

The Adventures of Sebastian Bold



Rudolph Michael Brandt

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By

Rudolph Michael Brandt



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ISBN: 978-1-68181-550-3

Dedication

For my wife, Edith, and my family.
Thank you for your love and support.

The Best School Of All

It's good to see the school we knew,
The land of youth and dream,
To greet again the rule we knew
Before we took the stream:
Though long we've missed the sight of her,
Our hearts may not forget;
We've lost the old delight of her,
We keep her honour yet.

The stars and sounding vanities
That half the crowd bewitch.
What are they but inanities
To him that treads the pitch?
And where's the wealth I'm wondering,
Could buy the cheers that roll
When the last charge goes thundering
Towards the twilight goal?

Then men that tanned the hide of us,
Our daily foes and friends,
They shall not lose their pride of us,
However the journey ends.
Their voice to us who sing of it,

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No more its message bears,
But the round world shall ring of it,
And all we are be theirs.

To speak of fame a venture is,
There's little here can bide,
But we may face the centuries,
And dear the deepening tide;
For though the dust be part of us,
To dust again be gone,
Yet there shall beat the heart of us,
The school we handed on!

We'll honour yet the school we knew
The best school of all
We'll honour yet the rule we knew
Till the last bell call.
For working days or holidays
And glad or melancholy days
They were great days and jolly days
At the best school of all.

Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938)

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1

Caught

The country of British Guiana was a part of the British Empire at the time when, as the saying went, “The sun never set on the British Empire.” Situated north of the equator, its size is approximately the size of Great Britain, with a land area of 83,000 square miles. It is the only South American country whose official language is English. It is bordered to the east by Dutch Guiana, to the west by Venezuela, and to the south and southeast by Brazil. Its coastline faces the Atlantic Ocean. The capital city of British Guiana, Georgetown, was built at the mouth of the Demerara River, a river that starts in the central rain forests of the country and flows north for hundreds of miles to the Atlantic. Many of the streets of Georgetown were lined by trees, earning the city the nickname “The Garden City.”

In this unique country and city Sebastian Bold was born.

The last of three children born to the Bold family, Sebastian opened his eyes in the maternity ward of the St. Joseph Mercy Hospital. The hospital was located in an area of the city known as Kingston. Across the road from it was the Eve Leary parade ground.

Sebastian came into the world kicking and screaming. His exhausted mother sighed wearily but contentedly when she

heard him. At the precise moment of his birth, the police band was practicing on the parade ground for Empire Day and struck up the march, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."

The nurses in attendance looked at each other, amused.

"He's hearing the music. He's crying in time with it," they observed. Then one of them held Mrs. Bold's hand and said, "You have a beautiful baby boy, but I think he's going to be a handful."

Mrs. Bold, with a smile, whispered, "Please tell that to his father when he visits."

It was an early prediction that Sebastian, during his growing years, appeared destined to fulfill. Sebastian was a young boy who viewed life with a degree of openness. It was a time when minimal supervision was required by parents. Every grownup was an individual supervisor who was quite prepared to punish the misdemeanours of delinquent youngsters and then report them to their respective parents for follow up treatment. As a result, young boys viewed grownups with a jaundiced eye. It was left to these youngsters to devise methods of operation which at all times presented the face of innocence. Sebastian was a master of the art.

One Friday afternoon in June, a group of boys gathered at the avenue on Georgetown's Main Street, just where Middle Street crossed it.

Georgetown's Main Street was an interesting and important conduit in and out of the city's business and shopping centre. It was four blocks long, from the railway crossing to the cenotaph, with traffic running north and south. The avenue, which bisected

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it, was lined with saman trees. Beautiful white colonial houses stood back from the street with long driveways and green hibiscus fences. On Main Street, each of the four blocks started and ended with a half circle of concrete pillars shaped like the pawns of a chess set with rounded heads. In the third block of the street, on the eastern side, stood the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, a structure built of wood in the shape of a Latin cross. It possessed a carillon, which would ring out hymns across the city on feast days, herald the arrival of brides, and sound the Angelus in the evening. On another block stood the Government House, which could not be seen from the road, for it was surrounded by tall trees and thick underbrush. Two major hotels were also on Main Street, The Tower Hotel and The Park Hotel.

