

The Mahoosalem Boys

by W. A. Curtis



THAT old Professor McBeaser didn't say much in his lecture that astonished me, because I had lived alongside some of them same phenomena he spoke of. There ain't much that occurs in foreign parts that can't be duplicated here to home.

This here Professor McBeaser, that there savant, as the reverend named him when he introduced him, let on that the stories told by the old time Portuguese explorers about people in the kingdom of Prester John having tails, was true. He said there was one old Portuguese by the name of Pinto that Shakespeare alluded to as the standard type of handy liar and random talker and that subsequent acquaintance with Africa in modern times had showed he never overstated nothing.

McBeaser says folks with tails occur even now and that people with ears like a deer, still to be seen, was so common in Roman times that any quantity of statues of 'em was made. Fauns, they called 'em. McBeaser reasoned it all out in a convincing scientific way, showing how it was natural to expect it and brought in a lot of ancient and modern testimony to prove it was so. Well, he wasn't telling anything new to me.

Yes, sir, I can recall a good many uncommon occurrences up there in New Hampshire, and if anybody thinks that when it

comes to strange and peculiar things any European or African country, even, is going to put it over the State that produced the heft of great Americans, or if not that quite, produced so much more than its share, he is mistaken.

Produced a lot of big men? Well, you look through the roll of big Americans and see what a sight of 'em was born in that one little jam of mountains and lakes.

When I went to the district school back of Townsley's Pond, in Joppy, there was a couple of all-fired peculiar boys went there, the Mahoosalem twins, Ai and Eo, Bible names, but they wasn't what you'd call standard, average Bible characters, hardly.

Now, I don't know how it happened, what the ancestry of those fellers was, but speaking of Prester John, their mother was a Preston, she was so, and their father's name was John and he was a Portuguese. I suppose, something outlandish, or come from Coos County, or something, and anyway, those tarnation boys—yes, sir, they did, mister, and don't you try to ask unnecessary questions—those two natural-born, living galoots, just like any one else in every other particular, a couple of as well-favored, rugged lads as you'll ever see, those two enduring boys had—had—had—tails!

Seddown, mister! Keep still!

They were about five feet long, those tails, when I first knew the boys, and the boys were about three feet tall and the tails grew in that proportion as the boys grew. Their ma, who was a real neat, precise person, one of those pizen neat housekeepers, made 'em keep their tails wrapped around their waists inside their jackets when they were out in public, except when she had 'em rig the tails crisscross over their shoulders to hold their trousers and save using suspenders.

You see the tails were about an inch thick at first and limber as hose, and when they wrapped 'em around their waists inside their jackets, you would never know there was anything out of the common about them boys. For a spell, the boys had let their tails float loose and she used to have a red ribbon tied in a bow on Ai's tail and a blue one on Eo's and it looked real pretty, but they got so shiftless about letting their tails drag in the dirt that she up and made a rule they should be wrapped the way I said.

She wanted 'em to have an education and sent 'em to school. She said boys gifted as they were, would be in the public eye, conversing with many men and great men, too, and must be able to talk with credit to themselves.

She wanted 'em to ground themselves in science, but they were awful boys in school. They would put a shingle nail through a stick and sharpen the nail and clasp the end of their tail around the stick and reach way over two tiers of seats to Cy Sanborn sitting there in front and jab him in the neck and he'd jump and yell and the teacher would inquire what had happened and the Mahoosalems would suggest that maybe a hornet stung him.

Sitting there pretending to be studying spelling, they would reach over with their tails and steal apples out of boys' pockets and pull the braids of little girls, push books kerslap on the floor, trip up boys going down the aisle, do all that and jerk their tails back before teacher could see 'em. They certainly enjoyed life.

Teacher finally made a rule she would lick 'em if she even caught 'em with their tails unwrapped, but in summer they bellered and said it was too hot to keep their tails wrapped around 'em and she let 'em off and they were up to all of their old previous tricks and would tickle our bare feet, which is something awful, and they weren't exactly popular.

