

An Unconquerable Alliance

By John D. Lopez

Illustrated by Louis Fancher.

Affection is as Necessary to Childish Development as Sun and Air.

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NATHAN flopped his fat little body to a step of the tenement-house stairway to seek solace in self-commiseration. It was here that he usually communed with himself, reasonably certain of being undisturbed. Outside was the world where every hand was raised against him; upstairs, in their flat, were Aunt Elsie, who was cross and who would not understand, and Father, who must never be disturbed. That was the whole trouble; nobody wanted to understand or be disturbed.

Nathan had learned from experience not to tell his troubles to anyone, and more. Always the grown-ups said he was "touchy" or, as the school-teacher put it, "supersensitive." He had searched out the latter in the dictionary and arrived at the conclusion that both meant about the same. And anyhow, they always laughed at him. That was it exactly; everybody always made fun, no matter what.

Was it his fault because he was so fat? Wouldn't he like to be thin like other boys and have everybody's respect? There was the injustice of it; it was something he couldn't help. Nathan surveyed his corpulent form with intense loathing. He had come to despise his body as the cause of all his ills. No wonder most everybody called him "Fatty." If only he had been a cripple instead. Of course they couldn't get around any quicker than he; but then nobody laughed at cripples. Nor they didn't pick on them either.

A good home? Of course he had it. And fine clothes? Sure! But what good were they? They only made the Rivington Street gang always in the suit of "dude." Aunt Elsie didn't know how cruel it was to fix him up so fancy and make him wear big white collars. Once he had spoken about it; but she had declared, once for all, that the son of a rich retired rabbi must be a credit to his father.

Was it any use to be the best scholar in the public school except that it brought reward in spending money? Really, it was not to his credit; if he could have been playing with other boys, as he'd rather do, he wouldn't have so much time to read and study. Besides, it drew persecution upon him. Just that afternoon, because he had been awarded an "excellent certificate," the gang had tackled him because they said he was "teacher's pet."

Teacher's pet! Gee! If they only knew. Nathan opened his geography and snatched the despised certificate. Then he tore it into shreds and raised himself to throw the pieces over the banister.

At that moment there was a burst of shrill shouts up the street. Obviously they came from a crowd of boys who were running. Nathan's experienced ears could plainly distinguish the tones of derision and baiting. Of course they were after him! He grabbed up his books and prepared for flight.

"Skinny! Skinny!" The shout was unfamiliar and wonder held Nathan long enough to see a couple of pebbles bounce on the pavement directly in front of the open doorway. Then a boy ran up and came to a sudden stop. The boy was a stranger. Also he was very, very thin.

With bewildering rapidity, the boy deftly balanced a loaf of bread on his left arm, then raised his right and hurled a stone back at his pursuers. There was a sudden yell of agony and the cries of derision changed immediately to murmurs of babel. The new boy shouted a taunt: "Muckers!" Impudently, he twirled his fingers at his nose and then stalked complacently into the hallway.

Curiosity and excitement overcame Nathan's natural caution. "What's der matter?" he called over the railing. The boy wheeled nervously and raised his arm to repel unexpected attack. Then he saw who had called. Nathan noted the immediate fall of the arm and the look of relaxation that followed. The significance of the semi-grin that accompanied his quick scrutiny was apparent and Nathan's heart sank. But as they scanned each other, candidly, as juveniles do, he grew to like the looks of that boy. First of all, he was thin—as thin, almost, as Nathan was fat—and he looked agile as a cat. And then the blue eyes that peered out from under the tangled fringe seemed kindly; and so did his expansive mouth and freckled, upturned nose.

"You're the boy that lives upstairs," said the newcomer with the directness of youth; "they calls you 'Fatty.' What's your real name?"

Nathan told him, thawing under the boy's genial manner. "Mine's Mullally," volunteered that delightful individual. "Bill Mullally. We moved in this morning to the second rear. 'Cause rents is cheap. I'm from the Bronx."

"So?" said Nathan, politely. "I'm from Kishinev, vich iss in Russia, six years ago, after my mother was killed. We live here because father has no English unt Russia iss spoke much here."

"The gang tackled me," continued Bill, "an I soaked a big red-headed stiff with a rock."

"It's Reddy Franko," explained Nathan, anxiously. "He's tough. He put 'em onto me a velle ago."

"I seen it," said Bill. "Why don't you dodge the big ones and lick the little kids when they're alone?"

