

Forbidden Fruit

When I was a boy in Sunday school in Bluffton, S. C., it was easy for me to understand the Bible story of man's fall. All I had to do was substitute my self for Adam, the pears in Dr. Jacob Guerard's orchard for the forbidden fruit, and Bluffton for the Garden of Eden.

The analogy had to end there, because Adam's punishment for his transgression was in no way comparable to mine. True, he had to till the ground and eat bread in the sweat of his face all the days of his life. But to my way of thinking, that was nothing compared to what I had to suffer in Dr. Guerard's dental chair.

Besides, Adam had the pleasure of eating his forbidden fruit before he was condemned. I was apprehended, or at least I thought I was, before I had plucked mine, much less eaten it. I was up in the tree and my hand was outstretched in the general direction of the forbidden fruit. But I had not yet grasped it, and that extenuating circumstance should have reduced the punishment to fit the crime.

Dr. Guerard was a handsome dignified old gentleman. He wore a goatee and pince nez glasses and smoked Virginia cheroots. He was a bachelor and lived alone in a cottage on the riverfront. One room in the house served as his dental office. His pear orchard lay between the house and the street that ran east and west across the town and came to a dead end at the oyster factory a hundred yards or so from Dr. Guerard's property. The orchard fence was topped with a strand of barbed wire and a sign tacked on a post near the street read: No Trespassing Under Penalty Of Law.

One afternoon while I was playing with Wesley Clemmons in his yard across the street from the orchard, the wind was blowing in from the river and the tantalizing aroma of ripe pears was continually wafted up our nostrils. When I started home, Wesley walked to the front gate with me and we tarried there a little while. With nothing between us and the orchard full of ripe pears but a street and a fence and a No Trespassing sign, we could not help toying with temptation.

"Reckon you can come back right after dark?" Wesley said, his conspiratorial voice too low for his family sitting on the front porch to hear him.

"I guess so," I said.

"Reckon you can climb a barbed wire fence without hanging yourself up?"

"I guess so."

"Reckon you can walk on your heels without making any flat-footed tracks?"

"I guess so."

Wesley nodded at the sign on the post across the street. "Meet me over there just as soon as it's pitch-black dark." He glanced up at the sky. "No moon tonight and it's getting cloudy. Won't be one star shining. Don't bring anybody with you. Three's a crowd in a little pear orchard."

"If we get caught," I said, "my father will give me something worse than Tango got last year in the calaboose." Tango was a little humpbacked colored boy who had been tracked down and punished in jail for stealing two pears from Dr. Guerard's orchard.

"My father will clobber me too," Wesley said. "But I don't aim to get caught like Tango. If he'd walked on his heels instead of on those splayed toes of his, he wouldn't have got caught either."

"It's a sin to steal," I said.

"Sure it's a sin," Wesley agreed, "if you get caught."

I went on home and did my chores in the yard. After supper I got permission from my mother to go out in the street and play honey honey hero for a little while. As soon as it was real dark, I headed for my rendezvous with Wesley. I found him there waiting and eager to get started.

"I just saw Dr. Guerard come from his kitchen in the yard and go into the house and shut the door," he said. "I think he's settled down for the night and won't come out again. Now don't talk above a whisper and don't forget to walk on your heels. And if either one of us gets caught, he mustn't squeal on the other fellow. It's what you call honor among thieves."

Quietly we climbed over the fence and walked on our heels toward the trees. Wesley stopped at the first one he came to. "You take this one," he said. "I'll take the next one. Both better not climb the same tree. you might get in my way if I have to come down in a hurry."

"Don't run off and leave me in here by myself," I said. "You know what happened to Tango."

"I won't leave you," Wesley said. "Don't forget what I said about honor among thieves, It's very important."

Wesley went to his tree and I climbed up into mine and settled down in a deep crotch. Through the leaves I could see the lights in Wesley's house. I tried to see one in Dr. Guerard's house, but it was in total darkness.

I got to thinking about Tango, wondering if he had been in the same tree I was in. Tango had got out of the orchard before he was

recognized. Early the next morning Dr. Guerard sent for the marshal. He took one look at the splayed-toe tracks leading from the fence to a certain tree and back, then went straight for Tango. He made Tango put his feet in the tracks and they matched perfectly and Tango had to confess. "Poor little Tango," I thought. "Wouldn't have got caught if he had walked on his heels."

