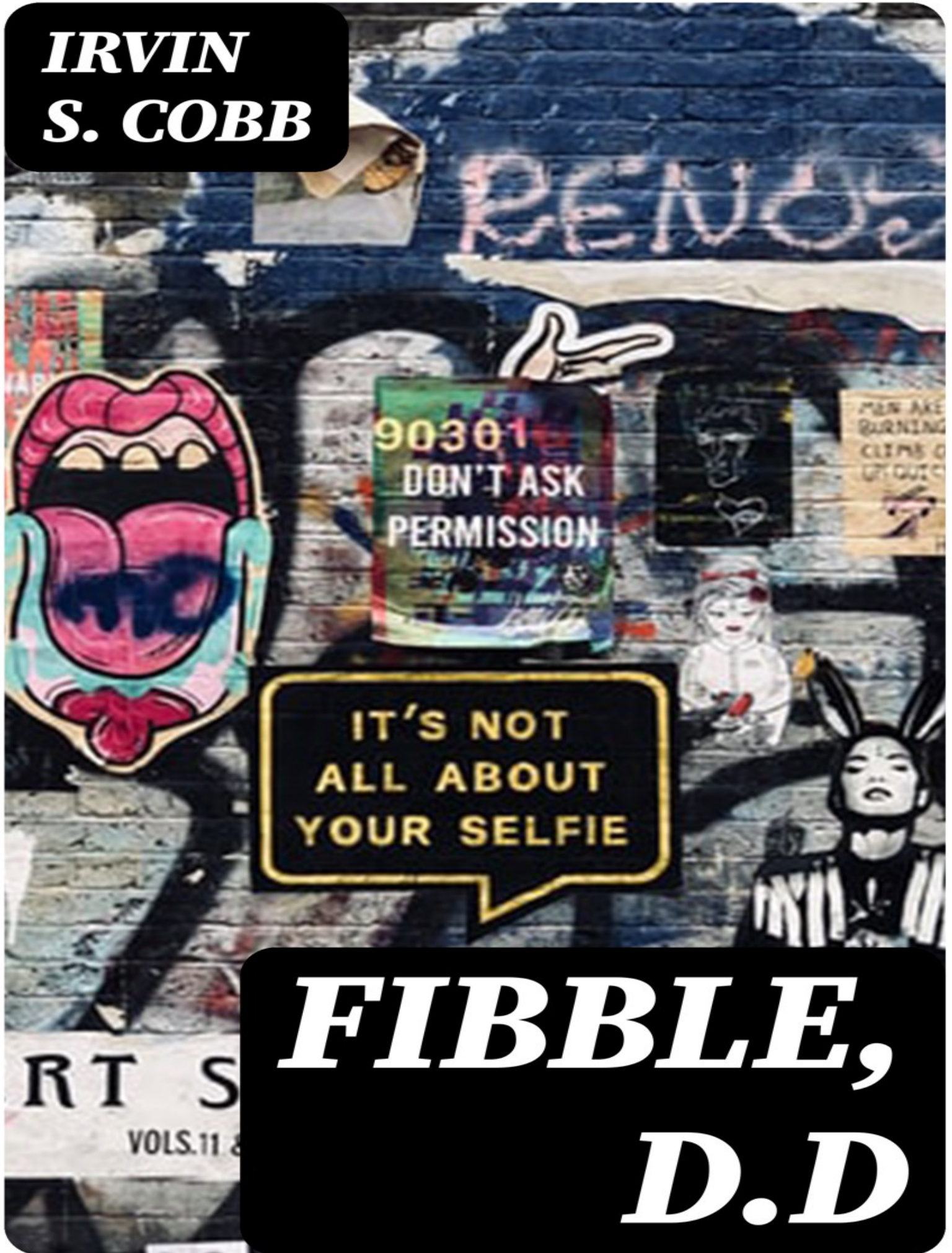


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PART ONE

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Being a Card to the Public from the Pen of the Rev. Roscoe Titmarsh Fibble, D.D.

