

Butler Ellis Parker

The Confessions of a Daddy



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I. OUR NEIGHBORS' BABIES

I guess we folks that live up at our end of town think we are about as good as anybody in Colorado, and mebbby a little better. We get along together as pleasant as you please, and we are a sort of colony, as you might say, all by ourselves.

Me and Marthy make especial good neighbors. We don't have no fights with the other folks in our end of town, and in them days the neighbors hadn't any reason to fight with us, for we didn't keep a dog and we hadn't no children! I take notice that it is other folks dogs and children that make most of the bad feelin's between neighbors. Of course we had mosquitos, but Providence gives everybody something to practise up their patience, and when me and Marthy sat out on our porch and heard other people's children frettin' because the mosquitos was bad, we just sat there behind our screened porch and thanked our stars that we did n't have no children to leave our screen doors open.

It was n't but right that me and Marthy should act accordingly. I don't mean that we were uppish about it, but we did feel that we could live a little better than our neighbors that had all the expense of children, and if our house was fixed up a little better, and we was able to go off three or four weeks in the summer to the mountains, when all the rest stayed right at home, we had a right to feel pleased about it. Lots of times we had things our neighbors could n't afford, and then the little woman would say to me: "Hiram, you don't know how thankful I am that we ain't got any children," and I agreed with her every time, and did it hearty, too.

'T was n't that we hated children. Far from it. We just thought that when we saw all the extra worry and trouble and expense that other people's children brought about, we were right satisfied to live the way we had lived the five years since we was married – our neighbors still called us the "Bride and Groom." Nor I can't say that we were happier than the other folks in our end of town, but we was more care-free. We lived more joyous, as you might say.

One night when I come home from the store Marthy met me at the corner, and when I had tucked her arm under mine, I asked her what was the news. Bobby Jones had cut his finger bad; Stell Marks had took the measles; little Tot Hemingway had run off, and her ma had gone near crazy until the kid was found again; the Wallaces was n't goin' to take no vacation this year at all because Fred was to go off to school in the fall, and they could n't afford both. It was the usual lot of news of children bein' trouble and expense.

I was feelin' fine, the next day bein' a holiday, and Marthy, with the slick way women has, sprung a favor on me just when she set the broiled steak on the table. Extry thick, and burnt brown – that's my favorite steak – and whenever I see it that way my mouth waters, and I look out for a favor to be asked.

"Hiram," she says, quite as if she was openin' up a usual bit of talk, "did you take notice of Mrs. Hemingway's silk dress last Sunday?"

"Why no, Marthy," I says, "I didn't. Was it new?"

"New!" she laughed. "The idee! That's just what it wasn't. I believe she has had that same silk ever since we have lived in this end of town, and no one knows how much longer. It's a shame. She puts every cent she can dig up on those children of hers, and has hardly a decent thing of her own. I feel right sorry for her."

"I feel sorry for Hemingway," says I. "The old boy is workin' himself to death. He never gits home until supper is all over, and he told me just now that he felt it his bounden duty to work to-morrow. I tell you, Marthy, children is an expensive luxury!"

“That’s just what they are,” she agreed. “If it wasn’t for their children, the Hemingways could live every bit as good as we do, and he wouldn’t have to work of nights, poor fellow. But, Hiram,” she says, as if the idee had just hit her, “do you recall to mind when this end of town has seen a new silk dress?”

“Why, no – no,” I said; “when was it?”

“Years ago!” says the little woman. “I was figgerin’ it up to-day, and it was full two years ago. Ain’t it awful?”

“Downright scandalous!” I says. “And just on account of those children, too!”

Marthy looked down at her plate, innocent as you please.

“I’m glad we ain’t got any children, Hiram,” she says, full of mischief.

That tickled me. I was tickled to see how she was tickled to think she had trapped me.

“I guess it’s our bounden duty to hold up the honor of our end of town by showin’ it a new silk dress,” I says, and the next thing I knew I was fightin’ to keep her from chokin’ me to death.

All that evening Marthy was unusual quiet and right happy, too. As she sat on the porch her eyes would wander off over-the-hills-and-far-away, and I knew she was lost in joyous tanglements of bias and gores and plaits, where a man can’t foller if he wants to. But when we went inside and had the blinds pulled down she put her arms around my neck again and gave me another choke.

“Dear, dear old Hiram!” she says, and her eyes was tear-wet. “Just think! A new silk dress!” And just then there came into the room the noise of the Marks child – the one with the measles – whimpering.

“Ain’t you glad,” says the little woman, “that we haven’t any children to spoil all our fun, and bother us?” and when I looked down into that happy little face of hers, I was glad, and no mistake.

The next day was a beauty. It came in like a glory, and we was up almost as soon as the sun was; for we had figgered on one of our regular old-time jolly days by ourselves on the hills – one of the kind that made our end of town call us the “Bride and Groom.” It was our plan to take a good lunch, and just wander. Marthy was to take a book, and I was to take my fishin’ tackle, and beyond that was whatever happy thing that turned up.

“If we had children,” she said, “we couldn’t go off on these long tramps by ourselves.”

We got away while the neighbors in our end of town were still at breakfast, and as we passed the Wallace’s place we ran up to holler good-by through the window at them, and there was the youngest Wallace foolin’ on the floor with her stockings not on yet, and breakfast half over. Marthy stopped long enough to have a good, long look at the child.