The group of boys included several of Sebastian's best friends: Tom, Peter, Reggie, and Clement William, who all the boys called C.W.

At first the mood was somber and no one spoke, but as the minutes dragged on to fifteen minutes past their meeting time of five o'clock, the boys grew restless.

As they stood stamping their feet, bicycles leaning against the pillars of the avenue, a red MG sports car flashed by with its hood down.

"Wow, did you see that?" Tom said.

"Yeah, some car, but I prefer the Austin Sprite," Peter declared.

"Nowhere near the MG," Tom said, and the conversation became a heated debate on the merits of sports cars, Sebastian temporarily forgotten.

"There's Sebastian." C.W. pointed.

The dark clouds hung low in the sky, portending rain, as the afternoon closed around them.

Sebastian rode up Middle Street. He was a tall, athletic youth with brown eyes and brown hair, which often fell across his forehead in a cowlick. He stopped his bicycle before them. There was a scowl on his face, which to an objective observer could mean only one thing—he was in a bad mood. To those who knew him, his mood and expression were out of character. Sebastian was known by some people to be bright and likeable. Others dismissed him as too precocious. His elder sister and brother, the oldest of the three, avoided him. To them he was an embarrassment. His closest friends described him as a daring adventurer. He was all of these and more, but at that exact moment he was in a bad mood.

“What happened?” C.W. asked him.

“Well, I got caught.”

“We know that. What happened?” Tom asked also, somewhat impatiently.

The scowl deepened. “I don’t know.”

“What does that mean?” Tom persisted.

“Well, I’ll tell you. I was good, almost invisible as I walked the field. No one was looking at me, I was pretty sure. I got to the fence, went through it fast, and there was Fenwick and two other prefects as though they had nothing better to do than wait for me. Somebody must have squealed,” he ended dramatically.

Voices rose in protest as each boy rejected any possibility that he could ever be a traitor.

“I am not accusing anyone of anything, but I would sure like to know how Fenwick found out. Now it’s Smithy on Monday.”

He was referring to Father Smith, who was the principal of St. Stanislaus College, the Catholic boys’ high school, which they attended. He was a stern but just man, respected by all, but especially feared by wrongdoers.

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The plan, uncovered by accident and hatched at the spur of the moment, was supposed to be foolproof.

At school, they usually met during morning recess and after lunch, before the bell went, under the large tree that stood by the fence at the southwestern end of the playing field. It was as far as they could get from the three-storied school building on the eastern end of the compound where the prefects were inclined to be.

C.W. leaned on the fence and was tossing a tennis ball in the air and catching it. Suddenly Peter lunged for the ball, and in the process he knocked C.W. over. Now C.W. was small in stature, whereas Peter was quite stout. Upon impact, C.W. flew into the air and came solidly into contact with the fence. To everyone's amazement, he disappeared through it. What had seemed to be a solid, well-painted fence was in fact weak with rot, causing the fence to yield like paper under C.W.'s weight. They pulled him back, leaving a gaping hole. He was none the worse for wear. As they were dusting him off, Sebastian looked up and saw a prefect approaching. He immediately decided that the hole should be concealed, and under his breath, he hissed, "Quick, hide the hole."

The boys moved swiftly to conceal the hole in the fence as Sebastian stepped forward to meet and distract the prefect.

"Hello," he said.

The prefect looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you up to?" he demanded.

"Up to? What do you mean?" Sebastian innocently responded.

Looking back and seeing Peter on his knees, he shrugged. "Peter here has dropped a coin, not that it's any of your business."

The prefect was about to reply when the bell rang.

"All right, you fellows, you heard the bell. Back to classes."

With that, he turned and walked away.

“Okay, let’s hide the hole. I have a plan,” Sebastian said.

