

The “Chucklehead”

The year I started in school Papa planned to put me to work cutting wood and milking Daisy and helping out in the store — the same as he had with my oldest brothers, Mark, James, Paul, Peter, Philip and Thomas. But a little monkey wrench changed his mind, and I had to nurse my sister Jennie one day to change it back.

Jennie was the tenth baby in our family. But she was the first girl, and to Mama and Papa and us nine boys she was something extra special, with big blue eyes, long golden curls, and a smile as dazzling bright as the Pearly Gates on Resurrection morn.

The day before I had to nurse Jennie, Pearl Harrison brought her new doll to my house and we decided to get married and set up housekeeping in the backyard under the grape arbor. Just as soon as our “baby” was born, Pearl handed him to me to hold, and right then was when Papa had to have his little monkey wrench.

Papa and Mark were at the bottom of the cove back of the barn fixing the ram. It was a hydraulic ram that pumped water from the artesian well in the cove up to a storage tank atop a sawed off live oak near the house. It was supposed to run night and day and never stop because it took a lot of water for our family, when you counted in Daisy and Mack and all those thirsty Domineckers scratching around in the lot between the barn and the store. But the plunger in the ram was stuck and the water in the tank was getting low, and Papa was getting nervous.

“BOYYYYYYYYY! You boy up there under the grape arbor!”

Papa’s voice struck my conscience like a bolt from the blue. It shook the “baby” right back into Pearl’s arms and started me running barefoot through a patch of spurs, making a beeline for the ram and crying, “Suhhhhh!”

When Papa called one of us boys, he expected him to answer and appear at about one and the same time. He was watching for me when I hove in sight at the top of the path leading down to the ram.

“Stop!” he yelled, and I jelled in my tracks. “Now,” he said, “run to the store and tell James, or Paul, or Peter, to send me my little monkey wrench, and hurry up!”

I ran to the store as fast as my spurred feet would take me. I ran through the back door and straight through Papa’s office yelling, “James! Paul! Peter! James! Paul! Peter!”

I saw Peter behind the dry goods counter and I headed for him yelling “Peter Peter! Papa says send him a wrench and hurry up!”

Peter was waiting on a pretty girl named May Vincent. He had just put on long pants, and he didn't want small children bothering him while he was making sweet talk over the counter. He looked down his nose at me as though I had been a fly, or some other pest.

"Please control your respiration," he said, "and kindly inform me as to what kind of twisting tool you have in mind."

If May Vincent hadn't been standing there he would have said, "Hold your wind, boy, and tell me what kinda cockeyed wrench ya want."

I eased up on my breathing and tried my best to remember the kind of wrench Papa had told me to bring, but I couldn't.

Peter shrugged his shoulders, flashed an excuse-me-while-I-get-rid-of-this-brat smile at May Vincent, and disappeared into the sideroom where Papa kept his private tools. In a moment he returned with a wrench big enough to twist the smokestack off a steamboat.

"Here's one," he said, "that can unscrew the ram and Mark's head at the same time. Vamoose!"

I gripped both hands around the heavy tool and ran, or tried to run, back to the cove. As I reached the bottom of the hill, Mark jumped up from beside the ram, with a hallelujah grin on his face and a tiny bolt in his hand.

"Look, Papa!" he cried triumphantly. "I got it out! I got it out with two fingers! We don't need that little old monkey wrench now!"

Papa looked down over his handlebar mustache at the giant wrench I was offering him. He cleared his throat and looked up toward heaven and groaned. "Oooooo Lord, I pray, be merciful to this chuckle-headed child." And before he could clear his throat again and tell me to take that "infernal Stillson wrench back where it came from" I was halfway up the hill.

That night after I got in bed, I heard Papa and Mama talking in the parlor, which was next to my room. I wasn't eavesdropping. That is, I wasn't until I caught on that they were talking about me.

"... His hair is curly and he can't whistle a tune and he acts without thinking. The other day I asked him to crawl under the barn and bring out a setting-hen and lock her up in the fowl house, and he shot under there as if the devil was behind him and scared her clear across the cove into Old Man DuBois's yard. Today I asked him to fetch a little monkey wrench, and he brought me the biggest Stillson wrench in the whole store. I tell you, Maud, he acts without thinking, and it's dangerous."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Jesse. He's no different from the six ahead of him. They learned to cut wood and milk the cow and help out in the

store just as soon as they started in school, and so can he."

"If I let him cut wood, he'll chop off both feet. If I let him milk the cow, he'll never once hit the inside of the bucket."

"Fiddle-faddle."

"And if I put him behind the counters, he'll take one cent's worth of candy and three cents' worth of kerosene out of a nickel and give back six cents' change every time."