Though we looked up to 'em, we tried to get back at 'em some, and one summer day when they were sort of sleepy and their tails were sloshing on the floor careless and forgotten, Otis Crane took the chance and knotted the ends together and when Miss Durgin said school was out and everybody jumped up to tear out of the room and the Mahoosalems started scooting down two different aisles, jerk! their tails caught around a desk and slam! they went on the floor and they yelled and struggled, first one jumping up and going one way and jerking t'other along, then t'other going his way and jerking the first one down until both were down all the time and screeching like tunket and Miss Durgin, who was awful exasperated by the way they always carried on, lit into 'em and lathered 'em with a strap.

She had always been afraid of 'em before, and told Mrs. Jauncy she'd as lief mix up with a passel of snakes or a fish worm, as to get touched by those tails. Mrs. Jauncy said for her part they looked like a riling mess of vermin and she didn't blame nobody or anybody for going by on the opposite side.

But seeing 'em sorter helpless on the floor, Miss Durgin gave 'em some of their deserts and they tumbled around trying to get out of reach and got their tails snarled and raddled into such a tangle and mess of scrabbles that it took me and Otis and Tobe Huckins and Miss Durgin and her beau, who always came Fridays, until six o'clock to get the knots out and we used the broom handle and the stove poker working 'em loose and the beau said he guessed we'd have to take the ax, which made the Mahoosalems yell

worse 'n bobcats.

Mrs. Mahoosalem was mad and was starting some fusses with the school committee, when old Ex-Governor B. F. Bomaseen appeared in there and took her attention from her grievance. Governor Bomaseen was a great booster for the State, always looking out for new industries and ways of doing things that would benefit the public, and he said maybe we had there over back of Townsley's Pond the beginnings of what would mean to the old commonwealth as much as water-power, summer boarders, and forest products.

"What caused the tails on those boys? Is it the air, water, climate, soil, or what not of this locality? I shall have the scientists up from the State experimental station to analyze 'em all and to study them boys. Will these before-mentioned predisposing factors of air, water, and so forth cause tails on other parties in time to come? Will a favored race of folks with tails naturally evolve here by the beautiful, pellucid waters of Townsley's Pond?"

"Is it possible that these here boys will become the parents of children similarly blessed and that in time New Hampshire be largely populated with such fortunate beings? Why, just think what it would mean in agriculture, for instance. To take the single example of apple picking. Hanging in the limbs by their tails, the pickers, picking with both hands, could easily scale the tallest and most difficult trees and get the apples without bruising them.

"Or in dentistry. One could hold the subject in the chair by the tail, clasped restrainingly around him, while yanking out with both hands the most stubborn molar."

He took the boys down to the State College to show 'em off at the annual farmer's convention in session there, and Ai got a gold medal for plowing a sixteenth of an acre with a pair of mules so mean that no one had ever been able to use 'em, skurcely.

I tell you it was a regular sight to see Ai

larruping and lambasting those mules with his tail, grabbing a leg when they let out a kick, holding it in a coil of steel, flying around like a cork on a fish-line as the animal gave tremendous tugs with the captive leg, bobbing around, but hanging on until he had the chanst he was laying for, when he trips Mr. Mule right on his back, coils around his neck and chokes him until that herbivorous old eater is glad to get up and behave like a civilized animal should.

Twasn't long before Ai had those mules ambling along as peaceable as deaf and dumb delegates at a Grange convention. So he got a gold medal. This was the Jawn Robison medal for upright character. It was given to the student who had broken fewest rules of the college for two years. Ai wasn't a student and there wasn't any medal for subduing rogue mules, but the crowd thought he just naturally ought to have a medal and Governor Bomaseen thought so, too, and this was the biggest medal and he got it. The college faculty feebly tried to protest, like, but the people asked what sort of a college this was the Legislature appropriated money for and wouldn't give a medal to a feller like Ai for doing what he done and not breaking college rules wasn't *nawthing* compared to breaking a pair of mules so depraved as these here ones.

Old Squire Deacon Joe Henry McGuirk had a pork animil that was the peskiest pig hog in the whole shire limits of Strafford County, and for the encouragement of agricultural arts and the theory and practise of husbandry he had offered five dollars to any one who could hog-tie that evasive old swine critter.