"How?" queried Nathan with a despairing gesture. "Der vuns vich can lick me I cannot run away from, unt dose I can lick iss too fast for me to catch."

The boy looked at him gravely. "You are awful fat," he decided; but there was not the faintest tinge of mockery in his voice. "Kind of flabby all over. I'm awful skinny, but I kin get around quick."

"Skinny?" Nathan blenched with admiration in Nathan's voice. "Vy, it's grand. Everybody makes fun mit a boy dot iss fat. Efrubby laughs; efen vitzmen vich makes sorry mit other boys."

Bill grinned appreciatively, then offered polite solace. "Too too," he said. "The gang'll do me up if they catch me. There's too many of 'em. An almost best in his eagerness. He leaped far over the balustrade."

"Say," he ejaculated pleadingly, "let us be partners. Let's make a little gang of our own—just us two."

Because the other did not answer quickly enough, he burst into a flood of alluring inducements: "I vill share up efrubbing mit you unt you need not do it mit me. I haf an air rifle unt you shall shoot it unt I vill buy der bullets. Unt you shall be der leader of der gang unt I vill do anything you wish. Unt I vill do all your lessons; I am very good mit books. Say vill you—go on!—vill you?"

The new boy's interest had heightened perceptibly. "Sure," he said with assumed carelessness; "I don't care. What kind of rifle is it? It ain't broke, is it? I'm rotten at lessons."

He started rearward through the hallway. "So long. See you later. Me mother's waitin' for the bread." He quickened his step. A call from Nathan brought him to a halt.

"Say," pleaded the corpulent one, "please don't call me 'Fatty.' Call me 'Nat'an.'"

Scarcely had he bolted his supper than Nathan hurried downstairs and took a position on the steps. It was early, he mused, but then better be on the safe side. As the minutes dragged along their leaden way his spirits began to sink. Suppose the new boy didn't come out, it occurred to him with a clutch at the heart. And then, O joy, he heard a shrill whistle and a moment later Bill was with him.

"Stopped to help me mother do the dishes," he explained. "It's fierce; but she's tired. Me father's dead. Where's the rifle?"

"Aunt Elsie's there. But say, I got some money. I'll treat you. I know a fine place. Come on."

He took the new boy by the arm and led him up the street and around the corner to the little refreshment stand.

"Here, mister," he called to the Italian proprietor, "gif my friend a ice-cream sandvitch. A thick vun for two cents."

"Nix," protested his guest; "get two penny ones, then we won't have to break it. They crumbles easy and you lose the ice cream."

"We vill not break it," replied Nathan. "It iss all for you. Nefer do I eat after meals, because I—"

"Hungry!" The plaintive ejaculation seemed wrung from a tortured soul. "Always am I hungry, but der teacher says sweet t'ings makes you fat. So efen do I eat such a emptiness at meals. Dere iss pickles vich Mrs. Mogiovtz dot keeps der delicatessen says makes you thin. Always if I buy some thing at all it iss pickles."

A puzzled, frightened look swept into the other lad's eyes. "Say," he gasped suddenly, "maybe it's what's the matter with me. Pickles, I mean. I likes 'em an' eats 'em all the time. So does me mother, so we have plenty chowchow, an' pickles, an' pepper hash, an' all them things. She's skinny too."

Nathan was gazing at him enviously. "Dot's der vay," he said with a sad shake of his head. "Boys always gets plenty of vot dey don't want."

"I tell you what," shouted Bill rapturously, carried away by his idea. "No more pickles for mine. I'll save all I get an' swap with you for the sweet things you got."

Nathan gazed at him a wad, open-mouthed with admiration. "Say," he said, grabbing Bill's arm frantically, "honest to goodness, vill you? Honest to goodness?"

Never before had he felt such a glow toward anyone. They had confessed their infirmities and sympathized practically with each other. What stronger bond could there be?

"Mister," he called enthusiastically, pompously, "gif my friend two more sandvitches." He turned to the astonished urchin. "Nefer mind, I haf der money. Also vill I get me a dill pickle around to M's. Mogiovtz. Here iss der money."

He thrust the pennies into Bill's hand and was off with a near approach to a run.

