room with a glass front. Behind the glass was a little girl in bed. She was probably eight or nine years old. Her eyes fluttered open and Rob waved to her. She returned the gesture.

"Bob," Rob said. "Wave." I did and the little girl followed suit. I glanced at Rob and noticed he looked teary-eyed. "I don't know what's wrong with her, Bob. I asked different nurses and they said they couldn't tell me anything because I'm not family."

"That's true," I said.

Rob sighed, waved again, and said, "C'mon, Bob. Let's go back to my room and I'll get dressed so we can get out of here."

On the ride to Rob's place he said, 'Can I ask you to do me a favor?'

"I'll try. What is it?"

"Well, I'd like to have you get me into a Masonic home. I'm not doing so hot. Forgetting things. Just not myself anymore."

"Okay, Rob. I'll check into it and see what I can do."

"The following day I drove to Utica and spoke to a woman I'll call Irene. I explained Rob's situation and when I finished she said, "There's nothing available right now but I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, I'll give you the necessary paperwork for your friend to fill out. Mail it back to me as soon as possible."

When I got home I immediately went to Rob's I told him what happened and helped him fill out the paperwork. As soon as that was finished we went to a notary public and then to the post office.

One week passed. Then two. And then one Monday morning Irene called and told me that they had a room for Rob and that he could move in on Friday. All he had to do was bring his personal items. The minute I hung up I left for Rob's. He was happy to hear he would be taken care of forever but wondered what he was going to do with all of his stuff. I suggested a porch sale for the following day.

"Great idea," he said and sounded relieved.

Rob made \$265.00 at the sale. I told him it should be pocket money. He said he had a few things to take care of." "Don't worry, Rob," I said. "Everything is going to be okay."

That Friday morning I drove Rob to the home. He reminisced about our friendship all the way. And he was eager to see his new place. He wasn't

disappointed. He had to share a bathroom but the bed was comfortable and there was an air conditioner. "Home sweet home," he said and beamed.

I stayed long enough to have lunch with him and promised I'd come to see him every Friday. "Think you'll be okay here?"

"I already love it. Thanks, Bob."

I kept my promise about visiting. It made me feel good to see him so happy and so well-taken care of. He even gained a little weight because of the good food and he'd made friends with some of the other residents. And then there came the time I knocked on his door and saw a down-in the dumps look on his face. "Rob. What's the matter?"

"Bob. Take a seat"

We both sat. He fidgeted. "Rob. What's up?"

He hung his head. "I'm ashamed of myself."

"What in the world did you do?"

His face flushed and he hesitated. Finally, he said, "I had an accident in bed last night."

I shook my head. "So, that's nothing to be ashamed of. We've all had accidents. Don't let that get you down." He managed a smile. "I feel relieved that I told you. I was so embarrassed. "

"Don't be. Forget it. Let's shoot the breeze and have a few laughs."

Later, on the ride home, I thought about what happened to Rob and wondered about his health. I hoped he was okay and that there was nothing seriously wrong with him. He was on my mind the rest of the day and evening.

The next morning the phone rang. I answered it. "Bob. This is Irene. I have bad news. Rob Roy Boyd passed away last night."

I was so shocked I almost dropped my coffee. I shook my head as if to clear my brain and couldn't think straight. After the initial shock passed I told Irene I'd come there right away. I don't recall much about the drive. All I could think about was losing my best friend.

Irene met me at the door. "I'm sorry about Rob. I know how much you meant to each other."

"I'm going to miss him."

"We all will. Let's go to the dining room and have some coffee."

Seated at a corner table it felt odd not having Rob there. Before I could express that to Irene she said, 'Rob is being cremated. He named you executor of his will. He requested that you take his ashes to Newburgh and bury them with his Mom and Dad. He also requested you to mail books and pictures to relatives.'

I was stunned. "Me executor?"

"Yes, Bob. You were like family to Rob. Wait for me. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

I watched her leave and passed the time sipping my coffee and thinking about Rob. It was difficult not to cry. When Irene returned she was carrying a small jewelry box that she handed to me.

"Rob wanted you to have this."

I opened the box and found some ID bracelets, a few Masonic pins, and on the bottom-a gold pocket watch. I took it out of the box and tried in vain to wind it. "Rob must've had this for a long time."

"Everything in that box was obviously special"

"He really got attached to things." I stood and said, "I must be going now. I want to thank you for all you did for Rob. He loved it here."

"And we loved him."

"I'm going to take his watch to be fixed as soon as I get home."

"Oh," Irene said. "I almost forgot something important. I'll be right back."

I stood in front of the nearest dining room window waiting for Irene to return. I looked up at the heavens. "Rob," I said. "I hope you're with your Mom and Dad. Thanks for your friendship and for the jewelry, especially the watch. I'm going to get it fixed and I promise I'll keep it for as long as I live. I'll never forget you, my friend."

Irene appeared carrying the cap I'd given Rob. "Here, Bob. I almost forgot this. He never took it off."

I laughed. "Yes, I know. He probably wore it to bed." I put it on, straightened the visor, and we headed for the door. I gave Irene a hug and left believing.

Driving along, I smiled thinking about the time I gave the cap on my head to a person who had overcome great adversity. Rob Roy Boyd, a fellow lodge brother, officer, and my best friend. I glanced at myself in the rear view mirror and knew that I would donate the cap to the lodge in memory of the proudest Mason I ever knew.