

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES



Loyal Legion Vignettes



A PARABLE FOR FATHERS: A LOYAL DAUGHTER'S STORY OF A LOYAL LEGION MAN (AKA: A PARABLE FOR FATHERS)**

By

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(1880 - 1935)

Transcribed by Douglas Niermeyer, Past Commander-in-Chief
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DINNER was perhaps the busiest hour in father's hardworking day. Whatever else Murray and Jean might be learning at college, carving had been omitted from the curriculum. Father was left to struggle alone, as usual, with the huge roasts which were wont to vanish with startling rapidity before the onslaughts of the young Hendersons. No sooner would a first expeditionary force of well-filled plates be sent forth than, before father could do more than cut up Trottie's meat, the long procession would be filing back again to a tumultuous chorus of encores. Between relays, there were the twins' covert scufflings to be suppressed; mother was admittedly the disciplinarian of the family, but father's quiet, "Boys! I had been looking forward to a quiet dinner-hour!" had power generally to soothe the stormier moments.

It was not until everyone else had nearly finished that father, guiltily conscious of delaying dessert, would find leisure for a few hurried mouthfuls, and it was that inopportune moment that Trottie invariably chose to make him a fervent avowal of affection. She must hold father's hand; father must lean over and kiss her. Murray's or Jean's impatient, "Trottie, do let father eat. We have an engagement and it's late already," would force an issue between food and caresses. Father had not that strong-mindedness one would wish in such a situation; despite mother's protests, he always weakly declared that he had quite finished, and abandoned himself to Trottie's sticky embraces.

It is needless to state that father did not scintillate during the evening meal. Like most quiet men, he had married a vivacious girl; but even mother's volubility collapsed before that hubbub of young voices clamoring for the platform. The fourteen-year-old twins kept up a continuous merry altercation, occasionally rising into shrill-voiced vehemence; eight-year-old Trottie, her genial efforts persistently snubbed, took refuge in soliloquy; twenty-year-old Murray and eighteen-year-old Jean held victorious sway of the rostrum, with a running fire of comment on "our crowd" and college

reminiscences, varied occasionally by kindly efforts to educate mother and father, or to settle for their benefit any problem, from politics to the rearing of children.

Mother sometimes grew restive under this instruction, but father always listened gravely when Murray corrected his business methods or political views. Sometimes, when the college vocabulary grew particularly vivid, he would lift a humorous eyebrow over at mother and complain, - for father always had his quiet joke, - " Is it for this we've been standing in the bread-line all winter?" And mother would reply cryptically, in horror, "Eastern polish!"

But if father did not talk, there was certainly something radically wrong with the universe when that unfailing background of genial, interested silence was suddenly withdrawn. It began the night when he called down the table to mother, with a gloom that was new to his cheery voice, -

"It's on the twentieth -"

"What's on the twentieth?" demanded Larry, the more irrepressible - if there was indeed any choice - of the twins. "A funeral, I should judge from father's beamish look."

"It's the Loyal Legion banquet at the Carlisle House," mother informed them, "and your father has promised to make a speech."

The youthful Hendersons tore themselves from their ice cream and exploded in an amazed chorus. Murray voiced the general sentiment.

"I didn't know speeches were in father's line," he said. He had just won a sophomore debating medal himself.

"They aren't," groaned father. "You don't inherit that from me." He put his gray head down into his hands with a dejection that no business cares had ever wrung from him in public. "I can't see how I ever let myself be persuaded into the confounded thing."

This from father was the wildest profanity, and indicated a serious state of mind indeed.

From that moment, it seemed, father was a changed man. As the days drew nearer to the twentieth, his mien became more and more that of a condemned criminal, awaiting execution. At table he was for once deaf alike to repartee or to recrimination; all evening he sat motionless behind his paper, with troubled eyes and moving lips, evidently in agonized rehearsal of the fatal speech.

The extraordinary thing was the effect this had upon the family. Father was a darling, of course - there was no one in the world like him; but in that vivid, effervescent circle of young life, each absorbingly intent upon his own pleasures and ambitions, father admittedly played a relatively unimportant rôle. It was inexplicable, therefore, how the merriest sallies lost their flavor without the applause of his silent chuckle, the keenest triumphs their zest without his pleased smile. Trottie expressed the family sentiment when, in the midst of rapidly appropriating father's neglected dessert, she burst into a prolonged wail. "I'm mizzable! father don't pay 'tention to me."