One sandvitch was promptly consumed without necessity of prolonging its delights. Then the next one was handed over and more deliberately eaten. Still there was no sign of Nathan. Bill stamped around uneasily for a while, uncertain doubts beginning to take form in his mind. It is kind of funny for a fellow to act that way, now, ain't it? Come right up an' blow money on you when you ain't doing nothing for him. Buy ice-cream sandvitches—three of 'em—an' then forget to come back. Say, could you blame a fellow for gettin' nervous?

"Hoy, Guinea," demanded he of the stand keeper. "Where's this Mogiovtz place? Wonder if he's one of the gang puttin' up a game on me?"

Soon as he had learned it was around in Grand Street he was off with all the caution of twelve years' experience in street craft. Across to the opposite side he scurried with the cunning of an Indian stalking an enemy and then, by dodging in and out of doorways, reached the corner where he could safely view the street down which Nathan had disappeared. Immediately Bill's eyes fell upon a group of small boys leaping about, gesticulating and giving vent to shouts of derision.

There was Nathan at bay in a doorway, while in front of him was Reddy Franko, Bill's enemy of the afternoon, striking at the shrinking form with a stocky full of flour.

The other boys were small fry, sycophants unworthy even of contempt. Indignation surged up in Bill. Could you blame him? Here was a fellow being mistreated that had showed he was all to the good. Anybody that was half on the level would have felt sorry. Bill gave his fiercest war-whoop and dashed across the street to take a hand. And just then things came his way.

As he drew near, Franko made an extra strenuous swing and overbalanced himself, tripping and whirling into Nathan's arms. He found himself clutched as a swimmer is fastened upon by a drowning man. It was a death grip upon which the victim's safety depended. Then came Bill like a rocket through the group, shrieking defiance, clouting small boys right and left, and dancing up to the principals.

"Hold him, Nat'an," he yelled; "I'll lick the stuffin' out of him." With utter disregard for all juvenile ethics of the street he fell upon the defenseless Reddy and pummeled and kicked him until he bellowed for mercy. Nathan, too, was adding shrieks of agony to the din because the boy kicked lustily and Nathan's shins suffered. But the joy of revenge was sweet and he held on. Then as a last insult, Bill picked the pickle from the gutter where it had rolled and with one sturdy blow crushed it over the visage of their victim.

"Shake him loose," he called to Nathan. "There may be more of the gang. Come on. Blow!"

He seized him by the arm and helped him run around the corner to safety. A dark hallway gave them opportunity to regain their breaths and compare notes.

"Dere ain't no big boys in der gang," finally gasped Nathan; "only little kids vich he can lick."

But the chill of fear was fastening on Bill. "Gee, when he gets me alone he'll lick me," he meditated. "He's too big for me unless somebody holds him."

"I'll do it!" said Nathan. "Always ve vill go out together unt I vill hold him unt you vill lick him. Ot'vise he vill lick me ven I am alone."

What else could sensible boys do? Here was a new community of interest that dictated union. Their compact was formally ratified with strange oaths and affirmations dear to boy heart. So they wended their way homeward planning for the morrow and arranging signals with whistling and all the countless details of up-to-date campaigning that grown-ups suspect without ever understanding.

They had reached their own hallway and then

matters greatly. Thereafter, when Nathan was ready for school he waited patiently in the hallway for Bill, whistling signals to start, at intervals. And though he began to be late regularly, he counted the cost as nothing compared with what he was receiving. Wouldn't Bill do it for him? It wasn't his fault because he had a lot of errands to do for his mother!

Gradually, Reddy and the gang gave up thoughts of interfering with the "partners." First they learned that it wasn't safe to try anything when they were together. A few skirmishes demonstrated that.

Then a couple of painful experiences for Franko proved conclusively that if you tackled either when he was alone, they would get you and fix you when they were together. Bill was exceedingly fleet of foot and could overtake and detain even Franko until Nathan caught up. The concluding tactics were invariably patterned on those of the battle of that first evening. Finally the gang even stopped calling names.

It's marvelous what the pride of independence will do for a fellow even if he is only ten years old. Aunt Elsie was not the only one who noticed it, although she did not suspect the cause. Everybody seemed ever so much more friendly. Nathan, himself, felt the change, but he knew where credit was due, all right. Bill thought it was because he wasn't so "touchy" any more.

And in the meantime Nathan had met Mrs. Mullally, Bill's mother. His conception of a mother had been hazy; a sort of exaggerated Aunt Elsie—a woman around the house that was boss and made you do all kinds of things you didn't want to do. So Mrs. Mullally was a revelation; although Nathan had reined his imagination in view of the fact that she was the mother of Bill.