Quickly they found some fallen branches and leaned them against the hole in the fence, obscuring it, and then they ran off toward the school building.

That afternoon when they met, Sebastian unfolded his plan.

“I think that this is the opportunity we have been waiting for.” They listened attentively. “If we can conceal the hole in the fence, which our good friend C.W. was kind enough to manufacture, we can use it to escape Friday afternoons.”

On Friday afternoons, the entire school was made to attend benediction at the cathedral, which stood two blocks away from the college, on Brickdam. Classes were let out one hour early on Fridays, and there was always someone trying to escape and capitalize on the early release from school. As a result, prefects were deployed at every gate of the compound and at the corners of the roads leading off Brickdam. It was very effective policing, and very few escaped.

Sebastian continued. “I have here,” he said with his usual air of drama, “with the compliments of Ann, the perfect camouflage.”

He took from his bicycle’s saddlebag a folded sheet of cardboard with fine pencil drawings on it. They looked at the grey cardboard sheet, and indeed it appeared to be the same colour as the fence.

“And,” Sebastian continued, “tacks. What we shall do now is proceed to the area at the back of the fence. C.W., you will have the honour of crawling through to tack it over the hole. We have to do this right. Sometime over the weekend Dass is bound to clean up, and if he discovers the hole, he is sure to report it.”

Dass was the caretaker and groundsman.

“Any questions?”

Reggie, always the cautious one, asked, “But what if we get caught?”

“It’s perfectly clear, my dear Reggie, that we have to be intelligent and not get caught,” Sebastian answered patiently. “We shall use this hole as the perfect escape. Just imagine, we can get away every Friday.”

“Do you mean all of us?” Reggie asked. “I don’t think I would like to. It’s too risky.”

Sebastian responded, “You worry too much. Once the hole is concealed and remains our secret, there can be no risk. It’s perfect. In time, we can take turns disappearing on Friday afternoons, and to prove my point, I shall go next Friday. But first, we must cover up the hole.”

“What if it rains? It will soak the cardboard. It won’t be able to stand up,” Tom said, being practical.

Sebastian thought for a while.

“Now that’s a good point. We’ll have to think of a more permanent solution.”

With that, he led off and they followed, with a reluctant Reggie the last to move off. They got to the road behind the fence and dismounted from their bicycles. There was no one about and no one walking on the street. The hole was clearly visible, and the branches they had covered it with on the inside could be seen.

“C.W., I’ll help you push the branches away,” Sebastian said. “You crawl through and put the cardboard square in place. The rest of you, keep a sharp eye out for anyone passing. We only have a few minutes. Come on.”

Giving their bicycles to the others to hold, they crossed the grass patch at the side of the road and jumped the shallow gutter running along the fence. Sebastian stooped down, pushed the branches out of the way, and looked through the hole at the ground area at the end of the field. A cricket practice match was underway. No one was in the immediate vicinity.

“Quickly, C.W., no one is about.”

C.W. squeezed past Sebastian and went through the hole and set about covering it.

“I can’t push the tacks in,” he whispered desperately.

“Hurry,” said Sebastian.

“But I can’t.”

“Find a stone.” Sebastian started looking about himself.

“Someone is coming up the road,” Peter called. “Can’t you guys hurry?”

“We’re doing our best,” Sebastian replied.

“It’s okay,” a desperate C.W. cried. “I found a stone.”

Muffled bangs came from the inside of the fence. C.W. lifted the flap and was through the hole in a flash, heading for his bicycle with Sebastian right behind him. A couple strolled by on the other side of the road and gave a brief glance at the boys, who appeared to be fixing one of their bicycles.

“That was close,” Peter commented. They looked at the fence. With the cardboard in place, the hole had disappeared.

“With any luck,” Sebastian declared, “that could be there forever after we improve on it. We could sell places. We could become millionaires.” He had a fertile imagination.

