

From *Joe's Luck: Always Wide Awake*, by Horatio Alger (page 100)

"No! Go ahead with your story."

"One day we sat down to dinner. Marm had made some apple-dumplin' that day, and 'twas good, you bet. Well, I see Bill a-eyin' the dumplin' as he shoveled in the meat and pertaters, and I knowed he meant to get more'n his share. Now, I'm fond of dumplin' as well as Bill, and I didn't like it. Well, we was both helped and went to eatin'. When I was half through I got up to pour out some water. When I cum back to the table Bill had put away his plate, which he had cleaned off, and was eatin' my dumplin'."

"What did you say?" inquired the gentleman from Pike, interested.

"I said: 'Bill, you're my cousin, but you've gone too fur.' He laffed, and we went into the field together to mow. He was just startin' on his swath when I cum behind him and cut his head clean off with my scythe."

Joe had difficulty in suppressing his laughter, but Mr. Bickford looked perfectly serious.

"Why, that was butchery!" exclaimed the Pike man, startled. "Cut off his head with a scythe?"

"I hated to, bein' as he was my cousin," said Joshua, "but I couldn't have him cum any of them tricks on me. I don't see as it's any wuss than shootin' a man."

"What did you do with his body?" asked Joe, commanding his voice.

"Bein' as 'twas warm weather, I thought I'd better bury him at once."

"Were you arrested?"

"Yes, and tried for murder, but my lawyer proved that I was crazy when I did it, and so I got off."

"Do such things often happen at the North?" asked the Pike County man.

"Not so often as out here and down South, I guess," said Joshua. "It's harder to get off. Sometimes a man gets hanged up North for handlin' his gun too careless."

"Did you ever kill anybody else?" asked the Pike man, eyeing Joshua rather uneasily.

"No," said Mr. Bickford. "I shot one man in the leg and another in the arm, but that warn't anything serious."

From *Joe's Luck: The World's Longest Literary Remix*, by Keir Graff and others

"No! Go ahead with your story."

Joshua's mind flashed back to the past, to that sun-ripened day when he and Bill had come in from the fields to find two apple dumplings cooling on the sideboard. Dinner first, his mother had insisted in reply to their mock-grieved entreaties. As they wolfed down stewed beef and potatoes, the cousins grinned, daring each other to steal a bite of dessert. But neither of them dared to defy his mother.

Wiping his plate clean with a crust of bread, Joshua had noticed a dirty smudge on his wrist. He went to the washstand, scrubbed off the offending dirt, and then carried the basin to the back steps. He flung the clouded water out and it landed in the dusty yard with a slapping sound.

Turning, he gazed through the screen door at Bill's back. His coarse older cousin had put away his plate and was devouring both dumplings with animalistic fervor.

"What did you say?" inquired the gentleman from Pike.

In the present, Joshua was startled to realize that he had involuntarily made some sound, so lost was he in his reminiscence. He shook his head and smiled, the smile of a halfwit, unsure what to say next.

Beside the screen door had leaned their two scythes, furred with chaff from the harvest. As Joshua stood, unmanned, robbed of his dumpling, he had such a vivid image of the scythe cutting Bill's head from his shoulders that he had had to clutch the door handle to stay his trembling hand.

"I said, 'Bill, you're my cousin, but you've gone too far,'" whispered Joshua intently. "And when we went back into the field to mow, I came up behind him and cut his head off with my scythe."

Joe laughed uneasily, but Joshua's face was so drawn and pale that it seemed as though he himself believed the lie.

"Why, that was butchery!" exclaimed the Pike man. "Cut off his head with a scythe?"

"He ate my dumpling," whispered Joshua, trembling. "Don't you see? The offense could not stand. Cousin or no—I had to do it. Don't you see?"

Joe slapped his thighs and stood up, hoping to break the strange spell into which the conversation had fallen.

"Why, look at the time!" he declared.

But the Pike County man was not so easily swayed. He seemed fascinated to have found himself in the presence of a flesh-and-blood villain.

"Did you ever kill anybody else?" he asked Joshua Bickford eagerly.

"No," said Mr. Bickford. "I shot one man in the leg and another in the arm, but that warn't anything serious."