There were eleven men there who said there wasn't any four legged quadruped of the hog kind that they couldn't throw and tie in the complicated and special way that constitutes hog-tieing. But one after another that old bird messed up the arena with the eleven experts, and the old squire deacon sat in the grand stand laughing fit to kill, as proud of his capable hog

as a boy of his first long trousers.

Just then Eo Mahoosalem stepped into the ring and a silence that ached descended on that vast concourse. Eo stood, still as a statue, only the barely perceptible quivering of his tail giving evidence of life. A jeering laugh from the squire deacon rang out in the silence and Eo raised his hand in a gesture of rebuke—that and nothing more. He stood there like a statue, only like flashing lightning that long tail played all around that astonished hog, binding him neck and heels and then replacing the tail with a rope. Eo soon had the hog in as neat a bundle as you ever see. Eo declined the five dollars and Governor Bomaseen said true art was above money.

But the crowd up and demanded that Eo receive a recognition he would value and though he hadn't done any stock judging, he was given the Horace B. Hoskison gold medal for stock-judging, which he subsequently sold for fifteen dollars and bought a banjo, a mink trap, and five pounds of candy.

As a climax to their performance, Governor Bomaseen wanted the boys to do a stunt of trundling a wheelbarrow full of wood with their hands and hauling a cart along behind with their tails, but they refused. They were afraid their mother would take notice and institute that system at home.

“Boys,” said Governor Bomaseen, “study, study. Get prepared just as quick as you can, for we want you down here at the college and in the life of the State as soon as possible,” and the beekeepers and the potato-raisers and the sheep-raisers, who were holding conventions that week, and all the rest, cheered like all get out.

But the Mahoosalems didn't study. They were getting too conceited and spoiled. They acted worse than ever and Ai painted, up his tail so it looked like a spotted adder and Miss Durgin fainted into her beau's arms and he licked Ai and give him a quarter, too, because Miss Durgin resigned and married him right off

without waiting until the end of the school year.

This was the spring term and there wouldn't any woman teach after that and the fall term opened with a man teacher; the Mahoosalems acted worse than before and when the teacher started to reason with 'em with a switch, they put him out. Of course, that's always done in stories for uplifting youth.

Well, this Edson Billiup, the teacher, looked like the pictures I have seen of old Laocoon when those Mahoosalems lit on him and twined and tied him all up with their tails and threw him out the school-house door. The same thing happened to Dana Blaney and James Kirkpatrick, and the school committee had got downright desperate when they hired Henry Z. Gilsum; of the State of Maine.

The Mahoosalems were not only the tyrants of the school, but they had begun to reach out into the general community and persecute the populace at large, and everybody began to feel some worried and uneasy.

There was the case of Hi Garlicks, who lived on the Miah Benton place on Hopsequottle Hill. It had belonged to his father before him and nobody around there any more knew who Miah Benton was except that he was one of those that, way back put up fifteen dollars to get his picture in the county history, and though about every library in Joppy consisted of that history and the works of Josephus and Tupper's “Proverbial Philosophy,” Miah Benton was only a name and still they called Hi Garlicks's farm the Benton place and was surprised and disapproving if any one spoke of going up to Garlicks's.

Well, Hi was sitting there in the kitchen of the Benton place in the evening with a nice fire, smoking a mean kind of tobacco they grow in Vermont and which he imported special, and reading on the editorial page of his paper one editorial by two editors telling what plumb idjits the Democrats is and two communications by one man in Concord telling what dumb idjits the

Republicans is, cal'ating that somebody ought to start a third party, and he laid his pipe down on the table to turn over the page to see if anybody had got drowned in Meredith or seen a couple of bobcats in Chichester or bought a heifer offen Professor Sanborn in Gilmanton and when he turned to pick up the pipe, it wasn't there!

He got down to see if it was on the floor and when he rose up, the paper wasn't there! And when he took the lamp to see if they had slid over into some corner and came back, his chair wasn't there! And then he went and sat in the parlor, and you know that it takes some resolution or shows some desperation in a New Englander of that time, to deliberately and for no special call to sit down in the parlor in cold blood and contemplate the conch shell and piece of block tin on the whatnot, the wax flowers under glass on the marble-top table, holding your head offen the tidy to hold your head offen the back of the hair-cloth rocking-chair.