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The Young Nuts of America

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IT is with a feeling of the utmost reluctance, amounting—if I may use so strong a word—to distress, that I take my pen in hand to indite the exceedingly painful account which follows; yet I feel I owe it not only to myself and the parishioners of St. Barnabas', but to the community at large, to explain in amplified detail why I have withdrawn suddenly, automatically as it were, from the organisation of youthful forest rangers of which I was, during its brief existence, the actuating spirit, and simultaneously have resigned my charge to seek a field of congenial endeavour elsewhere.

My first inclination was to remain silent; to treat with dignified silence the grossly exaggerated statements that lately obtained circulation, and, I fear me, credence, in some quarters, regarding the circumstances which have inspired me in taking the above steps. Inasmuch, however, as there has crept into the public prints hereabout a so-called item or article purporting to describe divers of my recent lamentable experiences—an item which I am constrained to believe the author thereof regarded as being of a humorous character, but in which no right-minded person could possibly see aught to provoke mirth—I have abandoned my original resolution and shall now lay bare the true facts.

In part my motive for so doing is based on personal grounds, for I have indeed endured grievously both laceration of the tenderest sensibilities and anguish of the corporeal body; but I feel also that I have a public duty to perform. If this unhappy recital but serves to put others on their guard against a too-ready acceptance of certain specious literature dealing with the fancied delights—I say fancied advisedly and for greater emphasis repeat the whole phrase—against the fancied delights of life in the greenwood, then in such case my own poignant pangs shall not have entirely been in vain.

With these introductory remarks, I shall now proceed to a calm, temperate and dispassionate narration of the various occurrences leading up to a climax that left me for a measurable space prone on the bed of affliction, and from which I have but newly risen, though still much shaken.

When I came to St. Barnabas' as assistant to the Reverend Doctor Tubley my personal inclination, I own, was

for parish work among our female members. I felt that, both by natural leanings and by training, I was especially equipped to be of aid and comfort here. Instinctively, as it were, I have ever been drawn toward the other and gentler sex; but my superior felt that my best opportunities for service lay with the males of a tender and susceptible age.

He recommended that, for the time being at least, I devote my energies to the youthful masculine individuals within the parish fold; that I make myself as one with them if not one of them; that I take the lead in uniting them into helpful bands and associations. He felt that the youth of St. Barnabas' had been left rather too much to their own devices—which devices, though doubtlessly innocent enough in character, were hardly calculated to guide them into the higher pathways. I am endeavouring to repeat here the Reverend Doctor Tubley's words as exactly as may be.

Continuing, he said he felt that our boys had been in a measure neglected by him. He had heard no complaint on this score from the lads themselves. Indeed, I gathered from the tenor of his remarks they had rather resented his efforts to get on a footing of comradeship with them. This, he thought, might be due to the natural diffidence of the adolescent youth, or perhaps to the disparity in age, he being then in his seventy-third year and they ranging in ages from nine to fifteen.

Nevertheless, his conscience had at times reproached him. With these words, or words to this effect, he committed the boys to my especial care, adding the suggestion that I begin my services by putting myself actively in touch with them in their various sports, pursuits and pastimes.

In this connection the Boy Scout movement at once occurred to me, but promptly I put it from me. From a cursory investigation I gleaned that no distinctions of social caste were drawn among the Boy Scouts; that almost any boy of a given age, regardless of the social status of his parents, might aspire to membership, or even to office, providing he but complied with certain tests—in short, that the Boy Scouts as at present constituted were, as the saying goes, mixed.

Very naturally I desired to restrict my activities to boys coming from homes of the utmost culture and refinement, where principles of undoubted gentility were implanted from the cradle up. Yet it would seem that the germ of the thought touching on the Boy Scouts lingered within that marvellous human organism, the brain, resulting finally in consequences of an actually direful character. Of that, however, more anon in its proper place.

