

Mama and Papa

A Sunrise Wedding

We children were always grateful to our grandparents for giving us Mama and Papa and some interesting aunts and uncles.

Mama and Papa had a sunrise wedding in the family parlor, June 3, 1894. As it was the time of lilies, the family garden supplied blooms for the parlor decorations and for the bride's bouquet. The Jones family farm furnished evergreens: I've heard Mama say many times that she remembered standing under a huge bell made of rhododendrons, which her brothers brought in from the bluffs along the Harpeth River.

The early morning hour was chosen because of the train schedule. The wedding journey was to be a boat trip from Johnsonville, Tennessee, up the Tennessee River to Florence, Alabama. The train passed through White Bluff at 8 a.m. There had to be time for the bride to change from her white flowered silk to her gray travel dress, and time for the wedding breakfast.



*Mama and Papa Had
a Sunrise Wedding*

Mama said all she could ever remember about that breakfast was the cold, sliced turkey.

She did recall very well her first wifely duty. She and Papa were sitting on the boat deck that afternoon, enjoying the scenery, and as happy as honeymooners could be, when the bridegroom suddenly grabbed his knee, leaped from his chair, and yelled.

A spark from the smokestack had burned through his pants and into the skin. Mama ventured to borrow a needle with gray thread to sew up the trousers of her new husband's black Prince Albert suit.

In packing for the journey Mama had carefully packed her comb and brush, her curling irons, her face powder, and all such articles as a bride might need, in a small box and had left it on her trunk, ready to be put in at the last moment. But when the last moment came, the trunk was closed and the box forgotten.

Next morning Papa had to find the housekeeper of the boat and borrow comb, brush, curling irons, and face powder before his bride could come to breakfast.

After three days and two nights on the riverboat, they arrived in Florence, spent the night at a hotel there, and then took the train for Columbia, Tennessee, where Papa had a new house almost finished—just across the street from his family home. They arrived late in the evening and were rushed immediately into a huge reception.

Mama said what she remembered best about that reception was that she had been traveling four days without curling irons, and that they had cold sliced turkey.



When Papa Came Home

Papa was tall, quiet, and mustached. He was foreman of a bridge-building crew for a railroad company and was home only on week-ends. As I remember Papa, he must have had a keen sense of humor under a solemn exterior. Other people laughed at the few words he spoke and frequently quoted him; but I don't remember ever seeing him even smile, much less break into a laugh.

He was not so bookish as other members of his family, but rather liked to tinker, or "invent," as he called it, in a cluttered little shop joining the woodshed in our backyard.

He used to perch me on a small box on one corner of his work bench while he pattered about, and by asking questions and getting one-syllable answers, I learned the names and uses of drill, auger, vice, and various hammers and other tools. From those days in Papa's shop, I resolved to be a mechanic, tinkerer, inventor, and whatever Papa was. To be able to operate a drill press or lathe would have made me almost as happy as to own a pink silk dress and parasol.

From the time Papa came home on Saturday afternoon until supper time, he belonged somewhat to us. We followed him around telling him everything that had happened throughout the week. But after supper, we were allotted our bananas and candy and sent to bed. Then it was Mama's time to tell him of the week's happenings.

Papa never punished one of us children, and I've heard him boast to Mama that he never had to speak to one of us twice. But there was a reason—his bicycle bell!

One particularly strenuous week when Papa was home with the grippe and Mama was very nervous, and the weather was too bad for us to play anywhere else except behind the stove, family tension was running high.

Papa went out to his shop, returned, saying nothing, but bearing a discarded bicycle bell. He fastened the bell on the underside of the arm of his big porch rocker (brought inside for the winter) and took his seat.

All went well until one of us children got too noisy, too slack in obedience, or otherwise out of line. Then Papa instantly clicked that bell, and fixed on the reprobate a glaring blue-eyed stare. Result: instant obedience. That's the only discipline Papa ever gave us.