Undoubtedly this was largely due to her acceptance of him. In face of Nathan's unselfish adoration of her "bye William," Mrs. Mullally found all her deep-rooted prejudices against "Jew boys" were as mist. She just gathered him under her wing and mothered him along with Bill; and scolded them, and sympathized with them, without the slightest partiality.

"Shure the lads stavin' for affection," Nathan heard her say that day, and ever after, being unduly precocious, his ideas of mothers were amended.

"She's fine; grand!" he assured Bill. "Maybe not as pretty as der picture of my mother vich father keeps always on hiss desk; but dere eyes iss alike; same as they wanted to pet you. Sometimes I vish she iss alive. Poor father iss so busy to make love oter me."

And then they were into summer. Was it possible this was the same kind of school vacation he'd had last year? Certainly not; he didn't know Bill then! Gee, can't a fellow have lots of fun in summer if he gets a chance? What's the odds if he did almost melt from the heat going along with Bill when he delivered the orders for the grocer? He wasn't half as slow as he used to be. Bill said so. Besides, didn't they spend some of the money for great rides up to Bronx, and Central Park, and once down to Coney? Bill was great on whacking up now. He shared everything, though at first it was plainly agreed only Nathan was to whack up what he had.

Dreamlike, it passed and they were back at school with only Saturdays for long trips. And so one afternoon late in January they had gone to Central Park to hunt Indians with the old air rifle. Regardless of the fact it was broken, Indians are awful sneaky things; they ambush in such out-of-the-way places. That's why the "pards" were forced to trail a band of them right down to the edge of the big lake. It was Bill who braved the followed the trail out on the ice, first warning Nathan back. But the ice held safely and besides he was just going to follow Bill, that settled it. When the park policeman came to the rescue they found Bill standing up to his neck in the icy water, holding

Nathan from slipping farther out.

Aunt Elsie kept Nathan in the house all Sunday as punishment, but bright and early Monday he was down in the hall whistling the signal to start to school.

Finally, Mrs. Mullally came, obviously worried. "Stop yer whistlin'," she said; "me bye's too sick to go. It's out of his head he is, half the time. It's a doctor I'll be havin'."

Not even the admiration of the other boys for their adventure overcame the anxiety that possessed Nathan all morning. As soon as school was out he ran every step of the way home and hurried to the Mullallys.

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"VE VILL NOT BREAK IT. IT ISS ALL FOR YOU."

to Nathan came the proudest moment of the eventful day. "So long, old man," said Bill cordially, wending his way rearward; "see you in the mornin'."

"So long, old man," he had said it earnestly, but oh, the ecstatic feeling of pride it roused in the corpulent bosom. To be treated as an equal—to be accorded the full measure of a worth-while boy's respect! Could life offer anything more satisfying? Nathan leaned over the banister trying to hide his unmanly emotion, trying to think of some appropriate and worthy reply.

"So long, Bill," he called enthusiastically; "don't forget der pickles."

With the next morning began an era of happiness for Nathan that more than fulfilled the promise of the first day. True, he met summary punishment at the hands of the gang; and so, for that matter, did Bill, though in a lesser degree. But after that they rarely ventured forth alone, at least not until they had demonstrated the significance of their union which stood not only for mutual protection, but vengeance as well.

To their great satisfaction, Bill was transferred to the same school as Nathan, which simplified

that attached to Bill, said something disparaging about Bill, mind you; his "pard" that was sick and maybe dying.

Things went a queer, wavering red before Nathan's eyes. It wasn't really he that grew tense and sprang at Franko and bore him to the ground. It was some other fat boy with murder in his heart who beat and choked and rolled his victim until some men pulled him away. But after that Nathan was treated with respect; he had re-established Bill's standing.

True, a couple of days later Franko fell from an awning pole and broke his leg. And this worried Nathan. Not on Franko's account; you bet your life. But with the fickleness of youth the boys had immediately transferred their hero worship from Bill to Franko. Common sense made Nathan recognize that a real accident with an ambulance and a hospital was more adventurous than any sick spell no matter how you got it.

Still, that could all be settled later; and anyhow he didn't care what was what if only Bill got well. The old step on the stairway became again a refuge for meditation. Mrs. Mullally knew he could be found there and the doctor might relent and let him see Bill. Anyway it was a good place to pray. Nathan had decided that prayers might help some; so he used to sit there by the hour and run over all he could remember or invent.