Hi Garlicks had not been united with any church. He was one of those who said if you didn't cheat in a hoss trade or log on another man's land or mix in three or four rotten eggs in every dozen, that it wasn't necessary to belong to a church. But next morning, much to his good wife's delight, he took a cord of wood and a ham to the Baptist minister six miles away in Joppy village and arranged to join the church.

And a few days later he heard how Mrs. Mahoosalem was telling it around how her boys had clim up into the elm to the Benton place, lowered theyselves on the ridge pole, crawled into the dormer window of the ell attic, lifted up the old trap door in the ceiling and with their prehensile tails played those tricks on Hi.

Well, you can understand that everybody was some concerned over the outcome of the term of teaching of the new teacher and that several spoke to him about the gravity of the situation. Let those Mahoosalems get to going much farther and the peace and comfort of the

Townsley's Pond district would be no more.

Second day of Gilsum's teaching, Ai tripped up Steve Philorick going down the aisle and quicker 'n scat teacher threw a piece of stove-wood that took Ai in the chest and knocked him on the floor, and then teacher made a dive for Eo just as he was getting ready for action, grabbed his tail with both hands and started for out doors.

You can't brace against a force pulling from behind, your legs bend the wrong way for it, and Eo just had to come, snatching at things, but going, teacher keeping the tail stretched taut, snaking him along the way the Central American natives drag a boa-constrictor into a grove and sling him around and crack his head against a tree. So long as they go fast enough to keep the constrictor out straight and he can't coil on 'em, they're safe and Henry Gilsum had read about that, for he was a scientific feller.

Out of the door and down the steps *kerbim!* and out over the ground Eo tumbling and rolling and snatching at the turf, but going along *kerbiff!* and *kerwallop!* on the high places, out to the end of the school-yard where the hillside plunged down into Vaughn's pasture almost in a cliff.

Out to the edge of this bank pranced teacher, Eo hobbling and flopping and flopping and bounding along behind him, out to the edge of this bank loped teacher, braced on the edge, and like he was cracking a whip made a mighty swing with that tail and Eo and threw him out over the edge *kerswish!* and in a few seconds or so, *kersmash!* 'way down in the pasture below.

Seemed like, somehow, that Eo kinder hung in the air for a moment before he fell, sorter suspended, like, out beyond the rim, pausing and sagging back, like, and seemed like there was a little ripping, tearing, busting noise, but we didn't really notice, for here was Ai, bellering like Ed Allen's calf, rushing to throw himself on teacher and wipe him out.

But that teacher made a quick dodge to right

and a quick grab to left and had that young phenomenon's tail in his terrible grip, and he swung him through a half-circle, out over that bank and this time we did see that the subject hung a moment, that he did sag back, like, and we did hear a little ripping and busting sound and away sailed Ai Mahoosalem and there stood Henry Gilsum holding the tail, broken off, pulled out at the roots! And there at his feet was Eo's tail, previously removed!

"Why, sake's alive! I forgot to let go the tails when I threw the critters! And the tails stayed and the boys went."

Those boys sneaked home, awfully ashamed and their dad licked 'em and their mother didn't go to Grange meeting for two months, she was so affected by the family humiliation. Governor Bomaseen wrote up to have the tails sent to the Historical Society at Concord and have 'em where folks could see 'em along with the relics of Governor Benning Wentworth and General John Stark, but when somebody went to get 'em they were gone.

Bobcats or some other varmints had et 'em

all up completely. So I can't prove this narrative by taking you to the Historical Society Building and showing you the tails. For the tails ain't there and Governor Bomaseen never got over the disappointment.

They recently got the correspondence of George Washington into their collection, but that don't reconcile the old Governor to the loss of those tails. Nor can I prove it by showing you the Mahoosalems and getting them to tell their side to it. For they were so crestfallen after being cast down from among the leading citizens and principal points of interest in a State which for its size has got more of the latter than any other in the whole kit and boodle of States, for they were so crestfallen that they finally changed their name to Smith and moved out to Ioway.

After the bobcats et the tails, the Legislature passed a law increasing the bounty on bobcats. But it was too late. There ain't no use in a State trying to conserve its resources when the resources are gone.