It was so dark in the tree I couldn't tell a pear from a leaf. I began feeling around with my hand. I hadn't yet touched anything that felt like a pear when I heard Wesley over in his tree saying, "Psssssst! Psssssst!" I answered him with the same sound and then he said, "He's on the porch! Heard him come out the door! Don't move! Don't even breathe!"

I hardly had time to check my breath before there was a sudden flare of light from Dr. Guerard's house and a loud explosion followed by a noise in the trees around me that sounded like a wind-chased rain pelting leaves.

Wesley and I hit the ground at the same time and took off on our heels like a couple of peg-legged ghosts. We ran up the fence as though it had been a ladder and Wesley made it to the ground on the other side and vanished in the darkness.

I got one leg safely over the barbed wire, but when I lifted the other leg over it, my pants got caught and I toppled over toward the street and hung in midair between heaven and earth with my head straight down and my feet straight up. My body went into a fit of violent convulsions until my pants ripped wide open and released me to the ground. Then I jumped up and ran toward home like a shot at suck-egg dog.

I slipped into the house through the back door and slipped unseen into my room. I took off my pants and inspected them carefully, and I was relieved to see that an incriminating piece of the cloth had not been left hanging on the orchard fence. I hid the pants under my mattress and put on another pair. Then I sneaked back into the yard and reentered the house through the front door, as though I had just come in from a game of honey honey hero.

In a little while my mother called all of us children in the parlor for family prayer. "It's your time to read," she said, handing me the Bible. "Find the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy and read the Ten Commandments."

My heart fluttered crazily and I almost fell out of the chair. I knew the Ten Commandments by heart. "Thou shalt not steal," was the eighth. Was that the one she particularly wanted me to read? How could she know where I had been and what I had done? Sometimes my

mother seemed to know things about me that only God in heaven was supposed to know.

I read fast, and when I got to the eighth Commandment I passed over it and read the ninth and tenth. But I didn't get away with it. My mother looked at me reprovingly and said, "Now go back and read the one you skipped. Read it slowly and read it twice."

When I got up from my knees, I went to bed and hid my head under the cover. I tried to dismiss the Eighth Commandment from my mind and go to sleep. But it wouldn't be dismissed. It kept popping up under the cover in great big fiery letters. "THOU SHALT NOT STEAL." And every time it popped up, another verse I had learned in Sunday school trailed along behind it. "BE SURE YOUR SINS WILL FIND YOU OUT."

"I didn't steal anything," I told myself, "and nobody will find me out. Didn't I run on my heels? Didn't Wesley run on his heels? Didn't we both get away clean?"

Every time I heard a noise I wondered if it could be Dr. Guerard or the marshal knocking on the front door. I rolled and tossed fitfully for a long time before I finally went to sleep. But not even in sleep could I get away from that Eighth Commandment. I rode a nightmare all night long, trying my best to keep ahead of an old man with a goatee very much like the one Dr. Guerard wore. He was coming after me with a giant pair of pincers in his hand and he was hollering: "Thou shalt not steal! Thou shalt not steal!"

I woke up at daylight, and I was trembling and my head was hurting and for a while I thought I had an earache and a toothache at the same time. After I quieted down, I realized that the throbbing was localized in a jaw tooth that had been giving me trouble off and on for some time, especially when I ate sugar, candy or syrup.

"Oh Lord," I thought, "it's a punishment for eating one of Dr. Guerard's sweet pears! It's going to kill me sure as the world!"

Then I remembered that I hadn't had time to pluck a pear, much less bite into one. Was I being punished just because I had tried to steal something? Was I going to die with a swollen jaw for something I hadn't done?

"Oh Lord," I prayed, "please make this tooth stop hurting! If You do, O Lord, I promise you I'll never go in anybody's pear orchard again as long as I live!"

But the Lord wouldn't bargain with me and my toothache got worse. I called to my mother and I told her I was dying. She gave me an aspirin and stuffed the cavity in my tooth with cotton saturated with "toothache drops."

My father made me open my mouth and let him look at the tooth. "It will have to come out," he said. "Get your clothes on. I'll take you over to Dr. Guerard's office right after breakfast."

I sat up with a start and cried, "No! No! It's better now! It doesn't hurt a bit! It's plumb well now!"

"Nonsense," my father said. "If Dr. Guerard doesn't fix it, you'll be bawling here all day and all night and nobody in the house will get any rest. Put your clothes on."