The morning of the twentieth dawned clear and bright, and father searched in vain with haggard gaze a cloudless sky. It was plain that he had hoped to the last that some devastating cataclysm of nature might prevent the evening's horror. Instead, Fate, grimly relentless, was preparing for him another prostrating blow. Mother, to whom he had clung for mental support throughout the hideous week; who had alternately soothed his fears and energetically prodded his faltering spirit; who had assured him twenty times each night that it was ridiculous for any man who had had such unusual experiences never to have spoken once at the banquets; that he would find how simple it was once he began; that he knew how much they all thought of him and how lenient his audience would be; that he had promised and could not disappoint them now - mother, at the eleventh hour, after battling

valiantly all day, succumbed to a neuralgic headache and took to her bed.

It was late in the afternoon when she called Jean to her darkened chamber and told her that she must go in her place.

"But, mother, I can't," Jean expostulated aghast. "It's the night of the Farley dance and I've promised to go with Harold."

"It's too bad," mother agreed, "but your father can't go alone to the only speech he's ever made in all his life - when you know how he's been dreading it, too. You'll have to call Harold up."

Jean explained with exemplary patience. "But, mother, you don't understand. It would be awful to break a date this way at the last moment - when it's too late for Harold to get another girl. If I had any kind of an excuse it might be different, but just an engagement with one's own father -"

But mother was impervious to reasoning. "It's a very little thing to do for your father," she declared. "It's no use arguing, Jean - if you won't do it, I'll get up and go myself, sick as I am."

"Of course, if you put it that way, mother, I'll have to go," Jean said stiffly. "Probably Harold will never forgive me, but I suppose that doesn't make any difference."

"I hope Harold has a little sense," remarked her mother unfeelingly. "I think Murray should go, too. Is he going to take anyone to-night?"

"He's staggling it," Jean admitted unwillingly. "Lucia's out of town, and he won't take anyone else. But I know he's looking forward to this dance."

There was still that hurt antagonism in her young voice. It was not as if she wouldn't be glad to do anything in the world for father, she told herself with passionate insistence. But she couldn't make his speech for him! And just going with him surely wasn't worth this terrible sacrifice mother was calling upon her to make. Of course, she couldn't explain to mother how things stood, how mean she had been to Harold last night; no direct unkindness of word or deed that they could thrash out openly afterwards, but little intangible wounds of omission - wounds inflicted in sheer girlish intoxication of her budding power over men. Harold had borne them in rigid, bitter silence; all day long she had promised herself to atone for them graciously to-night. And now he would think her amazing message a last unwarrantable stab! He would perhaps never give her a chance to explain - how could she explain anyway when she didn't understand herself what had made her behave as she had?

"Please tell Murray I'd like to speak to him," mother was saying wearily. "And if you're going, Jean, you'd better dress right away."

It had evidently been a stormy session with Murray, too, from the gloom on his handsome brow when he and Jean, mutinous young martyrs, presented themselves coldly to mother for a still unforgiving farewell kiss. She eyed disapprovingly Jean's simple gown.

"I want you to put on the dress you were going to wear to the dance," decreed mother implacably. "You must look your best to-night for your father's friends."

"But, mother," Jean protested, in exasperated justification, "you're always lecturing me to save my clothes, and surely to-night -"

"To-night of all times," declared mother. "Do you realize that your father seldom has a chance to enjoy your pretty clothes - when he has to work so hard to pay for them?"

Jean obediently buttoned her best pink tulle - that cloud of flimsy loveliness which had been destined

to delight Harold's adoring eye - over a hotly rebellious heart. She swept down the stairs like an outraged young duchess. Father's tragic gaze lightened for a moment as it rested on her.

"My little girl looks very sweet to-night," he said; and Jean forgot for a moment her attitude of injured martyrdom and gave him an impetuous hug. After all, it wasn't .father's fault -

Bitterness surged over her again, however, as they went down the steps and turned toward the street-car. How different an exit from her usual triumphant descent to the carriage some eager admirer had waiting for her each evening. For this was in the days when the horse had indeed received his death-blow, but was not as yet socially extinct. Romance, even in the opening years of the twentieth century, still rode to dances in "sea-going hacks," as Murray elegantly termed them.

