

Bluffton Boy Learns a Lesson

If a boy wants to go through life without too much trouble, he's got to learn one lesson at an early age. Whenever he's given a job that he doesn't like, he must learn not to do it too well, or he'll be called on to do it again and again, and he might have to keep at it as long as he lives.

If I hadn't done such a fine job of nursing my sister Jennie, I wouldn't have been called on to nurse my sister Estella. I guess I was slow to learn things like that, because I went ahead and did a better job with Estella than I had done with Jennie, and it's a wonder I'm not still pushing a baby carriage around in Bluffton.

I nursed Jennie the year I started in school. I was supposed to go to work cutting wood and milking Daisy and helping out in the store, the same as my six oldest brothers had done. But I was a seventh son, which portended something out of the ordinary, and I had curly hair and couldn't whistle a tune and acted, Papa said, without thinking, which was dangerous. He said I might cut my foot off, or aim more milk outside the bucket than inside, or give customers too much change. Mama said that was stuff and nonsense — that I could do anything those other boys could do. To prove it, she asked me to nurse Jennie one afternoon while she entertained the Missionary Society.

I had to play baseball that afternoon, so I took Jennie to the diamond in the schoolyard and let her sit in the carriage and watch the game. She commenced screaming while I was at the bat trying to knock a home run, and when I swung and missed the third pitch and the umpire yelled, "Out!" the bat flew out of my hands and struck the carriage broadside and turned it over. I got Jennie back in the carriage and pushed her all the way to the riverfront before she could catch her breath and scream loud enough for Papa to hear her. I kept her down there until she hollered herself out, and when I took her back home she was just as happy as she was before we left the house.

That night, Mama did a lot of bragging on me and Papa had to eat crow's meat for saying I couldn't push a baby's carriage around without turning it over.

The next day Papa put me to work the same as he had done with those other boys. Everything went along fine, too, until my sister

Estella arrived. Then, for some reason I can't remember, Papa got cautious again. He said I still acted without thinking, and that it was mighty dangerous.

"He's just as smart as ever," Mama said. "I trusted him to nurse Jennie, and I'd trust him to nurse Estella. I'd even let him roll her all the way down to the river, if he wanted to."

"Well," Papa said, "you'd be taking an awful risk. He might let the carriage roll right down into the water and drown that child."

"Oh do, Jesse," Mama said.

Papa didn't want any risks taken with his girl babies. He had to have nine boys before Jennie was born. After Jennie, Matthew came. And when Papa opened the door to Mama's room and saw Grandma Guilford and "Aunt" Becky dangling Matthew by the heels over a tub of water and spanking breath into him, he said, "Another chucklehead, eh? Lord have mercy, eight more of those again before we get another girl?" "Go along with you," Grandma said. "The next one will be a girl, or my name's not Jane Guilford."

She was right, too. To the delight of Papa and Mama and all the rest of us, the next baby was Estella. She was just as pretty and wonderful to look at as Jennie, but in a different way. Whereas Jennie was the Nordic type, Estella's exotic charm lay in her darker blue eyes, darker hair and almost olive skin. By the time she joined the carriage contingent, she, like Jennie before her, had become the belle of Bluffton.

So I didn't mind too much one Friday afternoon when Mama asked me to roll Estella around and keep her quiet until she finished a pair of rompers for Nathanael. Besides, I knew Mama was again trying to prove to Papa that I could do anything in the way of work that my older brothers had done.

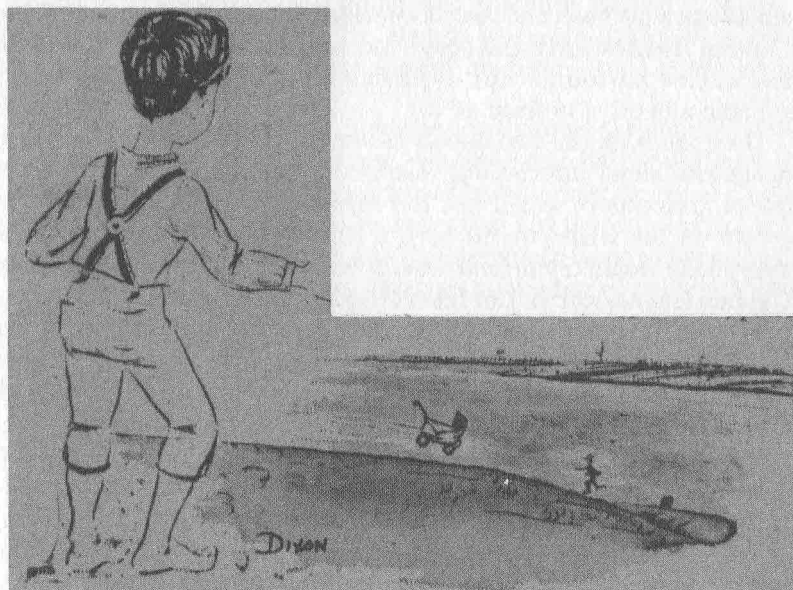
I pushed the carriage straight for the steamboat wharf at the foot of the main street, where practically everybody in Bluffton went on Tuesday and Friday afternoons to meet the Attaquin and the Louise when those two side-paddlers arrived from Savannah with freight and passengers.