"Stuff and nonsense. The boy's bright as a silver dollar, and you know it. He can do anything the others can do, and just as well."

"I hope you're right. But I don't believe he could push the baby's carriage around without turning it over."

"Well, I do, and I'll prove it."

The next day, when I came home from school, Mama was waiting for me at the front steps. She had Jennie soaped and powdered and sitting in the carriage with her pink bonnet on, ready to go. The Missionary Society ladies, Mama said, were meeting in the parlor at three o'clock, and I must roll Jennie around and keep her quiet until the meeting was over.

I didn't let on that I knew what Mama had in mind — that if I could keep a baby quiet a couple of hours, Papa would have to admit that I could do anything those other boys could do.

"I'll have to roll her down to the schoolyard," I said, "because we're making up a baseball game and I promised to come right back."



Me and Jennie

"All right," Mama said. "But you must be very careful and see that nothing happens to your little sister."

I ran into the house and dropped my books on the hall table. I returned to the front steps by way of the kitchen, where I stuffed my pockets with cold biscuits and corn muffins.

I pushed the carriage out the front gate and headed for the magnolia tree across the street from W. J. Fripp's store in the next block. The magnolia tree was at the edge of the schoolyard, about halfway between home plate and first base, and I knew Jennie would enjoy sitting there in the shade and watching a good baseball game.

Just as soon as we got there, several boys came running over to the carriage. They stuck their fingers into Jennie's curls and tickled her under the chin and said "Coochy, coochy, coochy," and Jennie smiled her Pearly-Gate smile and tried to hold hands with all of those boys at the same time.

While we were choosing sides and getting the game started, Jennie was the quietest baby I ever saw. She didn't open her mouth, except to smile. But just as soon as I grabbed up the bat and ran over to the home plate and got myself set for a home run, she began crying.

Naturally, I looked to see what was wrong, and that was the very split second that Fred Hubbard the pitcher, threw the ball. I didn't even see it coming. I heard it pass my nose and the next thing I heard was Roy Snyder, the umpire, yelling, "Striiiiiiike one!"

Charles Niver, the right fielder on my side, ran to the carriage and stuck the little finger of his glove into Jennie's mouth, and she went right to work on it. And if Fred had taken advantage of the lull, I would have made my home run and had it over with.

But Fred had to make Thad Smith, his catcher, change signals about a dozen times, and when he got what he wanted from Thad, he just stood there holding the ball in both hands out in front of his chest while he cocked his eyes around at the man on first base, the way Eddie Mulligan and Buster Martin did when the Bluffton Big Boys played the Hardeeville Hornets or the Ridgeland Roosters. And before he got through with all that time killing business, Jennie found out what the glove's finger wasn't and began screaming again, and then, when I turned my head, Fred sneaked the ball across home plate a second time and Roy yelled, "Striiiiiiike two!"

That left me one chance to make my home run. But I wasn't worried. Charles wasn't either. He knew I could make that home run, if I had only half a chance. He said he would keep Jennie quiet if he had to blow his head off. He pulled a police whistle out of his pocket and held it up for me to see.

"This'll keep her quiet," he said. "I'll blow it so hard you can't even hear her hollering."

He took a deep breath and began blowing, and I couldn't hear Jennie at all.

Fred tried his trick again. But it didn't work. While he was killing time, Jennie was screaming. Charles was blowing his lungs out, and people in Fripp's store were crowding the front door to see if the marshal was calling for help to stop someone from torturing a baby. But I wasn't about to take my eyes off that ball in Fred's hand.

"Playyyyyyyy ball!" yelled Roy, and Fred had to pitch whether he was ready or not.

He wound his arm around in a circle six full times and kicked his left foot higher than his head and reached the ball backward to the ground and then came up with a spitball curve that would have struck out Ty Cobb in person.

I swung and just barely missed, and Roy yelled, "Striiiiiiiike three and out!" And before I could stop it, the bat flew out of my hands and struck the carriage broadside and turned it over.

Jennie landed on her head and did about three somersaults before I caught up with her. I snatched her up in my arms and dropped her back in the carriage and pushed her down to the river just as fast as I could run. I had to get her as far away from home as I could before she caught her breath and started screaming loud enough for Papa to hear her. I hid her in a clump of palmettoes back of the Episcopal Church and let her holler herself out. Then I took her home and turned her over to Mama.

That night, after I got in bed I listened with both ears, and what I heard from the parlor that time sounded all right.

"Well, Maud, I guess I'll have to eat crow's meat. If that chuckle-headed boy can mind a baby and play baseball at the same time, I guess he can do just about anything those other boys can do."

I didn't try to hear any more. I just turned over and went to sleep, feeling pretty proud.