I was convinced now that I had sinned and was being turned over to the devil for punishment. I wished I had never been born. Why didn't I stay hung up on that fence until all the blood drained out of my body? Then they would have put me in a comfortable coffin and lowered me down gently into my grave. But now — now I had to sit in a dental chair and suffer and suffer.

After breakfast, my father drove me in the buggy to Dr. Guerard's house. When we turned into the driveway that ran alongside the pear orchard, I looked to see if the marshal or anybody else was looking for tracks, but nobody was in sight.

We went into the office and Dr. Guerard told me to sit in the chair and open my mouth wide. He examined the tooth and then opened a drawer and brought out an instrument that looked like a pair of heavy-duty pincers capable of withdrawing a railroad spike from a crosstie. I thought of jumping out of the chair and making a run for it, but my father was standing between the chair and the door and Dr. Guerard was between the chair and the window.

"It will hurt a little," my father said. "But you'll feel a lot better soon as it's out."

The next thing I knew, Dr. Guerard had gripped the ailing tooth with the "pincers" and was rearing back as though he was trying to uproot a live oak stump in a newly-cleared field. I kicked and squirmed and tried to holler. But the mouthful of "pincers" had my tongue depressed and my throat blocked and all I could get out was a gurgling, "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Dear Lord," my father said, "those infernal roots must be imbedded in your heel bones."

Dr. Guerard got red in the face and beads of perspiration stood out on his face as he pulled and twisted the "pincers," but the stubborn tooth wouldn't budge.

Undaunted, Dr. Guerard climbed up on top of me and put his knees in my stomach and gripped the "pincers" with both hands. He rocked and pulled until the veins in his face and neck looked like balloons just before they burst. I could feel my jaw bone giving under the terrific

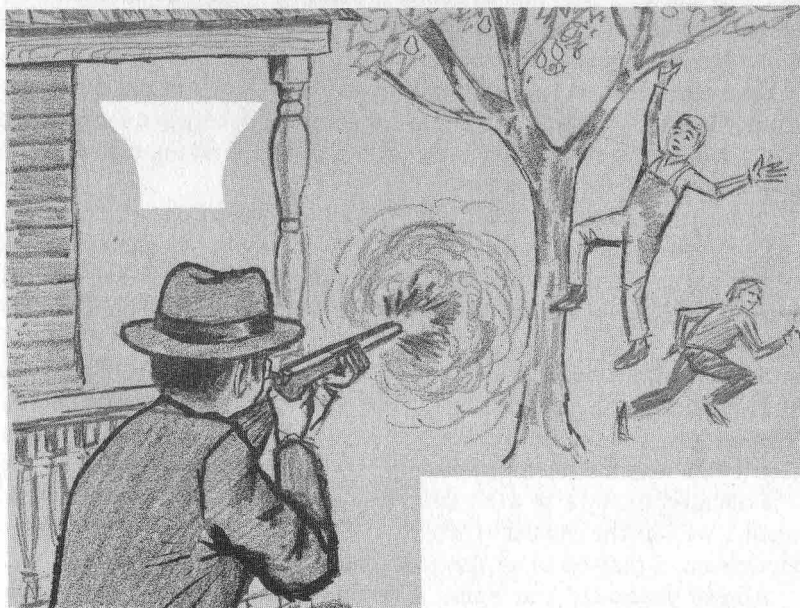
strain, and for a moment I thought everything inside of me all the way down to my feet was being drawn upward through my mouth.

During the struggle, my endurance point was reached and passed and I lapsed into a dream world. I felt as though I was floating around in the chair with Dr. Guerard on top of me. Like a bird in a cat's mouth, with all hope gone, I was dying but it was a sweet kind of death. I would soon be with the angels.

A heavy sigh from my father got through to my subconscious, and I heard him say, "Well, thank goodness you got the wretched thing out." And suddenly the last little ember of life in my soul blazed into flame, and I sat up and stared wide-eyed at the bloody tooth Dr. Guerard was dropping into a receptacle on the floor.

"Here, he said, handing me a glass of water, "rinse your mouth. Then hold this piece of cotton against your jaw until the bleeding stops."

He and my father went out on the porch. When I came out of the office, they were looking at the pear orchard. Dr. Guerard put his hand on my head. "Just as soon as that jaw heals up," he said, "you come back here and eat all the pears you can hold. But don't wait until thieves pick them all. Found two pairs of heel tracks out there this morning."



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