The Attaquin was newer and faster than the Louise. She was 96 feet long and carried 300 passengers and about 100 wagon loads of freight. Her Captain Haynesworth was tall and florid and handsome as an admiral in his white uniform.

The Louise was about the same size as the Attaquin. Age had slowed her down and left her wheezing and smudgy and reeking with foul odors. But she still had plenty of fight in her. And so did her Captain Sinclair, a bilious old salt with deep-set eyes, a rackety

cough, and a gray mustache stained yellow with nicotine from an endless chain of strong Turkish cigarettes. A man of few words, Captain Sinclair usually kept his thoughts to himself, unless he was riled, and then he would remove a cigarette from his mouth and cough up enough opprobrium to make Long John Silver sound like a sick sissy at a Sunday school picnic.

After leaving Savannah in the morning, the steamers made two regular stops on the way to Bluffton — one at Daufuskie and one at Halsey — and one hail stop at Spanish Wells. The Attaquin usually kept ahead of the Louise all the way to the Bluffton wharf, and the Louise would have to tie up alongside the Attaquin and move freight and passengers across the Attaquin's decks.



I turned to see the carriage rolling straight for the channel.

But every now and then the Attaquin would be delayed at one of the stops, and the Louise would move into the lead and arrive at Bluffton wharf first. Then the Attaquin would have to tie up alongside the Louise, and Captain Haynesworth would be about as happy as a race horse forced to exchange stalls with a mule. So whenever the Louise took the lead, Captain Haynesworth would ring the engine room for full steam ahead and try to overtake and pass her.

Sometimes the Attaquin couldn't catch up with the Louise until she was in sight of the Bluffton wharf. Then Captain Haynesworth would toot the whistle for Captain Sinclair to pull over and let him pass, but Captain Sinclair would hold his course in the narrow channel. Captain Haynesworth's blood pressure would rise as high as the steam pressure in the boiler gage below. He would jerk the whistle cord with one hand — blasting out a rapid succession of angry toots — and with the other hand he would spin the wheel hard to the left, trying to nose the Louise out of the channel and away from the wharf.

Captain Sinclair's blood pressure would shoot upward, too, and he would stick his head out the pilot-house window and shake his fist at Captain Haynesworth and cough out something that looked — from the way he pursed his lips — like a four-syllable noun with a two-syllable adjective in front of it.

Deckhands on the two steamers would line the rails on the lower decks and shout unprintable insults at one another. On the upper decks, passengers would line the rails and cheer the fight on. The crowd on the wharf would have a ringside seat, so to speak, and everybody would try to hear what it was that Captain Sinclair called Captain Haynesworth. But I don't think anybody ever knew for sure.

When I got down there that Friday afternoon with Estella, one of those cat-and-dog fights was on. The Attaquin had caught up with the Louise at Martin's Bend, and Captain Haynesworth was blowing his staccato toots and trying to nose the Louise out of the way.

I stopped the carriage a good ten feet from the top of the slip before I ran over to the edge of the wharf where the crowd had gathered. I thought Estella would enjoy a good steamboat fight, and I didn't bother to keep an eye on her, because I knew that if anything happened she could scream and let me know. And anyway, I wanted to keep my eyes on Captain Sinclair and see if I could hear what that name was that he called Captain Haynesworth for trying to nose him away from the inside place at the wharf.

Estella must have enjoyed the fight all right, because she didn't scream one single time. But the very second that Captain Sinclair stuck his head out the pilot-house window and opened his mouth to

call Captain Haynesworth that four-syllable noun with a two-syllable adjective in front of it, Mrs. Etta Patz, who was one of the passengers standing up on the bow of the Louise, started screaming to the top of her voice and pointing her parasol at something on the wharf.

I turned around and looked just in time to see Estella's carriage rolling down the slip straight for the thirty-foot channel and an ebb tide racing into the side-paddles of those fighting steamboats.

I couldn't move. I couldn't even holler. I couldn't do anything but stand there like a sphinx with his mouth wide open.

I watched Rollin Pritchard, the young man who was in love with Miss Chaplin, my school teacher, run to the slip and jump down to the bottom of it ahead of the carriage.

But I still couldn't budge an inch. I was frozen with fright and I wasn't breathing. I think I forgot to breathe, until I saw Rollin Pritchard backing up out of the slip pulling the carriage with him.

Everybody on the wharf rushed over to see if Estella had fainted or something. But she wasn't even frightened. She was just sitting there in the carriage, laughing and pointing excitedly at Rollin Pritchard's straw boater. He always wore his boater at a rakish angle. Far over on the right side of his head, and I guess Estella thought it was falling off.

As soon as I thawed out, I pushed the carriage through the crowd and back up the hill to the street. I forgot all about the Attaquin and the Louise. I hadn't yet heard what Captain Sinclair called Captain Haynesworth. But I didn't care about that any more. I was in a hurry to get Estella home before some blabbermouth went to the store and told Papa that I had left the carriage at the top of the slip without pushing the brake pedal down.

But I don't think anybody ever told Papa anything. That night I heard Mama bragging on me again, telling Papa that she never would have been able to finish Nathanael's rompers if I hadn't kept the baby quiet all afternoon.

"Well, Maud," Papa said, "I guess I'll have to admit that chuckleheaded boy has made me eat crow's meat again. But I still say he acts without thinking, and that's mighty dangerous."

"Stuff and nonsense," Mama said.