Monday morning at recess they strolled toward the tree, confident that only a close examination would reveal that all was not right with the fence. Upon confirming that their secret had not been uncovered, they congratulated themselves, patting each other on the back. Normally this would not have attracted anyone’s attention, but on this particular day George Fenwick and his friends were walking just behind them, and George’s curiosity was aroused.

“What are you fellows so happy about?” Fenwick asked.

Sebastian looked at him disdainfully. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” he sneered.

George Fenwick, slighted, turned angrily and walked away, beckoning to his friends.

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The prefect who had accosted them the week before overheard the exchange. He was a friend of George Fenwick's brother Charles, who was also a prefect, and didn't like Sebastian's attitude. He stayed behind and closely observed Sebastian and his companions. Their behavior around the tree seemed unusual. Puzzled, he approached Charles.

"You know, Charles, that group of boys who hang out with that chap, Bold I think his name is, I swear they are up to something," he said.

Charles looked at him curiously.

"Surely you don't mean that vagabond Sebastian Bold?"

"Yes, that's the fellow," replied the prefect.

"Really? Interesting. I have a score to settle with him." Charles suspected Sebastian and his friends of being responsible for a spate of flat tires to his bicycle. The prefect related the curious attitude of the boys as they gathered around the tree, and Charles decided to investigate. He also started to observe them from a distance. At first he was disappointed, for he could find nothing wrong or unusual about their actions.

He was on the cricket team, and Thursday after net practice he went to the tree to look around. Everything appeared normal. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something peculiar about the fence. He walked up to it and looked down. The cardboard flap moved slightly in the wind. He bent down and gently lifted the flap, smiled to himself triumphantly, and lowered it.

The next morning when the prefects gathered for assignment, Charles announced, "Gentlemen, I think we will have an attempted break this afternoon. I know exactly how, and I have a very good idea who the culprit or culprits will be." He then proceeded to discuss his plans for the afternoon.

On Friday morning Sebastian got up, dressed quickly, and was early at the breakfast table.

“My, are you the early one,” his mother said.

“Important things to accomplish, Mom,” he replied.

His mother lifted an eyebrow but did not respond.

As soon as he arrived at school, Sebastian was surrounded by his friends.

Tom asked, “You’re going to do it?”

With supreme confidence, Sebastian answered, “Of course! This is the ultimate in the expression I believe you are all familiar with, freedom of movement!”

He had just heard his father talking about the restrictions that the Russian government had imposed on its citizens. His father had said that the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, had called it the Iron Curtain.

“Today,” he declared in his most expansive mode, “we will remove the curtain. Are you with me?”

The group of boys, locked in their private conspiracy, avoided the tree but for one brief circling of the grounds. Sebastian kept a careful eye out for prefects, but saw none. The covered hole had not been detected, and there had been no rain, so the cardboard had held up nicely. He was absolutely certain.

At last the afternoon bell went, and everyone was off scampering for their bicycles. Sebastian’s was carefully deposited two blocks away from the school’s compound in the yard of Tom’s aunt. He, however, went through the motion of going with the other boys to where the bicycles were kept. The prefects were deployed at the gates, but curiously there were none about the compound keeping an eye out for tardy movers.

Hundreds of boys filed through the gates and proceeded toward the cathedral. Sebastian’s friends were the first out, anxious to distance themselves from any disaster. Sebastian lingered as the flow of boys slowed. Choosing his moment carefully, with his head down searching the ground as though something was

lost, he approached the tree. As he drew near he paused for a brief moment, then raised his head and looked around. He was confident he was not being observed. Quickly he went through the hole, but as he emerged on the other side a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“Well, well, what have we here? A miscreant, I believe.”

To Sebastian’s utter dismay, there was Charles Fenwick flanked by two other prefects, broad smiles on their faces. Sebastian stared at them bereft of words. He was escorted ignominiously to church, where he stood in the back, completely deflated. George Fenwick and his friends were looking at him and laughing. At the end of the service he sneaked away, avoiding C.W. and the others until a few hours later when he stood in complete chagrin and recounted the missing pieces of the story for the benefit of his friends at their meeting place.

