A Boston Boy in Bluffton
by Andrew Peeples

I remember as well as though it were yesterday the first time I met the boy from Boston.

It happened during the month of June when I was 10 years old. That was long before the Port Wentworth bridge was built; and the boy from Boston had come to Bluff ton, as most visitors came in those days, by way of steamboat from Savannah.

For some unremembered reason I was not at the big wharf when the boy arrived, and it was several agonizing days before I got to see him. In the interim, however, I gathered bits of information about him. In effect, they told me that he was about my age, was spending the summer with his aunt in her house near the bluff, was crippled with a left clubfoot and walked with a decided limp, wore glasses, and kept his nose in a book most of the time.

One of my girl friends whose mother was a good friend of the boy's aunt informed me that he knew more than his father who was a Harvard professor. She said he read every book he could get his hands on. "You know what my mother says?" she said. "My mother says he's a prodigy, that's what."

I looked up prodigy in our Webster and found out that it was, among other things, "an abnormal development; a monster;" and after that I walked blisters on my bare feet, trying to get a glimpse of him.

His Aunt's house was on our street, between our house and the big wharf, and fortunately, sheepshead were biting fiddlers like mad that week, and nobody paid any attention to the countless trips I made to and from the river, before I finally saw him in his aunt's back yard.

He was on his knees in the shade by a sycamore near the back gate, looking intently at something on the ground. I sidled over to the gate and watched him through a crack between two pales.

I was disappointed. He was no more of a monster than I was. In a way, he was just like me or any other boy in our town, except that he looked like something new that had just been unwrapped; while we looked like something that had spent years in the dust and mud of Bluffton's oyster shell streets and tidewater coves.

Everything about him seemed to shine. He was kneeling in the shade, but the brightness of the noonday sun was reflected in his rich thatch of chestnut hair neatly parted on the right side, in his ruddy face, in his gleaming glasses, in the tiny gold cross that hung from his neck, even in the built-up shoe on his left foot. And when he suddenly looked up at me and smiled, the flash of his pretty white teeth dazzled me.

"Hello," he said. "Come in and see what I have here." He said it as though he had known me all his life and was expecting me.

His voice, even more than his appearance, fascinated me. I had been hearing Yankee talk all my life. My grandfather, my mother's father, lived in his native Maine until after he married; and though he had lived in Bluffton since long before the turn of the century, he had not lost his rolled r's any more than his English wife, my grandmother, had lost her broad a's. But the Boston boy's accent had a musical quality that reminded me of little bells. Each syllable was clearly enunciated, each had a soft tone of its own, like subdued but distinctly separate notes. After hearing him speak, I was reluctant to open my mouth and betray my geechee gobbling of the English language. But I had to be courteous and say something.

"I see it," I said, speaking slowly so that my words would not run together and sound like the chatter of a young ape. "It's nothing but a little tumble bug."

Nothing but a little tumble bug? How ignorant could a boy be? I soon found out. For in the next few minutes my new little friend from Boston began teaching me facts about a tumble bug that changed my whole concept of the insect; indeed, of all insects. And he did it so naturally and with such grace that I hardly realized I was the pupil and he the teacher.

As soon as I entered the gate and knelt beside him, he said: "Isn't she a beautiful bronze and green beetle? Just look how shiny she is. What a pity that a creature so wonderful had to be given

the name dung beetle. She's clumsy rolling that ball around, but she's wise, isn't she? God gave her the wisdom to lay her egg in fresh cow manure, roll it up on the inside of a ball of the same, tumble it out into the dust to form a crust over it, and then roll it away to the nest. Or do you call it a well? If you do, you are correct, for it really is a well, isn't it?"

I had never thought of a tumble bug's hole as a nest or a well. I had never thought of a tumble bug as a beetle. She was just a tumble bug to me. But I was learning fast, from a teacher who knew what he was talking about, even if he was only ten years old.

"Nothing in the world," he went on, "is more interesting to watch than a mother beetle building her nest, is it? She burrows into the earth with her head and front legs, while she kicks the soil backward with her hind legs. As the hole grows deeper, she buries herself. And when she has buried herself under as much earth as she feels she can lift, she backs out at the top of the hole pushing it ahead of her. Sometimes, her husband gives her a hand. I wonder where her husband is. I don't see him anywhere around, do you? Now isn't that just like a man, running off when he's needed at home?"

We both got a good laugh out of that.

"Oh well," he said, "maybe he's a good guy after all. Maybe he's at the nest, waiting to help her there, for that is where she will need his help most, The hole at the first digging is five or six inches deep, isn't it? The ball is supposed to be rolled in by the husband and caught by the wife as she enters the top of the well. Then climbing downward, she holds it on her head until she reaches the bottom, after which she carefully crawls out from under it and runs to the top. Together the husband and wife fill the well with the loose soil they have removed and return to make another ball. This second ball may be brought to the same nest, or taken to another; for three or four nests are usually made, aren't they?

I nodded agreement, not because I knew he was right but because I was so interested that I wanted him to go on with what he was saying. Besides, I was almost speechless with amazement at all the things I was learning about a creature I had called "nothing but a little tumble bug."

"If they do bring it to the same nest," he said, "the loose earth is all removed, and the second ball placed on the first. When enough balls are in the nest to fill it within two or three inches of the surface, the hole is made deeper by burrowing under the lowest ball and allowing it to settle. One time I dug out a nest that was a foot deep and had six balls in it."

"Gosh," I said.

"Yes," he said. "And isn't it exciting to know that every ball contained a baby tumble bug, and the dung inside the ball was to be its food until it grew up?"

He paused for a moment and looked up at the sky. I glanced at him and saw that he was not looking at anything in particular in the sky. He seemed to be looking right through the sky.

"Isn't God wonderful?" he said. "He loves beetles. He must, mustn't He, to make so many thousands of different varieties? One of them, you know, was worshiped by a whole nation."

"Worshiped?"

"Yes. It was in Egypt, wasn't it, that the beetle was thought to be a god?"

"A god?"

"Yes."

"Gosh."

"Anyway, we know that God loves beetles and cares for them all. My father says that is why we should ever deal kindly with them. He says it is often necessary to destroy many of them to prevent their working great harm, just as we must restrain criminals, but that we should never take pleasure in cruelty or in torturing those that are too small and weak to protect themselves."

I would have knelt there in the shade of the sycamore forever, if he had kept on talking that long. But his aunt called to him and we had to part.

As we said good-bye at the gate, we introduced ourselves, and he said his name was Charles Lee Harrington, "but everybody calls me Lee. You will come back, won't you?"

I went home happier and more excited than I had been in a long time. I had a feeling that I was going to spend a lot more time with Charles Lee Harrington before he returned to Boston. The very next day we —.

But that's another story.

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