

# The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met

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The most unforgettable character I've met was my stepfather. In general stepfathers aren't very popular with their stepchildren, but he was an exception in this respect as he was in so many others.

I was eleven and my brother thirteen when G. J. married Mother. He had insured himself of a cordial reception from us previously by taking us to football games, the circus, the Zoo in Cincinnati, Wyandotte cave, up the Ohio on a steamboat, and to various other points of interest. My Mother never accompanied us on these trips. As I look back on it, I think she was applying the acid test to a bachelor, but he came through uncorroded.

My brother and I were mercenary rats. We could see that the annexation of a stepfather was going to improve the family fortunes enormously. I was dazzled by the fact that he gave me a microscope and one hundred pennies for my birthday, and my brother Bob confided to me that he thought a stepfather might be able to buy us bicycles. Added to that was the fact that he was such a genial person and so much fun to have around. We tried to pump Mother to find out what she was going to do and were relieved when she said that she would be glad to have a husband if we were willing to have a stepfather. She lectured to us about our duties, but her talk went in one ear and out the other.

When G. J. first assumed his role as stepfather, he presented Bob and me with a radio for our bedrooms. I realize now that he did so because the only radio we

had was in the living room and he didn't care for our taste in radio programs which included Buck Rogers, The Lone Ranger and Fu Manchu, but at the time we didn't see through him and thought he was a cross between a god and a millionaire. It was characteristic of my foxy stepfather that he managed us without ever letting us see his technique.

He was a great stickler for manners. On the hottest night he always put on a coat for dinner and expected us to do the same. Our respect for him was so great that we conformed without complaining but frequently slipped up in other ways. One night my brother sat down to dinner with a girl's green beanie on his head. My mother who is absent minded didn't notice it, but nothing escaped G. J. With his usual courtliness he excused himself, left the table, and came back wearing one of Mother's turbans, edged with pink and blue plumes. Nothing was said, but Mother caught on, excused herself for a moment, and came back wearing G. J.'s homburg. Still nothing was said. I got up, imitating G. J. as closely as I could, and came back wearing a feminine off-the-face job in pink grosgrain. We ate in silence until the cook opened the swinging door into the dining room and gasped. She threw her apron over her head and muttered, "Craziest fambly ah evah worked fo'." Bob never wore a hat to dinner again.

Dinner always was fun with G. J. at the table. He taught us never to hit him up for anything before dinner and

explained that he felt more generous on a full stomach than an empty one. It became a rule that we were not to discuss problems or tell disagreeable occurrences during the dinner hour, but to make it a pleasant family occasion. He saw eye to eye with Bob and me about food. To our joy and delight he hated green vegetables. We had been brought up on spinach and carrots. While we didn't particularly like them, we had learned not to question Mother's judgement in such things. She always would put the blame on Dr. Segar whose word had been law in our household as long as we could remember. G. J. just didn't know about Dr. Segar. The first night the spinach ring with diced carrots in the middle went around the table, he politely took a spoonful but didn't eat it. Mother noticed it at once and asked him to tell her what vegetables he liked.

"Noodles," said G. J. cheerfully.

"Noodles isn't a vegetable," said Mother.

"Well, then, spuds, and beans in the can."

"But Gilbert, I mean green vegetables," said mother, "the kind with vitamins in them."

"My dear," he said solemnly, "I don't like any of them. I don't know how they make them so nawsty, and I take my vitamins in a pill."

Bob and I went into a fit of the giggles as liberation from spinach came into sight. Then the dessert was served. It was something wholesome with fruit in it and G. J. looked at it suspiciously.

"Can't we have pie?" he asked plaintively.

"We had pie last night, mother said firmly. "You can't eat pie every night."

"You never tried me, my dear," he observed. "I eat pie every noon for lunch."

"Not from that awful pie wagon that comes around the factory?" exclaimed Mother.

"I can see that you don't understand pie," lectured G. J. "You see, some pie is better than other pie, but there is no such thing as bad pie."

After that we had fewer green vegetables and more pie for dinner, and G. J.'s prestige rose higher in our estimation. He was more powerful than Dr. Segar.

Thrift was one of my stepfather's outstanding traits. While generous enough with other people he never spent a nickel on himself unless it was strictly unavoidable. He bought his stocks and bonds from Thomas Sheerin, but his shirts and socks from Sablosky's. He still had the same bedroom slippers and bathing suit he had in college a good thirty-five years ago. Mother had been married to him a year before she found out that the studs in his dress shirt came from the five and ten cent store. She had a fit, of course, but he was urbane and undisturbed.

"My dear, if it took you a year to find out where I buy my studs, how do you expect the public to know?"

He wore his shirts until they fell into a fine powder, and all of his ties were antiques. The first Father's Day we spent with him we decided to fix him up with some new clothes. We bought shirts and ties, slippers and a bathrobe. When he unwrapped the packages he was greatly pleased. He looked at us with twinkling brown eyes and said, "I say, old tops, being a father isn't half as repulsive as it looks."

