

Round and Round the Merry-Go-Round

by W.M. Akers

"Uh, Dad?"

"Yes, Mark?"

"I was wondering...do you think that maybe, I don't know, maybe I could have an extra scoop of ice cream?"

"I don't know. Is it your birthday?"

"Yeah!"

"All day?"

"All day!"

"Then I'd say you'd be pretty silly not to."

This was the birthday rule. Anything Mark could usually have just a little of-ice cream, soda, TV time-he could have a little more, as long as he asked. He had to be polite about it. He had to ask for just a little bit extra. He had to smile if Dad said no. And he had to do something else, too. Something important. Something that, if he didn't do it, Dad would get really mad. What was it?

Oh yeah!

"Thank you!" shouted Mark.

"You're welcome," said Dad, smiling.

It was super important to say thank you when you got something extra. Otherwise you might not get it again.

It was summertime-it was always summertime on Mark's birthday-and he and his dad were walking in the park. In the sky, the sun looked like melted butter on a blue countertop. It was warm, but not too hot-perfect weather for a little extra ice cream.

"Another scoop of mint chocolate chip," Mark said to the ice cream vendor. This was an easy decision, since mint chocolate chip is the best ice cream flavor in the world.

"Here you go," said the vendor, and handed Mark his cup. Mark always ate ice cream out of a cup. Cones tasted good, but cups aren't as messy. If you don't have to worry about your ice cream melting all over your hand, you can eat more slowly. You can enjoy it longer. And you have room, once a year, for an extra scoop.

Mark ate the ice cream while they walked in the sunshine trying to decide where to go next. They had already spent an extra half-hour at the zoo making very silly faces at the monkeys. They had drunk extra large chocolate milks at the boathouse. And they fed two loaves of bread to the ducks instead of just one, because Mark liked to share his birthday fun with others.

"Okay, Dad," said Mark. "I think it's time for you know what."

"Yaaaaaargh!" said Dad, and started to run.

"Yaaaaaargh!" said Mark, and ran after him, his ice cream-covered spoon pointed at the sky.

"You know what" was the pirate ship. It was black, with red stripes down the side and a Jolly Roger flag right on the front. It had a bench big enough for two, and a pole stuck right down the middle. It wasn't a real pirate ship, since it was only big enough for two pirates. It was the pirate ship on the merry-go-round.

The merry-go-round was right next to the lake. It had been there since before Mark was born-ever since his dad was a kid. When his dad was young, his favorite thing to ride on the merry-go-round was the pirate ship. Because fathers and sons are often alike, this was Mark's favorite thing to ride, too. Mark finished his ice cream while they waited for the pirate ship to open up. There was no point riding the merry-go-round if you had to sit on something boring, like a horse.

"Pirates," Mark told his father, "are the best."

"Har har har!" said Dad.

It was their turn to go aboard the pirate ship. As they waited for the ride to fill up, Mark's stomach tingled with excitement. Finally, the ship started to move, and they were off!

The merry-go-round played lots of different, old-fashioned songs. Mark's dad knew all their names. Things like "The St. Louis Blues" and "Down by the Riverside." It wasn't Mark's favorite kind of music, but it was perfect for the merry-go-round. They whipped around the outside of the machine, their hair flapping, laughing as hard as they could. Other kids shouted things like "Wheee!" or "Aaaaaah!" but

Mark and his father had a part to play.

"Avast, young Captain Marcus," said his dad. "Thar be a pony up ahead!"

"Aye aye," said Mark. "So there be. Lay on more sail, and we'll see about catching it."

They shook invisible swords at the horse in front of them, doing everything they could to make their ship go a little bit faster. It never worked, but Mark thought they might have scared the boy riding the pony. This wasn't a bad thing. Pirates are supposed to be a little scary. Finally, the music slowed down and the merry-go-round did, too. The ride was over.

"Yaaargh," said Mark's dad.

"Yaaargh," said Mark.

"Shall we ride it again, Captain Marcus?"

"Aye aye!"

This was normal. Mark and his dad usually rode the merry-go-round three or even four times when they came to the park. Most kids only stayed for one trip around, but that's because they didn't get to sit on the pirate ship. Mark and his father were the happiest people on the ride.

The music started again, the ship began to bob, and the pirates were off on another adventure. Round and round they went, laughing and yaaaarghing, and shaking their imaginary swords. Truly, it was good to be a pirate.

Finally, after the fourth time around, Mark's dad suggested they call it a day.

"Dad?" asked Mark. "Do you think that maybe we could ride it one more time?"

"Are you sure?" asked Dad. "I'm starting to feel a little woozy."

"Sorry, Dad. I'm going to invoke the birthday rule." There was no way to say no to this, so Dad leaned back, straightened his invisible eye patch, and got ready for another go-round.

"Aye aye, Captain Marcus!"

The music started and the ride followed. Mark and his dad shook their swords and laughed their laughs, but something was wrong. Mark felt like he'd swallowed a cannonball. He slumped in his seat, clutching

his stomach.

"I ate too much ice cream, matey," he said.

"Yaargh," said Dad. "It feels like I used my stomach to make a milkshake."

Finally, the ride stopped. They staggered off the pirate ship, dizzy and full of too much ice cream. They flopped down onto a bench and looked at the ducks, who were tired from eating too much bread.

"Sometimes," said Mark, "a little extra is too much."

"Aye aye."