Pondering over the problem after evensong in the privacy of my study, I repaired on the day following to Doctor Tubley with a plan for a course of Nature Study for boys, to be prosecuted indoors. I made a point of the advantages to be derived by carrying on our investigations beside the student lamp during the long evenings of early spring, which were then on us. What, I said, could be more inspiring, more uplifting, more stimulating in its effects on the impressionable mind of a boy than at the knee of some older person to wile away the happy hours learning of the budding of the leaflet, the blossoming of the flowerlet, the upspringing of the shootlet, and, through the medium of informative volumes on the subject by qualified authorities,

to make friends at first hand, so to speak, with the wild things—notably the birdling, the rabbit, the squirrel? Yes, even to make friends with the insects, particularly such insects as the bee and the ant—creatures the habits of industry of which have been frequently remarked—besides other insects too numerous to mention.

And, finally, what could better serve to round out an evening so replete with fruitful thought and gentle mental excitement than a reading by some member of the happy group of an appropriate selection culled from the works of one of our standard authors—Wordsworth, Longfellow or Tennyson, for example? What, indeed?

To my surprise this plan, even though set forth with all the unstudied eloquence at my command, did not appear deeply to appeal to Doctor Tubley. I surmised that he had attempted some such undertaking at a previous period and had met with but indifferent success. He said that for some mysterious reason the nature of the growing boy seemed to demand action. My own observation subsequently was such as to confirm this judgment.

In passing I may say that this attribute remains to me one of the most unfathomable aspects of the complex juvenile mentality as commonly encountered at present. Though still a comparatively young man—thirty-eight on Michaelmas Day last past—I cannot conceive that as a lad I was ever animated with the restless, and I may even say mischievous, spirit that appears to dominate the waking hours of the youth of an oncoming generation.

For proof of this assertion I would point to the fact that a great-aunt of mine, living at an advanced age in the city of

Hartford, Connecticut, continues even now to treasure a handsomely illustrated and fitly inscribed copy of Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," complete in one volume, which was publicly bestowed on me in my twelfth year for having committed to memory and correctly repeated two thousand separate quotations from the Old Testament—an achievement that brought on an attack resembling brain fever. I do not record this achievement in a spirit of boastfulness or vanity of the flesh, but merely to show that from a very early stage of my mundane existence I was by nature studious and ever mindful of the admonitions of my elders. Indeed, I do not recall a time when I did not prefer the companionship of cherished and helpful gift books to the boisterous and oftentimes rough sports of my youthful acquaintances.

But I digress; let us revert: Abandoning my scheme for a series of indoor Nature studies, since it did not meet with the approval of my superior, I set myself resolutely to the task of winning the undivided affection and admiration of the lads about me. On meeting one in the public highway or elsewhere I made a point of addressing him as "My fine fellow!" or "My bright lad!" of patting him on the head and gently ruffling his hair or twitching the lobe of his ear in a friendly way, and asking him, first, what his age might be, and, second, how he was doing at his books.

These questions being satisfactorily answered in the order named, I would then say to him: "Ah, what a large sturdy lad we are becoming, to be sure!" or "Heigho, then, soon we shall be ready to don long trousers, shall we not?" And I would also be particular to enquire regarding the

health and well-being of his parents, and so on, and to ascertain how many little brothers and little sisters he had, if any; usually coupling these passing pleasantries with some quotation aimed to inspire him to thoughtful reflections and worthy deeds. Yet to me it seemed that the lads actually sought to avoid these casual intercourses.

Attributing this to the excusable timidity of the young, I persisted, being determined to put myself on a footing of complete understanding with them. I sought them out in their hours of relaxation, there being a large vacant lot or enclosure adjacent to the parish house where they were wont to meet and mingle freely in their customary physical exercises and recreations. Here again, from time to time, I proffered certain timely hints and admonitions for their better guidance.

For example, I sought to discourage the habit so prevalent among them of indulging in shrill, indiscriminate outcry when moved by the excitement of the moment. Repeatedly I advised them to practise in concert three hearty cheers, these to be immediately followed, should the exuberance of the occasion warrant, by a ringing tiger. This I recall was the invariable habit of the playfellows described in such works as "Sanford and Merton" and "Thomas Brown's Schooldays." I also urged on them the substitution of the fine old English game of cricket for baseball, to which I found them generally addicted. It is true I had never found either opportunity or inclination for perfecting myself in one or both of these games; but the pictured representations of cricket games, as depicted in books or prints, showing the participants dotted about over a smooth greensward, all

attired in neat white flannels and all in graceful attitudes, convinced me it must be a much more orderly and consequently a more alluring pastime than the other.