Something of Jean's thought must have penetrated father's mind, for he turned an anxious eye upon her white coat. "I ought to have had a carriage for those pretty clothes," he said. "You see, I never dreamed I was to be honored this way."

"It doesn't matter," Jean assured him.

An uncomfortable little thought had wedged itself into her mind. There was always an equipage of some sort waiting for her; Murray's carriage-bill rolled in each month as regularly as his laundry-bill; but father and mother, the last few years, went always on foot. Was this waiting on the bread-line such a joke, perhaps, after all?

It was a silent ride to the hotel. Father was evidently miles away from them, locked in a last frenzied struggle with the speech. Jean and Murray were lost in bitter dreams of the paradise they had lost. The last dreg of unkindness seemed added to Jean's cup when she surveyed herself in the dressing-room. She had never looked so pretty. "And only those old fogies to see me," she mourned.

The unworthy thought vanished when she saw the light in father's face as she came out into the corridor. All that was best in Jean leaped to meet that look. What did one silly little dance matter anyway? What difference did it make if Harold never spoke to her again, when she had the power to bring such love and pride into father's eyes? In a passion of remorseful tenderness she smiled and dimpled her winsomest as father's friends bent courtly silver heads over her hand and paid her old-fashioned compliments. Even Murray's glumness melted before the touching pride in father's voice as he introduced "my little girl" and "my boy."

Father himself seemed miraculously changed from the quiet figure they had always known. The grim shadow of the speech had evidently lifted, for a few moments at least. He sparkled suddenly with boyish enthusiasm and eager good-fellowship. It was astonishing to see these elderly magnates clapping him on the shoulder, calling him Rolly, bringing up reminiscences of a dashing past which made father's children open their eyes. Was it possible that father had not always been sixty, and merely a lovable background for very remarkable children?

It was not until they were fairly seated at the long table, resplendent in floral swords and crossed sabres, that the real meaning of the occasion came with a touch of awe to Jean. She had known of course that the Loyal Legion were officers of the Civil War. All the children had been brought up on father's war stories. The twins still voraciously demantled them; but she and Murray had for some time past felt that the war was a very remote and insignificant topic indeed before the burning issues of college and social life which loomed colossal upon the horizon. They had tactfully concealed this point of view from father. He never knew that when he began, "Just before the battle of Nashville, when we were stationed -," she or Murray would signal silently, "It's your turn this time to listen," and slip from the room.

But somehow father's reminiscences had abruptly ceased - also the invitations to the open banquets that he had wistfully tendered them from time to time. They had always been too busy to go. To-

night, this assemblage of white-haired, straight-backed officers - scarred and crippled, some of them - made startingly vivid the Great Conflict, and dwarfed to pitiful insignificance her foolish, trivial little round of pleasures. Why, these men had done great things - offered their lives that the flag against the wall might still be theirs. And she and Murray had felt it a condescension to give up an evening to them!

She slipped her hand into father's underneath the table. Father's fingers closed about it convulsively, in a desperate appeal very different from their usual comforting strength. He met her startled glance with a brave attempt at a smile, but there was no doubt that father was again in a "blue funk." Jean herself felt a sudden tremor of fear. It was all very well to have laughed about the speech in the safe shelter of home; before this august gathering it took on new and hideous proportions. She felt a sudden passionate desire to throw her arms around father before them all, to cry out to them how dear and splendid he was, even if he could not make speeches.

She could see that Murray was sharing her fears.

"I wish I'd gone over it with you, father," he said remorsefully; "I could have helped you perhaps - and then I could have prompted you if you got stuck!"

The speaking began. One glib-voiced orator after another got up, rolled out polished, graceful sentences, sat down. Jean hated them all with fierce intensity. And now the terrible moment had come. It was father's turn.

"We have among us to-night," the toast-master was saying, "one known to you all as the bravest of soldiers, the most efficient of officers, the best of comrades. No one present has seen more active or unusual service than Captain Henderson. Unfortunately his modesty equals his valor, and we have never been able to persuade him to relate at our banquets any of his experiences. To-night, however, as he is the only officer here who was present at the storming of Fort Blakely, he has relented and promised to make us -"

"Not a speech!" father implored wretchedly. He had been listening to these encomiums in the frankest misery. "You know you promised I needn't make a speech - just talk."