“If all the children was like Daisy Wallace,” she says, “they wouldn’t be so bad. She is the dearest thing I ever did see. She’s got the cutest way of kissin’ a person on the eyelids.”

“She looks to be just as lazy in the dressin’ act as the rest,” I remarked, and I was surprised, the way Marthy turned on me.

“Why, Hiram Smith!” she cried; “didn’t *you* ever dawdle over your dressin’? When I was a girl I got lots of fun out of being late to breakfast. What difference does it make, anyway, when she is perfectly lovely all the rest of the time? I simply love that child. I wonder,” she said, sort of wistful, “if they would let us take her with us to-day. She would enjoy it so.”

“Foolishness,” I said. “We don’t want to pull a kid along with us all day; and anyhow, they are going to take her to the photographer’s to-day to have her picture took.”

We went out around town, and up the hill road. The morning air was great, and nobody on the road at all, so far as we could see, and we stepped out brisk and lively.

“Seems good to git away from the baby district, don’t it?” I says, as we was walkin’ up the road. “We ‘re like Mister and Missus Robinson Crusoe,” and at the very next turn we most fell over Bobby Jones and his everlastin’ chum, Rex, which is the most no-account dog on earth.

“Where y’ goin’?” he asks.

“Nowheres particular,” says Marthy. “Just walkin’ out to git the air.”

“So’m I,” says he, and then he says, sort of bluffin’, “I ain’t lost.”

“Yes you are, Bobby,” I says, severe as I could, “and if you know what’s good for a kid about your size you’d better turn right ‘round and scoot for home.”

He looked at me as if he would like to know who I was, to be bossin’ him.

“Ho!” he says, “You ain’t my pa. I don’t have to do what you say! I won’t go home for you!”

Marthy was bendin’ over him in a second.

“Bobby,” she says, coaxing-like, “do you know what your folks is going to have for dinner?”

“No’m,” he says, as polite as you please.

“I do,” says the little woman. “Ice cream. And if you git lost you won’t git home in time to git any.”

Bobby looked up the road where he hadn’t explored yet, and then looked back the way he’d come, and then he smiled at Marthy and took off his cap to her.

“Thank you, Missus Smith,” he says.

Marthy laughed as happy as a girl, and kissed him right on his dusty face. She put her arms around him, even, and acted like she had never seen a freckled boy before.

“Nice boy,” I remarked, when Bobby had gone down the road toward town.

“Nice!” says the little woman. “Nice! Is that all you can scrape up to say? Why, there ain’t a dearer child in our end of town than what Bobby is. He’s my sweetheart when you ain’t at home. Hiram,” she says, looking back at him as he paddled along kicking up the dust with his bare toes, “I wonder if we dare take him with us?”

“What about his ice-cream?” I says. “What about having a kid dragging after us all day?” So we went on, but I seen she felt a little mite lonely-like, as you might say. Which was queer.

By ten o’clock we had got far enough from town, and we pushed through a field that was all covered with flowers, and over to where the brook was, with the tangle of trees and brush hiding it, and when I pushed apart the brush to go through, I stopped and motioned for Marthy to come quiet and look.

There, sittin’ on a tree trunk, as quiet as you please, was Teddy Lawrence, with his eyes glued on to his bobber, and thinkin’ of nothing in the world but fish. I’m a right hearty fisher myself, and it done my heart good to see the strictly-business way that kid had. Marthy moved a little, and I put my hand on her to make her keep still.

The boy lifted up his pole and looked at the bait like a regular old hand. He dug a fresh, fat worm out of his can, and fixed it, and then I fairly held my breath. Would he do it? No! But, hold on – yes! He leaned over and spit on the bait to bring luck, just as natural as life! Say, wasn’t that real boy for you? I let the brush come together real quiet, and me and Marthy slipped away.

Well, sir, my five-dollar pole and my two-dollar reel, made me feel sick.

What did I know about fishing, anyhow? I felt right there what was the truth, that all my fishing amounted to was, that I was tryin’ to bring back the joys I used to have when I was a kid, settin’ on a log, happy and lonesome, watchin’ my bottle-cork joggle on the ripples. What was the use? A feller can’t go back to them days. There ain’t nothing to do about it. Unless, of course, he can sort of go forward to them in – well, a feller could sort of live them days over agin in a boy of his own.

“Wallace don’t deserve that boy,” I says, sort of mad about I don’t know what. “What sort of a dad is that old book-worm of a Wallace for a boy that likes to fish like Ted does? I’ll bet Wallace never had a fish pole in his hands since the day he was born. Now, if I had a boy like that I could show him a thing or two about fishing. If I had a boy like that – ”

“Look there!” says Marthy, sudden. “Did you ever see anything sweeter than what that is?”

Over on the other end of the field Ted’s sister was strayin’ around in the flowers, her face all rosy with the fresh air. She was like a butterfly in amongst the butterflies, a mighty pretty girl, and just the age when a mother loves a girl best and when a mother takes the most care of ‘em. I like pretty things as well as the next man does, and I’ll say right here that there was something about that

girl that made me feel like I'd like to own her – just like I feel about a real pretty rose, sort of covet to keep it just as it is forever, and take care that it don't git spoiled any way.

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