James watched his father stalk off angrily, growling at Mother, “Prayer meeting? You don’t think I’d go to prayer meeting with all this plowing to do! Long summer evenings are for farming, not for prayer meeting. Sunday church is enough church for me.”

James looked at his mother’s quiet, hurt face. He felt like exploding. Was a fifteen-year-old boy big enough to explode against his father? At least his thoughts were.

James’s thoughts raced back and forth, from past to present, from present to past. When had Father ever been kind to Mother, even in speaking to her? When had it mattered to him what she wanted or longed for? Why had she married him in the first place? Why hadn’t she learned, as his hired girl during his first wife’s long illness and passing, what he was like? How did he ever get to be deacon in the church? Deacon Peter Bucher, looked up to by the congregation? As seen by the family, his religion was only Sunday religion. Always he was in his place on Sunday, on the front bench, without any
tobacco in his mouth. Always he pretended in public to get along smoothly with his brother-in-law bishop John Stump. But how those two men clashed during the week! When meeting each other, Father took evil pleasure in saying accusingly, “I’ve got it on you. You better shut up.” James never knew what this was all about. Father never said.

James’s thoughts rambled on. To others outside the family and the bishop, he noticed, Father could be very likeable. Nearly every year he’d give a pig and several bushels of corn to the Petersons, the poor family in the church. And in other ways he could put his best foot forward as deacon and hold a good reputation. People liked him. He held his temper among them. But how he let it fly at the family! And even at the family collie! How often had James seen Rover slink to the house ahead of Father when Father came in from the barn in an ugly mood? Rover knew from the sound of his voice that he should get out of the way.

James remembered getting a whipping that kept him out of school three days. He remembered another whipping—one he had not deserved. Teacher had used the rod on him along with a lineup of schoolmates. That evening neighbor Brown came over and said, “Pete, I heard about the rumpus in school today. My boy was guilty and got his lickin’, but he says your Jimmy wasn’t guilty. Did you lick him?”

James, supposedly asleep behind the stove, heard his father snap back, “Sure did. That’s the rule here. Lickin’ at school, lickin’ at home. Well, sometimes he needed it and didn’t get it, so this time he just got it and didn’t need it. It can go for some he should have had but never got.”

And wouldn’t I like to give you a lickin’? James bragged to himself, his clenched fists twitching for vengeance. One of these times maybe he could. He was almost as big as Father and almost as strong. Father better watch out!
Meet James

Come to think of it, maybe Father deserved some of the credit for James’s strength. James remembered learning to plow at six, his little hands stretching up at arms’ length to reach the plow handles, the lines dangling into a knot behind him and snaking over the backs of the two gigantic Belgian horses ahead of him. He had learned to fire the steam engine at six also, throwing in slabs of wood to raise steam in the boiler. More years had added more muscle by way of digging potatoes, cutting and shocking and hauling corn into the barn, running the steam engine that husked and shredded it there, milking cows, getting in wood for winter fuel, and all the other jobs a growing boy could do on the farm.

Yes, Father deserved some credit. Mean credit. Stingy credit. Crooked credit. Credit that James would use on the cruel man sometime. Maybe soon. Maybe with his fists. Or maybe—

“A penny for your thoughts, son.”

James jerked to attention and faced his patient mother, her lips still quivering from the smart of Father’s words.

Hard, rough-and-tumble boy though James was, he loved his mother dearly. If ever there was a Christian, he knew she was one. How he hated his father for treating her so cruelly! How he pitied his mother in all she had to endure! How he wished she would brace up and hand it back to him! How he wished he could have cheered from the housetop the one time Mother made even a feeble attempt to talk back! That was the time Father came in and asked for a cup of hot coffee. Mother heated it to boiling and poured him a cup. He began drinking impatiently and burned his mouth. Did he ever sputter! And flare up! She said, “Well, you asked for hot coffee, so I gave you hot coffee.” James would have liked to add, “And you deserve ten burned mouths instead of just one.”
Again James brought his thoughts back to the present and looked into his mother’s sad, kind eyes. “I’ll take you to prayer meeting, Mother,” he offered as gently as a coarse boy could.

What a hero James thought he was that evening as he hitched Dolly to the buggy and drove his mother the three and a half gravel miles to prayer meeting! How proudly he turned the horse a little to the right to spread the front and back wheels on the left side and make room for her to step out! How he hoped the other boys standing around outside the church were watching him do all this! How he swaggered over to them after driving the buggy on into the shed and tying Dolly!

There, however, his heroism ended for the evening. When the others made their way into church, he stayed outside with whatever boys might be staying outside. Things were too warm inside. Outside, laughing and joking with the other boys, he could fight conviction better, especially when these boys happened to be his cousins, the bishop’s sons, on evenings when their father was absent.

It gave James a good feeling to be able to take his mother to prayer meeting week after week. It meant getting even with Father, after a fashion. It meant showing his manliness to chums looking on. It was a way of telling his mother he loved her and sided with her against Father. And maybe it could make up a little for his irregular Sunday school attendance.

James was fed up with Sunday school. Other fifteen-year-old boys were playing baseball on Sunday. Why shouldn’t he? Mother pled with him. Father scolded and threatened. But James put baseball ahead of Sunday school, and soon more Sundays found him on the ball diamond than in Sunday school. He thought baseball, dreamed baseball, and lived baseball. Baseball had him. Being a good runner, he played outfield. Being a good planner, he became captain of his
team. James’s baseball team began playing other teams. Then Sundays found him traveling as far as twenty-five miles by horse and buggy to play other teams. He saw himself heading toward career baseball and becoming a second Ty Cobb. He imagined newspaper captions hailing him as “the boy from obscure little Stumptown, Indiana, who rose to world baseball fame.”