"I stand corrected," apologized the toast-master, amid laughter. "Captain Henderson is not going to speak to us - he is merely going to talk to himself - about the storming of Fort Blakely."

Father did not attempt to rise. He leaned forward a little, and in a very low voice, with his eyes fixed upon his plate, began to speak. Murray's knuckles whitened between his straining fingers; beneath the table Jean clutched father's coat in a convulsive grasp.

"This is the first speech I have ever made," said father simply - "and the last. I am sure you already understand why. But if you want to know about Fort Blakely, - why, I was there, - and this is what happened."

He went on huskily, with an occasional falter or clearing of his throat, to describe the lay of the country, the arrangement of the troops, the importance of the assault. Jean, listening in an agony of pity and tenderness, swept the table with defiant, hostile glances. If they dared to be laughing at father! If they dared to notice how his dear hand shook as he lifted a glass of water to his lips! Something in the kindly, intent faces reassured her, lifted that intolerable ache of impotent sympathy. Why, they loved father - these men! It wouldn't make any difference what his speech was like - they would understand.

Perhaps father, too, dimly felt this as he went on. His voice grew clearer, his look less haggard. His head was up and he was speaking, still very quietly, but so that all the room could hear, when he brought them to the beginning of the charge -

And then one could see that father completely forgot his speech; forgot his circle of motionless listeners; he was a boy of twenty, riding headlong into a horror of blood and fire and almost certain death, holding in his young hand the responsibility of a hundred lives and the welfare of a nation. This was no "Speech" indeed, but a flaming page torn from history.

They were very silent for a moment when he ended - then the room broke into a thunder of applause. There could be no doubt as to the success of father's speech. The toast-master had to fight for silence.

"There are a few words I should like to add to Captain Henderson's graphic account," he said. "I am sorry to state that he has not been wholly accurate in some details. He entirely neglected to mention that he led that famous charge himself, was the first man over the parapet, and was promoted in consequence for conspicuous gallantry on the field of action."

How they did cheer father then! There were tears in Jean's eyes, and Murray was openly swelling with pride like a young turkey-cock. Father himself looked abjectly miserable, as if he had been caught red-handed in a crime.

At the close of the evening they stood and, in accordance with the beautiful old custom, joined hands in a circle and sang "Auld Lang Syne." It held a heart-breaking significance for that gray-haired band.

It was far from a silent ride homeward. Father was inclined to treat humorously both his earlier fears and his success, but his children would have none of this.

"It was a bully speech, father - a wonderful speech," Murray told him earnestly for the tenth time. "And me with the nerve to think I could have helped you with it! And, father, why didn't you tell us those things about yourself? You always just talked about the regiment! I just burst with pride - those things they said about you -"

Father, visibly embarrassed, protested that everyone was like that in the war; but the eager young voice swept on.

"And, father, I can join next year, can't I? You told me I could when I was twenty-one - I want to belong - and go to those meetings with you.

"Why, my boy!" said father; and to Murray's astonishment turned his back upon him and looked steadfastly out of the car-window. "I've dreamed of that since you were a little shaver. The first hour they put you in my arms I began planning -" Father's voice broke and he was silent.

Jean was silent, too, studying with wide-eyed intentness a topsy-turvy world. One short evening had swept father from the obscure niche he had occupied by virtue of being Murray's and her parent into a figure suddenly towering, magnificent. And it was not wholly because of splendid charges and parapets stormed that she saw with new vision: there was the quiet heroism of father's daily life, its selflessness, its constant thought for others, its burdens so gallantly and cheerily borne. As they went up the steps, she flung her arms around him in a storm of emotion.

"It's nothing," she choked at father's alarmed insistence. "I was just thinking, what if anything had happened to you in that dreadful war - and I couldn't have had you for my father!"

** Wood. J.F., 1918. A Parable for Fathers: A Loyal Daughter's Story of a Loyal Legion Man (aka, A Parable for Fathers). *Atlantic Monthly*, February 22, 1918.

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