

I Remember Papa

My father had a wonderful sense of direction. His fourteen children respected it so much that he could say to one, "Go," and one would go; to another, "Come," and another would come.

This willingness to accept a way of life in perfect accord with Papa's directions was a habit dating back to toddling days. For it was then that we began to observe his ability to follow the shortest route from any part of the house to a razor-strap hanging on the bathroom wall. When we ceased toddling and commenced walking across the yard to Papa's store, we were amazed at his directness in getting from his office or the hardware counter to a barrel full of buggy-whips conveniently displayed near the candy showcase. If we were playing in the yard or the adjoining store lot, we could only gape and stare as he negotiated an invisible but straight path to a reachable tree limb laden with switch-size branches, or to a suitable piece of harness leather or hemp rope (sometimes wet) completely hidden beneath a longforgotten trash pile. Never once did we see him travel a devious route to an instrument of persuasion.

This extraordinary talent of Papa's together with his genius for not mitigating his impressions upon us with any such hypocritical nonsense as "it hurts me, dear child, worse than it does you," made it comparatively easy for my thirteen brothers and sisters and me to regard his sense of direction as infallible. Only twice in my boyhood days can I recall following, or attempting to follow, my own as opposed to his.

The first time was the afternoon Papa got advance information that the village bully was "full to the gills" and headed for the main street, where our house and store were located. Papa promptly dispatched orders to the house for the children not to go out the gate for the rest of the day, and immediately several of my brothers and I lined up inside the fence, knowing from past experience that sooner or later the bully would get himself arrested and brought past our yard on the way to the calaboose on a side street in the next block.

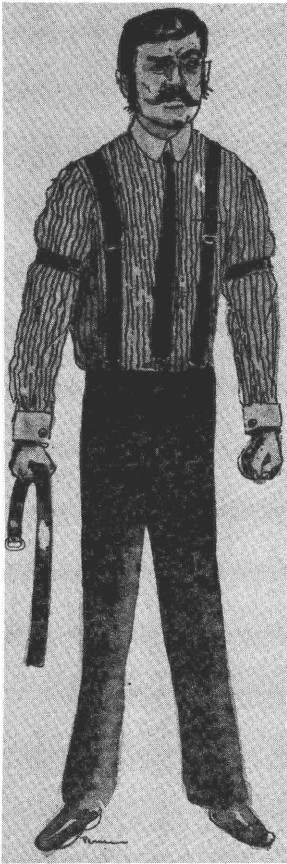
While we waited, I conceived a brilliant idea. "We can climb over the fence," I said, "and then we can say we didn't go out the gate." My brothers informed me that I was crazy and I restrained my foolish impulse, until other children came running by, yelling for us to come on and see the fun. Then reason went one way and I the other, over the fence and after those children, ignoring the warning cries of my brothers to come back before Papa saw me.

When the marshal and three deputies closed in on the bully in front of the post office, I was there. Bugeyed, I watched the scuffle and heard the shocking profanity with which the bully defied his antagonists as they got a firm hold on his arms and legs and carried him belly-up toward the calaboose.

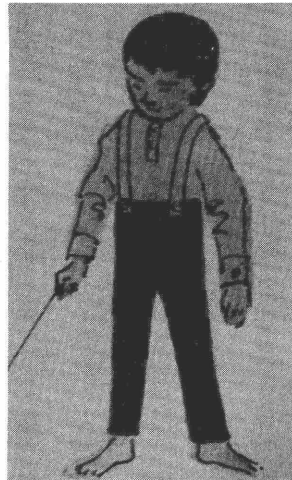
Skippping along with the other children in the wake of the disturbance, I was deliriously unmindful that we were heading straight past Papa's store, that he was standing in the front door, and that I was rapidly approaching the dead center of his vision.

"An-n-n-n-n-n-drew!"

Just once he called. But I heard him. I would have heard that



Papa



Me

parental voice had I been buried in the cove back of our house encased in four inches of armor plate.

For a moment I froze in my tracks, then sheepishly melted away from the crowd in the street bleating, "Su-h-h!"

Papa looked down over his Bismarckian moustache at me and cleared his throat.

"Didn't I tell you not to go out the gate?"

I mumbled something about going over the fence and Papa cleared his throat again and tossed his head toward the house. "Go to the parlor," he said, "and wait there till I come."

Like a convicted criminal summoned to the death-chamber, I made my way to the parlor. I closed the door and sat in a chair by a window, where I could see my executioner when he should come through the back door of the store and head for his gruesome task.

The curtains in the parlor were drawn and the room was so dark I could hardly see the organ on which I practiced my music every day. The mahogany table in the middle of the carpeted floor looked as black as the coal-tar barrel behind the store. The clock on the mantel-piece ticked faster than it had ever ticked before, determined to hasten the moment I wanted forever delayed.

As I sat there beside the gloomy window, with my head sunk deep into my chest, that God-inspired parlor, where the family gathered every night to sing hymns of hope and read the Holy Bible and pray for the "peace that passeth all understanding," was as comforting as a Siberian dungeon.

At least an hour passed before the fateful moment came. And in that eternity of waiting, I had suffered so much that the lashing I got was but an anti-climax. After it was over, I went to the room shared with three of my brothers, shamed and humiliated because my faulty sense of direction had led me to respect the letter more than the intention of Papa's law.

The second time I moved counter to Papa's direction, it had nothing to do with a brilliant idea. I was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea and had to make a choice. The devil was a trinity of snakes, rats and a setting-hen. The deep blue sea was a pair of leather reins in Papa's hands. I chose the trinity.

It began one day when Papa called me to the horse stable and showed me a small hole under the feed-trough. "A hen is setting underneath the barn floor," he said. "Crawl under there and bring her out, and hurry up."

The walls of the barn extended to the ground, excluding all light from the twelve-inch space beneath the floor sills; and to me that

stygian blackness was infested with rats and rattlesnakes, to say nothing of that fowl creature waiting in the dark to peck my eyes out.

In a show of obedience which was only a play for time, I fell on my belly and began working industriously at the hole with my hands, trying to make it large enough for somebody (not me) to crawl through. "Please, God," I prayed silently as I worked, "hurry up and send Luke here before it's too late!" I prayed for my younger brother Luke because he had a penchant for chastising wayward chickens and I believed he would welcome the opportunity to drag that Plymouth Rock out into the daylight and give her a good switching.

Papa cleared his throat, indicating to me that his patience and my time were running out. In desperation, I twisted around from underneath the feed-trough and looked up at the moustache glaring down at me. The toe of a shoe nudged me back toward the hole and the moustache said, "That way, son." I said nothing, but my eyes must have cried defiantly, "I can't! I won't!"

Papa lifted the bridle off the peg near the door and swung the leather reins over his head and then downward across my back. The shock of that blow and the dread of a torrent of others translated my delaying tactics into forward action. I dug my toes into the ground and shot my body headlong through the hole, completely out of range of those leather reins.

The sudden projection of a human body into an environment peculiarly adapted to reptiles and rodents and anti-social fowl must have startled the setting-hen into instant flight, for no sooner had I shot in than she shot out, squawking to the top of her lungs and flapping a cloud of dust into my face.

Papa yelled for me to come on back and close up the hole, but I was in no hurry. With my eyes, my ears, my nose, and my mouth full of dung dust, I was fit to snatch a six-foot rattlesnake by the tail and flail the hide off every beady-eyed rat under that low-down barn.