I don't know why Mama never rang the bell during trying weekdays. She struggled along, scolding, threatening, spanking, sometimes by hand, sometimes by peach-tree switch or hairbrush, but the bell was reserved for Papa's private use.

Our family life during the entire week was always slanted toward Papa's homecoming on Saturday night. Mama dressed a hen, baked a chocolate cake, a lemon pie, an egg custard, (and let us lick or scrape the pans, spoons, and mixing bowls). She also boiled a pot of rice and baked a pan of macaroni and cheese. Those were Papa's favorite foods. Then she bathed us and dressed us in our next-to-bests and had us all ready for his homecoming before she started to bedeck herself. The house itself was already clean, and we dared not "mess up" anything.

We would hang on the front gate until we could recognize his long legs ambling down the hill from toward the railroad depot. Then we broke out like wild young horses galloping and racing down the rattley old board sidewalk to meet him.

It was not merely that Papa was coming; it was also what he brought—bananas sometimes, candy for sure, always the "funny papers" with "Mule Maud and Si," "Buster Brown," and the very bad and often-punished "Katzenjammer Kids."

Usually in addition to those regular Saturday night gifts there was a surprise for one of us or another. Once there was a tricycle for me; another time a small red fire-engine for Clarence; and once, what Elsie wanted most in all the world, a pair of skates.

Each of these gifts eventually led to its own disaster. I was so proud of the tricycle that I couldn't resist holding my head high and leaning back like a lady in a surrey. Every time I did so, the tricycle was overbalanced, and back of my head hit the

rough, hard brick sidewalk to the accompaniment of stars in my eyes.

Clarence thought he had found a perfect highway for his little red fire engine, the banister rail in the front hall. He sneaked up the front stairway, an act which in itself was entirely forbidden, set the little wheels astraddle the rail, and gave the engine a shove and a ting-a-ling. Down it went right into the middle of Mama's new red swinging lamp, her Christmas present from Papa. We expected the seat of the boy's breeches to blaze when Mama laid down the hairbrush, but he was able to continue wearing them, though not to sit comfortably.

Elsie's skates seemed always in a hurry, especially when she started down the sloping walk in the side yard. They always slipped out from under her and let her head hit the sidewalk. But that in itself seemed not too tragic to the rest of us until one day she fell, clumsy thing, right down flat on top of our little pet chicken which was following her. She mashed his insides out. It was such a sickening sight and heartbreaking occurrence that Clarence and I hardly forgave her for days. Elsie practically had to go to bed. She had major claims to the chicken, for it was into her hands that Grandma Ussery had placed it, and it was usually her privilege to gather up the table scraps and feed it.

But it was Papa's regular gifts that meant most to us—the bananas, candy, and funny papers. We felt that we couldn't possibly live through a weekend without knowing what Maud, Si, Buster, Mary Jane, Tige, the Kids, and the Captain were

doing. So it was very handy that we had a Papa to come home on Saturday night.



The Cap'n's Kids

Papa's crew of men lived all the week "on the road." They had a train of freight cars all fixed up for living. One car was the cook-coach and dining room, with Papa's office in one end. The other cars had bunks for the men.

One of Papa's big problems was keeping a cook, one who was satisfied to stay away from home throughout the week, and one who's cooking could please so many people. Keeping the men satisfied seemed easier than keeping the cook satisfied, for there was a rule in the cars that anyone who complained about the cooking had to take over the job himself.

The men called Papa "Cap'n." When we went down to the cars on Sunday morning they looked us over thoroughly and spoke of us as the Cap'n's kids. This made us very proud. Any time Papa was out of sight and hearing, one of the men would say to us, "Your Papa's a mighty good man, yes sir, a mighty good man." Dozens of times I've heard that expression in regard to Papa. But one night he seemed to have not been so good and that's a story that stayed with that crew as long as they were on the road.

