

Bluffton Boy Grows Up

For most people, growing up from boyhood into manhood is a gradual process. Many are unaware of the change taking place in their lives, and in future years are unable to remember when they ceased to be boys and became men.

With me, the transition was so sudden and under such tragic circumstances that I could not help realizing that one phase of my life was ending and another was beginning. I remember the year, month and days in which it happened.

I was fourteen years old, and it was in December, in that "joyous season of the year when the spirit of man soars to the heights of love and fellowship." But to our family, it was also a season of deepest sorrow, for it was then that the Grim Reaper chose to enter our home for the first time.

Four of my brothers were home from college for the holidays. They had been away only three months, but to them and to my parents and the rest of us children it seemed like three years. Papa had made ready the fatted calf which, in reality, was a couple of noisy gobblers, comfortably quartered in the fowl house with a special invitation to attend our Christmas dinner quietly and properly dressed. Mama and Lydia had the pantry shelves sagging with pies, cakes and cookies, and the big wooden icebox at the foot of the kitchen steps was filled with milk, cream, butter, clabber, cottage cheese, fresh seafoods, and all kinds of meats. The hall, dining-room and parlor were gayly decorated with green holly, bay, and red-berried cassena; and a shapely little cedar tree trimmed with paper angels, silver bells and candle-lighted stars, and sprinkled with wisps of snowy cotton, stood in its usual corner near the fireplace.

Luke, Nathanael, Matthew and I were busy stockpiling firecrackers for the jubilee explosion Christmas morning. Jennie and Estella (Mildred was yet to come), were cutting out dresses for the dolls they had written Santa Claus to bring. The only person in the house not busy with preparations for the joyful Day was our baby brother John, nicknamed Jack and not quite three years old.

Jack was in bed with a temperature a little above normal, but he was not too sick to share in the merry excitement pervading the house. Santa Claus was going to bring him a tricycle; a little red wagon filled with fruits, nuts, candy and popcorn; a horn with handle and tassel; and a little white sailboat which Nathanael and Matthew were going to show him how to sail down in the cove. He was too

happy anticipating all of these things for anybody, except Mama and Grandma Guilford, to be concerned about his flushed face.

Apart from the fact that Jack was the baby in the family, he was a favorite with all of us on account of his grown-up ways. He was a chubby blue-eyed fair-haired little boy who was always talking and asking questions beyond his years. Sometimes when he walked out the front gate and disappeared, we would find him in the next block sitting with Mr. H. E. Crosby on the front steps of his store, carrying on a man-to-man conversation with Mr. Crosby about the weather and things. One time he followed me out to the barn and watched me milk Daisy. He was fascinated with Daisy's month-old calf and asked me why Mack (in the next stable) didn't have a baby calf, too. Mack, I told him, was a horse, and horses had colts. He wanted to know why Mack didn't have a baby colt. I told him that Mack was a man horse and that men horses didn't have colts. Then he wanted to know how Papa had him for a baby. The subject was getting too deep for me, and I found shallower things for us to talk about while I made music in the milk bucket.

That the cruel hand of death was already closing the throat of this precocious child was the last thought that would have entered my mind. True, he was in bed with a little fever. But wasn't he smiling? Wasn't he interested in everything going on around him? In a family of thirteen children, wasn't one of them bound to be ailing with something or other just about every day? A flushed face and a little fever was nothing to be alarmed about.

Christmas Eve came, and our store, as usual, was a beehive of activity, with Papa and us boys from me on up trying to wait on an endless influx of customers, all clamoring for service before everything was sold out — a needless anxiety, because Papa was too good a merchant to ever let the demand exceed the supply. The day began at seven in the morning and continued uninterrupted, except for dinner and supper, until midnight. At the stroke of twelve we closed the doors and went to the house, expecting to find Mama and the children there fast asleep.

But Grandma Guilford had not yet gone home. She and Mama met Papa at the front steps with anxiety written all over their faces. They had done everything they knew to reduce Jack's fever, but it was still rising.

Papa sent Philip on the run for Dr. Harrison, who lived directly across the street. He came at once, and after a brief examination of Jack's throat, confirmed Grandma's diagnosis of diphtheria. He would have to send to Atlanta to get the antitoxin to treat the disease.

It might be two days before it could get to Bluffton.

In those long-ago days, diphtheria was a dangerous killer that took a fearful toll of human lives. Today, no properly immunized person has diphtheria. The few spasmodic cases that occur are due almost entirely to negligence on somebody's part. But when Jack was a baby, the weapons of medical science for fighting diphtheria were not widely known, and in an isolated place like Bluffton, no preventive protection was available. If a child's natural immunity could not combat the disease, death was a matter of time only.

Word soon passed around the town that little Jack would die if the medicine sent for was delayed too long. Mr. Clemons, Bluffton's beloved mail carrier, offered to drive his model-T Ford to Atlanta and get the antitoxin. And when someone asked him who would bring the mail from Hardeeville while he was gone, he shouted, "Damn you, damn the mail, and damn anybody who even thinks about mail when a child is dying!"

As the infection in Jack's throat grew worse, his breathing became increasingly difficult. His gasps could be heard in every part of the house. Mama, Grandma, Papa and "Aunt" Becky, our colored nurse, kept a constant vigil in the sickroom, taking turns holding the child in their arms, trying to keep him quiet. But it was impossible. His throat was rapidly closing, his breathing was becoming more and more restricted, and his fear was turning into panic. He would shift himself from one lap to another, pleading with frightened eyes for help that could not be given.

For two days and two nights the heart-rending tragedy was enacted before the eyes of all of us. Nobody tried to sleep. Jack's suffering was our suffering, too. Mama, Papa and Grandma, I am sure, suffered even more than the baby they held in their arms. No pain can compare to the anguish felt in one's heart when one is compelled to helplessly watch a loved one, especially a child, tortured. We could only remain silent, praying and hoping that a miracle, or death, would end the child's agony.

Christmas was a day of sadness for the whole town. Everybody loved little Jack, and nobody could be happy while he was being choked by the invisible hand of death.

The antitoxin arrived the day after Christmas, and Dr. Harrison lost no time administering it. But it was too late. Jack lingered on for a while longer, but finally his little body had to give up the struggle, and with one last tortuous gasp he closed his eyes.

The tragedy was over.

In the days that followed, all of us tried to assuage our grief by

keeping busy, except Papa. He remained hours at a time in the parlor with the curtains drawn and the door closed. We respected his desire for privacy, and stayed away from the parlor as much as possible.

One afternoon while I was tiptoeing through the hall, the parlor door opened and Papa stepped out in front of me. As I started past him, he laid his hand gently on my shoulder, giving it just enough pressure to bring me to a standstill. My heart pounded as I wondered what he was going to say.

He knelt beside me and put his arms around me, and held me there a long time, saying nothing. I felt his mustache brush my cheek, and I could feel his body trembling with emotion.

At first, I was embarrassed, and I wanted to break away and run through the front door and out into the yard. Never before had Papa given in to his feelings like that, and I didn't quite know what to think, or do.

Then, suddenly, I realized that he was not only holding me, but that he was also holding Jack and all of my other brothers and sisters in that one embrace. I was only a symbol of all his children. Through me, he was expressing his love for Jack, for me, and for all of the others. I was too happy to speak. I could only throw my arms around his neck and hug him just as hard as I could.

And it was then, in that wonderful moment of understanding, that I knew I was no longer a carefree, irresponsible boy.



Mama, Grandma, Papa and "Aunt Becky" kept a constant vigil in the sickroom.