



Father Flanagan's Toughest Customer

*"There's no such thing as a bad boy!"
- and then along came Eddie.....*

One winter night a long-distance call came to that Nebraska village known all over the world as Boys Town.

"Father Flanagan? This is Sheriff Hosey - from Virginia. Got room for another boy - immediately?"

"Where is he now?"

"In jail. He's a desperate character - robbed a bank, held up three stores with a revolver."

"How old is he?"

"Eight and a half."

The gaunt, blue-eyed priest stiffened at the telephone.

"He's what?"

"Don't let his age fool you. He's all I said he was, and more. Will you take him off our hands?"

For years the Rev. Edward Joseph Flanagan has been taking unwanted boys off the hands of baffled society: youths of all ages, races, creeds.

"If I can't manage an eight-year-old boy by this time, I ought to quit," he said. "Bring him on!"

Three days later, Sheriff Hosey and his wife set down their prisoner in Father Flanagan's office - an unnaturally pale boy with a bundle under his arm. He was no higher than the desk; frowzy hair of chocolate brown dangled over the pinched face; sullen brown eyes were half shut beneath long, dark lashes. From one side of his



mouth a cigarette drooped at a theatrical angle. "Don't mind the smoking," pleaded the sheriff. "We had to bribe him with cigarettes."

The sheriff's wife laid a long envelope on the desk.

"There's a complete report," she snapped. "And that's not the half of it. This good-for-nothing criminal is not worth helping. It's my personal opinion he ain't even human! Good-bye and good luck - you're going to need it!"

Now the heart of Father Flanagan is warmed by his love of God and man, and especially young ones. Looking upon this patched wraith of childhood, the priest thought that never had he seen such a mixture of the comical and the utterly squalid and tragic.

Waving the newcomer to a chair, Father Flanagan began to read the report. People had forgotten the boy's last name; he was just Eddie. Born in a slum near the Newport News docks, he had lost mother



and father in a flu epidemic before he was four. In water-front flats he was shunted from one family to another, living like a desperate animal.

Hardship sharpened his cunning and his will. At the age of eight he became the boss of a gang of boys, some nearly twice his age. Coached by older toughs of the neighbourhood, Eddie browbeat them into petty crimes which he planned in detail.

About six months before the law caught up with him, his rule had been challenged by a new member of the gang.

“You never do anything yourself. You’re no leader.”

“I’ll show you,” replied Eddie. “I’ll do something you wouldn’t dare. I’m going to rob a bank.”

The bank was housed in an old-fashioned building. When most of the clerks were at lunch, Eddie entered unseen and crossed to an unattended slot of the cashier cage. So small that he had to chin himself up, he thrust in one grimy paw, seized a packet of bills and hid them in his jacket. Then he walked out to divide \$200 among his comrades. But the exploit was a flop; the bank concealed the theft and there were no headlines.

“You’re only cracking your jaw,” the gang jeered. “You found that dough somewhere.”

Eddie’s answer was to disappear for several days. Someone had sold him a revolver, and he was out in the fields beyond town, practising marksmanship.

This time the local front pages were full of him. Slouching into a restaurant at a quiet hour, he aimed his gun at the terrified counterman and was handed the day’s take from the cash register. Next he dragged a roll of bills from the pocket of a quaking tailor. His third call was on an old lady who kept a candy store.

“Put that thing down,” this grandmother cried, “before you hurt yourself!”

She smacked the gun out of his hand and grabbed him by the hair. Savagely he

struggled; he might have killed her, but her screams brought policemen. Now Eddie had wound up in Boys Town.

Putting aside the report, Father Flanagan looked at the villain of the piece. In the dimmish light Eddie sat unmoving, head lowered, so that it was hard to see much of that sullen face. As the man watched, the child produced a cigarette paper and a sack of tobacco. One hand, cowboy fashion, he deliberately rolled a cigarette and lit it, thumbnail to match; he blew a plume of smoke across the desk.

The long eyelashes lifted for a flash, to see how the priest was taking it.

“Eddie,” began Flanagan, “you are welcome here. The whole place is run by the fellows, you know. Boy mayor. Boy city council. Boy chief of police.”

“Where’s the jail?” grunted Eddie.

“We haven’t a jail. You are going to take a bath and then get supper. Tomorrow you start in a school. You and I can become real friends - it’s strictly up to you. Some day I hope I can take you to my heart. I know you’re a good boy!”

The reply came in one shocking syllable.

About ten o’clock next morning Father Flanagan’s office door opened and the new pupil swaggered in. His hair had been cut and neatly combed and he was clean. With an air of great unconcern he tossed on the desk a note from one of the teachers: “Dear Father Flanagan: We have heard you say a thousand times that there is no such thing as a bad boy. Would you mind telling me what you call this one?”

Back in the classroom Father Flanagan found the atmosphere tense. The teacher described how Eddie had sat quietly in his seat for about an hour; suddenly he began parading up and down the aisle, swearing like a longshoreman and throwing movable objects on the floor, finally pitching an inkwell which landed accurately on a plaster bust of Cicero.



