The park seemed deserted except for a few small children who were playing on the swings and riding on the see-saw. Up and down, up and down, the see-saw went.

Kip scowled, then sank down on the nearest park bench and dropped his face in the palms of his hands, tired, dusty and hot.
He watched the children and recalled his carefree, happy days of childhood. Good days they were, he had to admit. Even good until four days ago. Yes, four days ago, he had had all the food he could eat, a good, comfortable bed to sleep in, and security. Love, too. That was the super-big bonus at his house: love.

He had never had a problem until he began letting his hair grow. Then everything changed. But fast. His father had told him that so long as he lived beneath the Dahoff roof and ate food provided and prepared by the Dahoffs, he must comply with Dahoff rules and requirements and regulations. Unless he obeyed and got a decent, man-like haircut, he was informed, he could not live beneath the same roof.

"An ultimatum, is that it?" he had asked sarcastically of his father, whose tears even now troubled him.

"I guess that's what it amounts to, Son," came the sad but firm reply. "God demands strict obedience to His commandments; can I do less as your earthly father? When He said for children to obey their parents, He meant just that. It is up to your mother and me to see that you do obey, Kip. We have never made unreasonable demands of any of you."

"This is unreasonable!" he had retorted hotly. "I'm the odd-ball out there."

"There are others whose hair is cut like a man's hair should be cut," his father had replied, naming a lot of his friends. "And even if everybody was looking like many are today, you would still be required to get a decent haircut. It is a shame for a man to have long hair. That is Bible. Now, either do as you are told or take up quarters elsewhere. That is all I have to say. The subject is closed. You will obey . . ."

Without another word, he remembered having rushed from the house, slamming the screen door behind him. He had walked until he came to a main highway, no destination in mind, wanting only to get away. He hitchhiked a ride with a truck driver into a distant city and there, in the trucker's hometown, he had been let off.
And now, here he sat -- alone, frightened, jobless- and what little money he had had in his wallet fast going down. He had been sleeping beneath bushes or wherever he saw a place that looked like it might be safe for him to sleep. His one main meal a day had been either two hamburgers or two bags of french fries, and water. If only he could get a job of some kind! But who would hire an eighteen-year-old with dirty pants and shirt, an unshaven, stubbled face and . . .

He almost said long, dirty hair aloud. Then he remembered that it was because of that very thing that he had left home. Only, four days ago, his hair hadn't been dirty. Neither his body. Nor his clothes.

He became suddenly aware of another person on the bench. Turning his head, he came face to face with a pair of gray-blue eyes.

"You're new here," the man ventured.

Bold! Kip thought, edging farther to his end of the bench and ignoring the statement.

"Did you just land in the city?"

Kip didn't answer. One couldn't be too cautious among strangers, his father had always warned them.

"I know you heard me, kid. What you trying to hide? I know your kind."

Fear churned inside Kip. He turned and looked the man over from head to foot. He was a bum. He had heard about the cities having them; now he was face to face with one. Shivers raced like electric shocks up and down his spine, even into the roots of his hair. He had heard all sorts of wild, weird stories about some of these kind. And now he was face to face with one of them. Oh, he had never imagined anything like this when he raced out of his father's house four days ago.

"What's wrong; can't you talk? You heard me."

"Yes, I heard you."

"Then why don't you talk? You a bum?"
Kip raised up on the seat. "No. No, I'm not a bum. Can't you tell that?" Did he look that bad? he wondered.

Pulling a raveling from his ragged, frayed coat, the man said, "You look kinda like one. The marks are there. A bit young, perhaps, but a bum, nonetheless. What'd you do -- get mad at your boss or something and lose your job? Or didn't you have a job?"

Kip scarcely knew what to do. If he spoke too unkindly . . . the way he had done to his father before leaving . . . the man may get rough and tough with him. He was big. And burly looking, too -- like he could toss him to the ground without too much effort.

"I didn't lose my job," he said, far more kindly and gently than he felt.

"Your dad kick you out? Maybe because you wouldn't get your hair cut or something like that?"

"He didn't kick me out," Kip retorted quickly. "I left of my own will."

"Because you wouldn't get your hair cut, huh? I know fathers. They can be pretty unreasonable sometimes. Like your dad, maybe?"

Why, the nerve, Kip thought, deciding he had never heard the half of these kind of men. How dare he say that his father was unreasonable. He had a wonderful father, kind and good. And righteous, too.

"My dad's not unreasonable, Sir, I'll have you to know."

"Oh, I know how you feel. You're away from home now with little or no money. And you're hungry, and the nights get chilly, lying on the grass or a park bench with no warm cover, and, well, you get a little sentimental. That's where you're at now . . . that sentimental part. Then you think that maybe home wasn't so bad after all, that maybe it would have been better if you had cut your hair and obeyed those strict rules . . ."

"Look, mister, my home was never anything but happy. I have a wonderful father and mother and some wonderful brothers and sisters, too. The rules weren't all that strict."
"I know. I know how you feel. Exactly. Parents don't understand, you say. They demand too much; make you look like an oddball and . . ."

"Hey, how'd you know I said that? But it's not true. Not at all. My dad wouldn't want any of us to be an oddball for oddball's sake. Now if we were ever an oddball in the eyes of the world because we were obeying the Bible and complying with Its rules and Commandments, Its 'thou shafts' and 'thou shalt note,' well, that would be totally different. My father would be proud of us for that."

Kip felt frustrated. The man was brash, positively so, and uncouth. He had a horrid mental picture of fathers, his father especially. And he didn't even know his father. Had never met him even. How dare he say such things?

"You sure of that?"

"Sure of what?" Kip asked quickly.

"Sure of what you just said?"

"What did I just say? I was thinking along a completely different vein of thought."

"About your father, no doubt. And how unreasonable he is in demanding that you get that long, dirty hair cut. I know fathers, young man."

"Look, Mister, again I repeat, my father is not unreasonable. He's a kind man. Full of compassion and love and understanding."

"Except where your long hair is concerned! Kind in every other respect? Fathers are like that . . ."

"Don't say it again?" Kip exclaimed. "Believe me, my father is not unreasonable. I'm the unreasonable one. I rebelled; not he. I exploded, not Dad. I defied the home rules and disobeyed, or broke, whichever you may choose to call that commandment where God says to honor thy father and thy mother. None of this would have happened if I had followed the biblical injunction, 'Children obey your parents.' "
"Do you know what to do?"

"Of course, I know. I was taught properly by God-fearing parents."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"I am. Right now, too. This is not my lifestyle, believe me! I'm going to get this mop of hair cut. But short. I'm going to look like a man -- like my dad. Then I'm going to hitch a ride home."

"Is it far?"

"To Centerville. Quite a distance when you don't have a car," Kip said, standing to his feet.

"Now wait a minute, kid. Maybe I can help you. Let's see now . . ." Reaching into his tattered coat pocket, he pulled out a bill. "Take this," he said. "Ought to get you a haircut to please your dad, and fare home, too, plus a little grub, kid. Good luck to you."

"Thanks, Mister. Thanks much. You sure you can spare it? Give me your name and address and as soon as I earn the money, I'll pay you back."

"Nothin' doing. You've helped me enough. Now hurry. That train leaves in a couple hours."

"Thanks. Thanks much," Kip called, racing across the park.

The man got to his feet, wiped happy tears away, and smiled. Then he hurried to his car, parked along the curb, removed the battered hat from his head, the worn shoes from his feet, changed into a conservative suit and drove away, his mission accomplished.