Papa was trying to cut down on the amount of profanity used among the crew. So a ruling was established that any man who used an expression that he wouldn't say before ladies had to drop a penny for each word into a little tin bank. When the bank was full, it would be opened, and its contents were to be used to buy a Bible for the "cars."

All was going well. The bank was filling rapidly enough, for sometimes a good healthy oath would cost its exploder a whole nickel.

One night when a sudden rain came up, Papa got up to shut the car door and caught his finger in a quick pinch. He turned loose a big and dirty cuss word, then caught his breath—but not before one of the men had heard it.

The man got up quickly, roused up the whole crew, from one end of the sleeping cars to the other. They lit their lanterns, went back to the tool car, got a barrel and hand saw, turned Papa down across the former, and applied the latter. Then they made him put a dollar in the little tin bank. That midnight spanking of the Cap'n did those men more good than the Bible ever could, they said.

Papa died when I was ten, Elsie six, and Clarence three years of age. But Papa's porch chair with the bell on it continued to sit by the stove, always empty, but always as a reminder, until summer came, then the chair was taken out, and we could go out to play in the backyard or under the house.



Playing "Mrs."

There was not much inducement to play in the backyard. It was entirely bare. And like Grandma Jones's backyard, it had to be kept clean, swept every Saturday.

The only things of interest in the backyard were two maple trees that must not be climbed; a plum tree which, also, must not be climbed except when Mama wanted the plums picked; a walnut tree which annually produced many caterpillars and a few walnuts, the latter of which must not be touched on account of their stain; and a dripping hydrant which kept the chickens supplied with water, and which also must not be touched except for drinking and handwashing.

But under the house was different. It was latticed all around and nice and dusty underfoot. By taking particular care of our clothes, we could sift the dust, make "flour," "sugar," "salt," and every imaginable kind of groceries. The lumps which were sifted out were imagined into apples and potatoes, and Clarence kept store and sold groceries to Elsie and me, who, under assumed "Mrs." names, kept house and raised our imaginary children. But we did have to try at all times to keep our clothes clean while playing under the house. Besides that, we had to crawl about and keep our heads bowed during the entire playing process, for under the house was not very high.

It was during these earlier years that Bidy became a part of our experience. Bidy owed her life to the fact that Company didn't come. The little black hen was bought extra for Sunday

“Company” dinner. The grocery boy brought her—her blue feet tied with twine—when he brought the Saturday morning groceries: prunes, dried beans, celery, and such. Mama intended to wring off Biddy’s head, pluck her feathers, and rub her down with salt on Saturday afternoon. But the noon mail brought a card saying that the “Company” was not coming. So Biddy was spared for another week.

All that week Elsie, Clarence, and I devoutly prayed that something would happen to that company before the next Sunday. Our prayers were answered, and for another week, and still many others after, the little black hen was spared to us pet-starved youngsters.



Afraid To Love

Biddy was not the first pet in our backyard. In the days before Clarence and Elsie were big enough to share him, I had owned a teeny-weeny pet guinea—a darling little fellow with a bell around his neck. Papa had brought him from somewhere “down the road,” and Grandma had given me the bell to tie around his neck. That guinea was a large part of my whole life just then.

One afternoon I was invited to a party, a nice little party it was, with cake and ice cream; but there were games I didn’t

understand and boys and girls I didn't know; so I felt that I would much rather be at home with my guinea fowl.

I could hardly wait to get off my Party Dress before rushing out into the backyard to call my familiar playmate. I called, but he didn't come. I called again and again. I hunted in the henhouse, the woodshed, the shop—but no guinea.

Then naturally I went into the house to ask Mama. It was always a custom at our house, in any crisis, to “ask Mama.” Mama answered as casually as though she were speaking of beans or potatoes: “Why, that guinea got to be such a nuisance out there in the backyard I decided to fry him for supper.”

I don't know how I got out of the house. I don't know why I went to the chopping block in the woodshed. “If I could only find even his little bell,” I thought.