He carefully put the new clothes away in a drawer and they never would have been seen again except for a certain incident. One night my brother noticed that G. J.'s shirt was taking leave of his collar band.

"Where are those new shirts we bought for you?"

"I'm saving them for an occasion."

"Come on, Dave, let's tear off his shirt," cried Bob.

My stepfather would have put up a battle but he had a little difficulty with his heart. He clamped his hand over the offending ticker and said, "Boys! My heart, my heart!"

"Take it easy, G. J.," said Bob. "A new shirt won't hurt your heart a bit."

With that we ripped off his ragged shirt and left him sitting on the davenport in his under-shirt. I chased upstairs and brought down some of the Father's Day gifts and we dressed him while he laughed until the tears came into his eyes.

On the days when I played football at Park School, my stepfather always came out to watch. He would sit on the bleachers chatting with the other fathers and have a whale of a good time as usual. He loved people, knew everybody, and talked a blue streak. Nobody could get a word in edgewise while G. J. was around. One of the funniest stories that still circulates about my stepfather harks back to a time years before I knew him. He was walking down the street with Meredith Nicholson and James Whitcomb Riley. G. J. was doing all the talking as usual regardless of the fame of his companions. When he turned into the University Club and left them, Mr. Riley said reflectively to Mr. Nicholson,

"Reticent chap, isn't he?"

Although my stepfather had built up a successful business of his own, he hated work and was a very indolent person. He often referred to the business man as the lowest type of animal life. He would have preferred to be a doctor or a teacher like his famous father before him, but after his graduation from Amherst he felt that

he had to make money instead of waiting to learn a profession. This he did by saving every nickel and hiring smart people to work for him while he enjoyed himself as much as possible. He was never irresponsible, always there when you needed him, but was a hedonist at heart and a great party hound.

Every now and then he would get an attack of civic conscience and accept some office to promote the community's culture. Once he was president of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra which was a big joke in our house because we knew his taste in music ran to bagpipes. He had a fine collection of records by the Perth and District prize pipe band, and once confided to me that the world would have been a better place to live in if Beethoven, Brahms and Bach had never been born. Nevertheless, we all went to the symphony concerts regularly, Bob and I wearing our blue serge suits and starched white shirts. G. J. was happy if the orchestra played Carmen or the Nutcracker suite, but snoozed peacefully through Bach's Brandenburg Concerto. Bob and I admired his independence tremendously. Mother would have pinched us if we had slept through Bach.

Five years ago my stepfather's heart trouble caught up with him. We had years of happiness with him and only one hour of horror. He died talking a blue streak, well aware of what was happening, and telling us all what to do. It was a shattering shock for our family, but the best way for G. J. to go. He would have made a rotten invalid. Although he was a unique person who never can be replaced, he is not the type you remember with grief, but with pleasure. When his name comes up in any group, people begin to smile. Each one has a funny story to tell, a typical saying to repeat. He still makes

people laugh. We think of him as alive and quote his opinions which influences us as much as they ever did.

When I came back from France I did not want to go back to college. I wanted to go to work. But to save my life I

couldn't get away from the whimsical countenance of my stepfather. I could see him look me up and down with bristling eyebrows lifted, and hear him say in his dry, droll manner,

"Dave, my son, you have a strong back but a weak mind."

## Three Moods From Childhood

EDNA HINTON

*(Honorable Mention, Butler Literary Contest, Poetry Division)*

1.

It's like spring freshets laughing at the feet  
Which wince at winter's last remaining chill  
In streams she used to brave too soon; and still  
It's like the pounding of the summer heat  
Which is forecast in warm but heavy beat  
Through leaves not large enough just yet to fill  
The speckled shade. It's like the distant trill  
Of birds. It's coaxing, gentle, hushed, and sweet,  
But bubbles, wells and surges up inside  
Until it can't be stopped. She has to burst  
With gaiety, or run up hills, confide  
In nature as she always did since first  
She can remember. There were times she would  
Just look straight up and laugh—she felt so good.

2.

The keen eyes of the mist might have beheld  
A young girl sitting tensely on the crest  
Of Fern Hill, in the dusk. Her stubborn chest  
Thrust stiffly at attention, lips compelled  
Into a line and fists tight clenched rebelled  
To hear that voice which sought so to divest  
Her of her freedom, or to end her quest  
Of pleasure when the day's best moments welled  
Around her. Wont — Won't — W-O-N-'-T screamed through  
Her body as she ran now, hoping that  
The whistling wind would hush her mother's voice  
That still called in persistent anguish, true  
And clear — persistent — forceful — till she sat  
Exhausted, angry, scared, — to make her choice.

3.

She lay upon the quilted spread, and poked  
the little patterns absently, scarce seeing  
what they were because they blurred like kittens