To me, if I may venture to say so, baseball has ever seemed most untidy. Personally I can imagine few things more unseemly than the act of sliding through the dust in order the more expeditiously to attain a given base or station; and even more objectionable, because so exceedingly unhygienic, is the custom, common among these youthful devotees, of expectorating on the outer surface of the ball before delivering the same in the direction of the batsman.

I succeeded in inducing my young friends to allow me to drill them in the choral cheer. As I remarked repeatedly to them: "Why noise at all, young gentlemen? But if we must have noise let us have it in an orderly fashion and in accordance with the best traditions of the Anglo-Saxon race, from which all of us have or have not sprung as the case may be—to wit, as follows: Huzza! Huzza! Huzza! Tiger!" But, with the exception of one or two lads of a docile demeanour, I made no noticeable headway in my project for substituting cricket for baseball.

Nor did my recommendation of the adoption of a uniform attire for all the lads attending the private school maintained by St. Barnabas' meet with any more favourable reception. Personally I was greatly attracted to the costume provided at Eton. It impressed me that the short, close-buttoned jacket, exposing the sturdy legs, and so forth, the neat linen collar and cuffs, and the becoming black tie, the whole being surmounted by the high hat, with its air of

dignity, all combined to form ideal apparel for the growing lad. Some of the mothers to whom I broached the thought viewed it with considerable enthusiasm, but among the boys themselves an unaccountable opposition immediately developed.

The male parents likewise were practically united in their objections. One husband and father, whose name I shall purposely withhold, actually sent me word he would swear out an injunction against me should I undertake to dress his innocent offspring up as a monkey-on-a-stick—the objectionable phraseology being his, not mine. In all charity I was constrained to believe that this gentleman's nature was of a coarse fibre. Had he, I asked myself dispassionately, had he no veneration for the hallowed memories and customs of a great English institution of learning? I was impelled to answer in the negative.

Thus time wore on until the beginning of the mid-year vacation drew near apace. It was at this juncture that the idea of an organisation similar in character to the Boy Scouts occurred to me. I decided to borrow the plan, with certain modifications, confining the membership exclusively to our best families.

Accordingly, on the first Saturday afternoon in the month of May I called a chosen group of lads together and explained to them my purpose, finding to my gratification that they welcomed it with the utmost enthusiasm. Possibly my manner of setting forth the project of an outing appealed to them even more than the project itself. I recall that, in part, I spoke as follows:

"With me as your leader, your guide, your mentor, we shall go forth into the open, to seek out the bosky dell; to pierce the wildwood tangle; to penetrate the trackless wilderness. Our tents shall be spread alongside the purling brook, hard by some larger body of water. There, in my mind's eye, I see us as we practise archery and the use of the singlestick, both noble sports and much favoured by the early Britons. There we cull the flowers of the field and the forest glade, weaving them into garlands, building them into nosegays. By kindness and patience we tame the wild creatures. We learn to know the calls of the wildwood warblers, which I am credibly informed are many and varied in character; and by imitating those calls we charm the feathered minstrels to leave their accustomed haunts on the sheltering bough and to come and perch on our outstretched hands.

"We lave our limbs in the pellucid waters of the lake or large body of water just referred to. We briskly project ourselves to and fro in a swing of Nature's own contriving, namely, the tendrils of the wild grapevine. We glean the coy berry from its hiding place beneath the sheltering leafage. We entice from their native element the finny denizens of the brawling stream and the murmuring brook. We go quickly hither and yon. We throb with health and energy. We become bronzed and hardy; our muscles harden to iron; our lungs expand freely and also contract with the same freedom, thus fulfilling their natural function.

"We find the day all too short, too fleeting. And by night about the crackling camp fire our happy voices, all united, are uplifted in song and roundelay. So, at length, wearied

but happy, we seek repose in refreshing slumber until the rising sun or orb of day summons us to fresh delights, new discoveries, added experiences!"