Mama supposed it was too much ice cream and cake that kept me from eating supper that night; that it was too much party that made me toss and tumble all night in my trundle bed. I never did find even the little bell, and I never could ask about it.

After losing the guinea, I was afraid to love anything else. I didn't love the younger brother and sister. I didn't love Grandpa Ussery's horse, Old Nell. I couldn't bear to love even the little calf that came in the spring. I almost loved the little squirrel that Uncle Charlie gave me. In fact, I was thinking entirely too much of that squirrel; then one morning his cage was empty, and I was hurt again.

It was hard, however, to keep from loving Biddy, even though all three of us lived in constant fear that she would make a Sunday dinner. As it was, however, she became the pet of the whole family. Papa posed us with her on the back steps and took our picture. We took turns feeding her and eating her eggs for breakfast. One of Biddy's eggs was worth two from any other hen. Biddy was with us for years, but she belonged mostly to Elsie and Clarence. I had learned that a pet, no matter how much loved, could be fried for supper. From that time on I was afraid to love.

Mama took after her side of the house, of course, but she never seemed quite so precise as some of her relatives. You might guess her size when I say she could stand under Papa's outstretched arm with her hat on, and from the time I could remember, she weighed 136 pounds.

Mama was a model housekeeper and a very busy mother during the years I can first remember. I think most of all now of the pies and cakes she baked for Papa's homecoming on Saturday nights and Sundays, and of the weekly scouring and scrubbing she gave us three children on regular bath nights.

I remember particularly that we all had new Easter outfits for Easter Sunday mornings, and regardless of Easter weather, we wore them. In early autumn Mama made our fall dresses; mine was of dark blue and "serviceable" storm serge; Elsie's of the same material, but red. Both were trimmed lavishly with

gilt braide and brass buttons. On the first Sunday of September, regardless of weather, we wore those new wool dresses.

Many times as I shivered along to Sunday School on a chilly Easter morning, in light blue mercerized gingham, or sweated it out in scratchy serge in September, I wondered why the seasons couldn't be swapped so we'd have Easter in September, and September in spring.

But the neighbors had to be impressed.



Keeping Her Shoulders Up

From the time Papa died, Mama had a typical widow's problem of keeping up with the taxes and the grocery bill. Her main income was from dressmaking; she could sew and stay at home, and with three growing children she reasoned that she needed to be at home.

For long, un-numbered hours she stood at the dining room table and "cut out," or sat at her sewing machine by the window in the sitting room and stitched. But no matter what the hours, how long the days, or how tiresome and monotonous the work, Mama always "kept her shoulders up." That was her greatest pride. She was determined not to have "dressmaker's stoop." The neighbor's opinions were always remembered.

I was old enough and observant enough to notice what a hard time she had. I realized, many times, that she was wonder-

ing where the next week's provisions would come from, and how on earth she'd get the money to pay taxes, insurance, grocery bill, and note at the bank. She always managed though, somehow, and proved to be an excellent business woman and a good provider, considering what she had to provide with.

There were times when the grandparents or the uncles and aunts would or could help a little, but usually Mama was too proud ever to ask for help. She did however accept \$10 checks as Christmas presents, and \$5 bills as birthday presents. Those helped a lot.

I used to always remember Christmas and birthdays in my prayers, hoping that Grandma and Grandpa and the Aunts and Uncles wouldn't forget and asking God please to remind them. Also in my prayers I would ask him to make Papa's death not true.

I always expected to wake up some morning and find that his funeral had been just a dream. I'd always hang on the gate on Saturday afternoons hoping that he would again turn that corner with a sack of bananas in his right arm and a surprise package in the other, and the funny papers in his right hip pocket. I prayed for Papa's death to be a dream just as fervently as I ever prayed that my freckles would leave and my hair would turn from stringy and potato-colored to shiny black and curly.

My prayers were only one-third answered. The grandparents and aunts and uncles didn't forget.



My Prayers Were One-third Answered