Then came the discovery that he could keep in even closer touch at night by going out on the fire escape and watching the light in Mullally's flat, just across the narrow alleyway. It got awful cold sometimes; but Nathan could almost tell by the shadows on the blind when Bill's mother gave him medicine; and sometimes he fancied he could hear Bill cough.

It came to him one night that there was a way in which he could see Bill. The fire escape opposite extended to within three feet of the one he was on. A fellow could step across and go down one flight and peep into Bill's window. It was slippery on the rail, but Nathan stretched one leg over carefully and then—there was a rasping scrape, followed by a sudden roaring sensation and a dull rattle, and the oblivion.

When Nathan awoke it took him considerable time even to realize how strange things were. First it was the peculiar odor that impressed him; the kind of smell outside a dispensary. Then he tried to raise his head cautiously and the sharp pain it caused led to the discovery that his head was wrapped in bandages. It startled him almost to normal wakefulness. Something had happened! Sure; his leg was stretched out on a board. Oh, yes; he remembered now. He had slipped last night on the fire escape. He must be in a hospital. No; this was his room, all right. The blinds were down, but he recognized the bed and the furniture, and there hung the air rifle that he and Bill—

It brought him to a sudden remembrance. "What is it, dear?" said the young woman in white who had been sitting at the window. She walked over and took his hand.

She was strange to Nathan, but he liked her right away. Her voice was soft and caressing and her face was so cheerful. It was very soothing to his aching head. He knew immediately she was a regular nurse; he'd seen pictures of them on a drug-store sign.

"Ven I fell last night—" he began, and then stopped, astonished at the weakness of his voice. "Be careful," cautioned the nurse; "it was six days ago you fell."

"Six days—six days!" he gasped; "unt iss Bill—how is he?"

She had sat by during the days he had babbled in delirium and she understood. "Fine," she said reassuringly, "is convalescent."

"Oh!" The agony of terror in his voice indicated his misunderstanding.

"I mean by that," she explained quickly "that he is getting well. Is sitting up. And in a day or so can come and see you."

"Oh!" It was a revelation to her how the same word came to the extreme of emotion. Also a revelation that only then he thought of injuries; how bad they were; when he would be well.

Six weeks, she thought, before he would be up and then he would be weak and thin.

"Thin," he said eagerly; "really thin? To stay always so?"

"Always, if you are active," she replied with a comprehending smile. "And now go to sleep. You have talked too much for the first time." She playfully closed his eyelids.

"Miss Nurse," he said suddenly, "iss father unt Aunt Elsie very mad? I haf made so much trouble."

"Why, no," she replied with a little catch in her voice; "they are both very sorry. But go to sleep."

He sighed contentedly and closed his eyes. For perhaps five minutes he lay quiet, thinking, thinking. Then suddenly the nurse was startled by his voice for she thought he was asleep.

"Miss Nurse, please just run more t'ing. Did I fall far? More dan Reddy Franko?"

"Well, I should say so," she declared with a frank laugh. "Three times as far. All the boys are talking about it."

He smiled tremulously and lay quite still. He knew if he tried to speak he would burst out crying from sheer happiness.

The nurse was standing by the bed when he awoke hours later.

"You feel fine, don't you dear?" she said. "Well, then, how would you like to see father?"

"Fine," he said; "I would like to fine. But he must not be botherd."

There was an odd choking sound outside the open door. Then, of all things, who should hurry into the room but the father himself. Could it be possible that this man who threw himself on his knees beside the bed was the inaccessible father he had always known—this man that buried his face in the covers and shook all over? It hurt Nathan's hand to be squeezed so tight; but he liked it. He felt almost like crying himself when his father placed his lips to the hand and kissed it. It was amazing!

"My boy, my boy," he sobbed in Yiddish; "God has punished me that you love others better than me. Never will I neglect you again. And you vill try and forgive me and love me some!"

Only half comprehending, Nathan patted the bearded face and smiled.

"And I alone am to blame for this awful accident," continued his father.

"Awful accident?" interrupted Nathan questioningly. His mind danced to Bill's recovery, to Reddy Franko's eclipse, to the corpulent past gone forever and then to the fine, new, loving father he had found.

"Awful accident!" he repeated. "Vy, father, it was grand. It got me efrubbing."