Reggie said, “Well, I warned you.” His comment was untimely and earned him a withering look.

Tom said, “The last guy who was caught escaping came out of Smithy’s office crying. He had got strokes.”

“Who says I’ll get strokes?”

“Not only strokes, but reported to your parents.”

“Rubbish, I’ll talk my way out of it.”

“You’ll talk your way out of it? You must be the best talker in the whole world.”

Sebastian frowned at him. “If you’re trying to cheer me up, you’re succeeding,” he said sarcastically.

“No, Smithy will cheer you up with six of the very best,” C.W. said.

Then the sky opened up and put an end to their meeting.

It was two o’clock Monday afternoon when there was a knock on the door of Sebastian’s classroom. The teacher, Mr.

Bailey, opened the door and took the slip of paper that a boy handed to him. He read it and looked directly at Sebastian.

“I believe the principal requires a Bold presence.”

The class, who knew by now all about Sebastian’s misadventure, burst out laughing, George Fenwick’s laughter the loudest.

“Quiet there, and get on with your work,” commanded Mr. Bailey.

Sebastian slowly got to his feet and followed the boy. His heart beat faster and numbness seemed to creep over him. All weekend he had plotted his defense, but he could think of nothing that could save him. He had even considered feigning sickness, but knew his mother would have none of that and understood that it would only serve to postpone the inevitable.

He stood in line with the other unfortunate souls, also guilty of some breach of conduct. A faint hum came from the classrooms. A low murmur of voices could be heard behind the closed door of the teachers’ room, which was opposite the principal’s office. The door opened and a boy came out. He was wringing his hands.

“Your turn, Bold,” he said aloud.

He lowered his voice and whispered, “He is in a foul mood.”

Sebastian entered the office and approached the desk. Father Smith was reading the slip of paper in his hand. He looked up. His piercing eyes bored into Sebastian, who felt himself shrinking.

“These are serious charges, Bold. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Sebastian struggled to find his voice.

Father Smith raised his voice slightly. “Speak up, boy, we don’t have all afternoon.”

“Well, sir, I thought I would go home early to help my mother, as Friday is a very busy day for her,” he fumbled.

“Help your mother, eh! By going through a hole in the fence, which you and your friends, I suppose, had made. You first disobeyed school rules and damaged school property. Then you tried to sneak out and miss benediction, the most important ending to the school week, and now you come here with this ridiculous explanation?”

Staring sternly at Sebastian, he continued, “Now tell me how the hole came to be in the fence. Who conspired with you to conceal it and use it to try to avoid benediction?”

Sebastian was not about to betray his friends. He decided to tell all, making it seem as though he had done everything by himself. Father Smith listened carefully to him. When Sebastian was finished, he asked, “Is that all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’m sure you are covering up for your friends, but I do believe the fence was weakened. Your actions, however, constitute a serious breach. You will receive six strokes, one week’s detention after school, and you will also write an essay of five hundred words on the importance of benediction.”

Despite what he had told the others, Sebastian had expected to get strokes from the principal, and had taken the precaution of wearing two pairs of pants.

Father Smith got up from his desk and took down the cane that was hanging on the wall.

“Assume the position.”

Sebastian bent over, reaching for his toes.

It was a ritual with Father Smith that he applied only three meaningful strokes, and this was usually done at the beginning of the punishment. All the boys braced for them, and so it was with Sebastian, except the three hard strokes came at the end, just when he started to think how easy it was. The strokes knocked the bravado out of him, and it took all his willpower to muffle an outcry.

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At the end, Father Smith said, “You have one week to present the essay. Your detention starts from this afternoon, and Bold, it would be wise of you to consider avoiding future visits to my office. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Sebastian mumbled.

Struggling not to show any emotion, his eyes burning and his bottom stinging like the devil, he left the office. He avoided looking at any of the others awaiting their turn. Inwardly he was greatly relieved that there would be no report to his parents.

He never did find out how he had been discovered, though he knew that one day he would settle the score with the Fenwick brothers.

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