

Grandpa's Strange Behavior

At an early age a boy learns that industrious, God-fearing and sober people are the "salt of the earth." If a boy is blessed, as I was, with parents and grandparents who are shining examples of moral excellence, he goes about his business of being a boy with a song in his heart. If, on the other hand, he is unfortunate in having a parent or grandparent who is indolent, irreverent or intemperate, he is forced to wear a mask of false pride or hang his head in shame.

One time I was plunged into the depths of disgrace because I thought Grandpa Guilford had imbibed too much "devil's brew" and was making a spectacle of himself in front of the Bluffton Town Hall. At first, I was profoundly ashamed of Grandpa. But later, when I learned that I had judged him without knowing the whole truth, I was ashamed of myself.

Although Grandpa Guilford died when I was twelve years old, I knew him long enough to love and admire him with a kind of hero-worship. He was a scholarly old gentleman with white curly hair and a beaked nose. His skin was smooth and almost hairless, and his blue eyes always seemed to see something amusing in life. Born, reared and educated in New England, he had fought in the Civil War, taught school, traveled extensively, and had designed and built just about everything from a manger to a mansion. He died suddenly at his desk while writing a book about his travels to faraway places.

Grandpa Guilford loved the theater and good music, and was never happier than when directing plays and minstrel shows presented in the Town Hall. All five of his daughters could play one or more musical instruments, and his home was a mecca for young people, quartets and church choirs. Three of his grandchildren became accomplished musicians, and one of them, my brother Luke, is Mister Music in Bluffton today. He is not only a master of the keyboard, but also a composer. His arrangements of Negro spirituals have attracted national attention. Some of them have been published and are used by the Yale Glee Club.

Naturally, I never expected to see Grandpa displaying his histrionic or musical talents in the main street of Bluffton, especially since he was the mayor. But one Saturday afternoon there he was in front of the Town Hall acting the part of a drunken buffoon and

singing a hymn at the top of his voice. That was the day that Berry Graves, the marshal, was trying to arrest a Negro named Snyder Jones, who was crazy drunk and threatening to kill anybody who came within reach of his switch-blade.

Just about everybody in Bluffton was there in front of the Town Hall that day. The crowd had formed a circle around Berry Graves and Snyder Jones. I had secured a vantage position on the Town Hall porch by wrapping my arms and legs around a corner post, so as not to be shoved off by the milling spectators. From my eminence I had a perfect view of the crazed Negro crouched warily in the center of the ring, glaring into the muzzle of Berry Graves' revolver and holding that deadly switch-blade knife poised in front of his chest, ready to rip open anyone who dared to approach him.

"Shoot it out of his hand, Berry!" somebody yelled.

"Yeah," somebody else yelled, "shoot, before he rips you wide open with that knife!"

Others started yelling, demanding that the marshal do something before it was too late. He paid no attention to the excited voices around him, but I guess he knew that he couldn't put off pulling that trigger much longer.

It wasn't the first time that Berry Graves had had trouble with Snyder Jones. He was a giant of a man with shoulders wide as a warehouse door. He lived on a farm a few miles from Bluffton, and every Saturday he rode his mule to our store and bought a week's supply of goods. He would put the goods in a crocus sack and, most of the time, get back on his mule and return home. But once or twice a year, he would hide his sack of goods under the hardware counter in the rear of the store and head for the liquor dispensary. He would take a pint of whisky back of the dispensary, behind a live oak tree, and kill it, and toss the empty bottle over the fence into Mr. Mulligan's vegetable garden. He would stay behind the tree until it was born again — in the top of his head — and then he would circle the tree a few times, to be sure, I guess, that his fuel could hold him on a steady course, before taking off down the main street. He would walk in the middle of the street, whooping and hollering and tossing his hat into the air. Wagons and buggies, and automobiles, if one happened to come along, would have to pull over out of his way to pass.

The first time that Berry Graves tried to arrest Snyder Jones, he grabbed the marshal in the seat of his pants with one hand and the scruff of his neck with the other and pitched him across a fence into Old Man Carson's strawberry patch, and ever after that Berry Graves knew better than to try to lock up Snyder Jones without help.

But this was the first time that Snyder Jones had threatened the marshal with a knife or any other weapon. And it looked as though he was going to have to shoot the Negro before he could disarm and arrest him.

I clung to the post and kept my eyes on that shiny eight-inch blade of steel, until somebody started singing right under my nose. I looked down and saw that it was Grandpa Guilford. He had joined some of his fellow members at the Methodist Church that afternoon to help repair the front steps, and he was on his way back home. When I saw him, he had already set his tool box down right there at the corner of the porch where I was hugging the post. He had his old gray hat in one hand and a half filled whisky bottle in the other. He was rocking back and forth and singing: "There's a fountain filled with blood . . ."

I couldn't believe my own eyes. Grandpa drunk? Grandpa, the mayor of Bluffton, disgracing himself and his family before the whole town? How could he get drunk, with Grandma hating strong drink worse than Carrie Nation? He might slip a nip now and then in the privacy of his office, but never would he slip enough to reel around the town like a common drunkard and risk Grandma's holy wrath.

But there he was, holding that pint whisky bottle aloft and singing: "There's a fountain filled with blood!"

With mouth and eyes wide open, I watched Grandpa stagger over his tool box and spreadeagle his way into the crowd, still singing, until he was face to face with the marshal. Then he shook the whisky bottle in Berry Graves' face and ordered him to put up his gun and leave "this poor fellow alone. He's bothering nobody."

"Why, Mr. Guilford," Berry Graves said, "you're drunk as a fool and you don't know what you're saying. Get out of my way before you get killed!"

The crowd was too stunned to do anything but gape and stare, expecting Snyder Jones to sink that eight-inch blade right into Grandpa's back.

Still holding the bottle in his hand, Grandpa staggered around until Snyder Jones was standing between him and the marshal. The Negro kept his eyes on Berry Graves' pistol and ignored Grandpa altogether.

Like a flash of lightening, Grandpa swung the whisky bottle against the funnybone in Snyder Jones' right elbow, shooting the switch-blade knife straight as an arrow from Snyder Jones' hand into the ground between Berry Graves' feet. The Negro let out a groan that could have been heard all the way to the river three blocks away as he fell face downward onto the crushed-shell street.

Grandpa watched Berry Graves snap handcuffs around Snyder Jones' wrists and, with the help of several men, take him off toward the calaboose. Then he put his old gray hat back on and held the whisky bottle up to the late afternoon sun and looked at the amber liquid with a merry twinkle in his eyes, as though he saw something very funny.

I watched him walk back to the tool box and set the whisky bottle in it. And when I saw the large hand lettering on the bottle's label, I felt mighty silly for letting myself think that a man like Grandpa Guilford would drink SAW OIL and make a fool of himself.



"Shoot it out of his hand, Berry!" somebody yelled.