Replacing Eddie in his seat, Father Flanagan apologised:

"It was my fault. I never told him he mustn't throw inkwells. The laws of Boys Town will, of course, be enforced with him, as with all the rest of us. But he has to learn them first. We must never forget that Eddie is a good boy."

"Like hell I am!" screamed Eddie.

The child made no friends among boys or teachers. And for Father Flanagan he reserved his supreme insult - "a damned praying Christian." Spare time he spent roaming about stealthily, looking for a chance to run away. He stood aloof in the gymnasium and on baseball and football fields: "Kid stuff!" he muttered. Neither choir nor band could stir him; the farm bored him. And in all that first six months not once a laugh or a tear. Soon the question in Boys Town was whether Father Flanagan had met his match at last.

"Does the little fellow learn anything?" he asked the sisters.

"Somehow he is getting his ABC's," they reported. "In fact he's learning more than he lets on. But he's just eaten up with hate."

This was not the first tough case Father Flanagan had dealt with. One youngster had shot his father, a wife-beater, through the heart. A murderer - but only because the lad loved his mother. When the priest had understood, he had been able to work things out. There must be something in Eddie, too, that could be worked out.

"I'll have to throw away the book of rules," grumbled Flanagan. "I'm going to try spoiling the little devil - with love!"

Boys and teachers watched the new strategy as if it were a sporting contest, and the home team was Father Flanagan. Upon those weeks and months of planned treats the priest looks back with a reminiscent shudder: the scores of second-rate movies they sat through; the hot dogs and

hamburgers, candy bars, ice cream and soft drinks that Eddie stuffed inside his puny body.

Yet never once did Eddie give a sign that anything was fun. In summer dawns that smelled of pines and wild clover, he would trudge stolidly down to the lake, but no grunt of excitement came when he landed a trout. An apathy settled upon him; he became more silent than ever.

Only once toward the end of that unhappy experiment did man and boy come closer together. At a street crossing in Omaha Eddie was looking in the wrong direction when a truck bore down on him; Father Flanagan yanked him out of harm's way. For one instant a light of gratitude flickered in the startled brown eyes, then the dark lashes fell again; he said nothing.

Even to the man of faith it began to seem that here was an inherent vileness beyond his reach. Hope had fallen to the lowest possible point when one soft spring morning Eddie appeared in the office, boldly announcing that he wanted to have it out with Father Flanagan. This time the brown eyes were glowing with indignation.

"You been trying to get around me," he began, "but now I'm wise to you. If you was on the level, I might have been a sucker, at that. I almost fell for your line. But last night I got to thinking it over and I see the joker in the whole thing -"

There was something terribly earnest and manful in Eddie now; this was not insolence but despair. With a stab of hope the priest noticed for the first time a quiver on the twisted lips.

"Father Flanagan, you're a phony!"

"You better prove that, Eddie - or shut up!"

"Okay! I just kicked a sister in the shins. Now what do you say?"

"I still say you are a good boy."

"What did I tell you? You keep on saying that lie and you know it's a lie. It can't be true. Don't that prove you're a phony?"



Dear Heavenly Father, this is his honest logic! How can I answer it? How defend my faith in him - and in You? Because it's now or never with Eddie - God give me the grace to say the right thing.

Father Flanagan cleared his throat.

"Eddie, you're smart enough to know when a thing is really proved. What is a good boy? A good boy is an obedient boy. Right?"

"Yeah!"

"Always does what teachers tell him to do?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, that's all you've ever done, Eddie. The only trouble is that you had the wrong teachers - wharf toughs and corner bums. But you certainly obeyed them. You've done every wrong and rotten thing they taught you to do. If you would only obey the good teachers here in the same way, you'd be just fine!"

Those simple words of unarguable truth were like an exorcism, driving out devils from the room and cleansing the air. At first the tiny human enigma looked dumbfounded. Then came a glimmer of sheer, downright relief in the brown eyes, and he edged around the side of the sunlit desk. And with the very same relief Father Flanagan's soul was crying; he held out his arms and the child climbed into them and laid a tearful face against his heart.

That was a long time ago. For ten years Eddie remained in Boys Town. Then, well near the top of his class, he left to join the United States Marines. On blood-smeared beaches he won three promotions.

"His chest," boasts Father Flanagan, "is covered with decorations. Nothing strange about that, for he has plenty of courage. But God be praised for something else: he had the love of the men in his outfit - brother to the whole bunch. He is an up-standing Christian character. And still the toughest kid I ever knew!"

 **Fulton Oursler**

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*There go the grownups
To the office,
To the store,
Subway rush, Traffic crush;
Hurry, scurry,
Worry, flurry*

*No wonder
Grownups
Don't grow up
Any more.*

*It takes a lot
Of slow
To grow*

Eve Merriam