My imaginative picturing of the prospect had its desired results. Without loss of time all present, they being twelve in number, enrolled as members. From the minutes of this, our first meeting, as kept by me in a neatly lined book, which I had bethought me to provide for that purpose, I herewith enumerate the roster: Master Pope, Master Stickney, Master Worthington, Master MacMonnies, Master E. Smith and Master H. Smith—brothers, Master Odell, Master French, Master Horrigan, Master Ferguson, Master Dunworthy, and Master W. Smyth—nowise related to the foregoing Masters Smith, the name being spelled, as will be noted, with a y.

I was particularly pleased that Master Percival Pope should be included in our little band, for he was one to whom instinctively I had been attracted by reason of the gentle and almost seraphic expression of his mild blue eyes, his soft voice and his great politeness of manner.

Next in order there arose for consideration two very important matters—the selection of a title or cognomen and the choice of a suitable costume. Charging myself with the working out of an appropriate costume design, I invited suggestions for a club name, at the same time proffering several ideas of my own. Among those that were tendered I recall the following: the Young Gentlemen Forest Rangers, the Chevalier Bayard Wildwood League, the Rollo Boys, the Juvenile Ivanhoes, the Buffalo Bill Kiddos, the Young Buffaloes of the Wild West, the Junior Scalp Hunters, the Desperate Dozen, and the Johnnies-on-the-Spot.

I deem it well-nigh unnecessary to state that the first four suggestions emanated from my pen: the remaining five being fruitage of the inventive fancies of my young friends.

We spent some time canvassing over the proposed cognomens, rejecting this one for one reason, that one for another reason. None seemed to give general satisfaction. Those which especially pleased me—such, for instance, as the Rollo Boys—met with small approbation from my young compatriots, and vice versa.

At length, in the interests of harmony, I proposed that each member should confer with his parents, his guardian or his kind teacher, with a view to striking on a suitable choice, always bearing in mind that the proposed name should carry with it a thought of the woody glade, the craggy slope, the pebbly beach—in short, should remind one of Nature's choicest offerings. As I said: "Not infrequently two heads are better than one; how much more desirable then to enlist the aid of a large number of heads?" So saying, I gave the signal for adjournment until the following Monday evening at the hour of eight-thirty of the clock.

Pursuant to adjournment we met at the appointed hour and speedily arrived at a solution of our problem. One of our group—which one I shall not state, since he was the son of that same gentleman who had used such unwarranted and inconsiderate language regarding my Eton suit plan—presented a slip of paper bearing a line in the handwriting of his father. I opened and read it.

In brief the writer's idea was that we should call our organisation the Young Nuts of America, and that the leader, master or commander should be known as Chief Nut or

Principal Nut. Coming from a gentleman who had expressed himself so adversely regarding a former project that had been close to my heart this manifestation of interest on his part touched me profoundly. Moreover, his suggestion appeared to my conceptions to be both timely and effective, carrying with it, as it did, a thought of the opening of the burs, of the descent of autumn on the vernal forest, of the rich meatiness of the kernel; a thought of the delectable filbert, the luscious pecan and the succulent walnut—the latter, however, having a tendency to produce cramping sensations when partaken of to excess.

These sentiments my youthful adherents appeared to share with me, for on my reading the paper aloud there followed an outburst of cheering, not unmixed with happy laughter. Checking them with a mild reminder that this was not a laughing matter, I put the proposition to a vote, and it was decided unanimously that we should be known as the Young Nuts of America and that my official title should be Chief Nut.

Master Pope then moved, seconded by Master Horrigan, that for the time being we should keep the name of our club a secret among ourselves. To me there seemed no valid reason for this and I so stated; but appreciating their boyish fancy for creating an air of pleasant and innocent mystery about whatever undertaking in which they might be engaged, I soon waived my objection and it was so ordered by acclamation.

In this connection I desire to make a statement which may come as a surprise to many, and that is this: I have but lately—within the past few days, in fact—been informed that