

## A PLACE FOR THE ANGEL

"Remember, set a place for the angel" was a silly reminder as he helped Ida with preparations for Christmas dinner that day in 1922. No dinner table was set in their parsonage that didn't include the extra place in contemplation that it might be needed, and it often was. The 'angel' usually appeared as a member of their church who 'happened to be' in the neighborhood, but now and then would come a stranger down on his luck. Judgment was God's work, in the eyes of Ida and Byrd Payton, and they welcomed any who came to their door.

Wealth can be measured in a variety of ways. A preacher and his family on those prairies of Eastern Colorado were rich not in dollars or real property, but in the love and largesse of the communities and congregations they served. These were farming and ranching towns, so there was always a bounty of food in the Payton household to share with their dozen or more guests at Christmas.

And so he set out eighteen plates, three for his small family, and fourteen for the invited mélange of an elderly widow, a childless middle aged couple, hired men from the farms, and a young school teacher far from home. The eighteenth place, for the angel, was inconspicuous at a corner of the crowded table, not so likely to be taken today because they had already invited their regular 'angels'.

The Reverend Julius Byrd Payton (known by many as "J.B.") offered his annual Christmas blessing, a rousing, glorious, Methodist production. Then, after a momentary clash of elbows and pottery, Ida laughed and delivered her own belated proclamation that all dishes should be passed to the left. The din ebbed to murmurs of 'please', 'thank you' and 'oh my' as the turkey and bowl after bowl of fixings worked their way around the table.

"Now who might that be?!" exclaimed Ida. The knock didn't come from the wide oak front door this time, but rattled the screen on the back porch. Geraldine, her daughter of eight and self-appointed family receptionist, sprung noisily through the kitchen, through the aromas and warmth still radiating from the iron cook stove, and through the open back door to the screened porch. Her dad followed in steady but less strenuous pursuit.

A big Scotsman, he was, judging from the red beard and

his "Aye, lass!" greeting. His burly arm rested on a crooked staff, while at his feet the collie shyly wagged his tail. "Would you mind if we tarried a bit? Shep and I don't mean to be no bother, lass, but we've been on the road awhile, and we're bone weary."

"Can't he come in, Daddy? Please?"

The brief pause, as always when a stranger came to Payton's door, was to allow debate between two of his prominent virtues, common sense and Christian charity. It was a routine polemic which the Christians perpetually won, but never by default.

"Name's McKinley, sir. Jebediah. Jeb, to my friends."

"Byrd Payton," he replied, opening the door in invitation. "Let your coat and sack and your stick rest on the porch. Jerri, maybe you'll fix up a bowl for Shep, while I introduce Jeb around."

The Reverend led the Scot to the festive table and, with a hand on his shoulder, introduced him around to everyone seated, ending with "our daughter, Geraldine, who you've met" and who had just reclaimed her chair next to the empty one. "It seems we've been expecting you for our Christmas dinner, Jeb. Won't you join us?". Ida tittered a bit in her own manifestation of the Christians vs. common sense debate, then smiled and said "Oh, yes! Mr. McKinley, please do. We've more than enough!"

The conversation was varied and pleasant and they learned that McKinley had tended sheep in Wyoming until a few weeks ago when his charges had been auctioned to settle the estate of his late employer. Being near sixty and down a bit in the back, it seemed to him a good time to migrate to a more generous climate. He'd already noticed improvement as he and Shep ambled on foot through Colorado, but he was thinking of something still further south.

Jeb's Scottish burr was mixed with the rough language of the high plains, which he consciously toned down when he came to realize his hosts were a preacher and a temperance worker. Even then, he let slip "it's looking like one 'ell of a winter up there", but offered "sorry, ma'am" in respect to Ida. Jerri was enthralled.

Shep, meanwhile, had found his way to a place at the feet

of his master, next to Jerri. No one at the table acknowledged her surreptitious feeding of the dog, but she neither deceived nor displeased anyone in doing it.

It was pie time at the end of the feast when the peace was invaded by the Bell telephone in the passageway to the kitchen. Two short rings and a long, their code on the party line. Jerri was quick to answer the phone.

"It's Mr. Iverson, Daddy. It's about Juney." June Iverson was Jerri's friend and third grade classmate. The Iversons weren't Methodist, but the families had developed a friendship through their daughters.

"She's been up all night, J.B., and we're not sure what to do. The Doc's gone to visit relatives and won't be back for a couple weeks. I'm sure sorry to be bothering you on Christmas, but...."

"It's all right, Carl, we've finished our dinner. Maybe I could run out....we'll be there as soon as we can." J.B. Payton's touring car was still one of the few automobiles in town, but a necessity for a preacher whose flock was flung over the nearly 2,000 square miles of Kit Carson county.

Byrd apologized to his guests and explained his mission to Ida. June had been suffering from a chest cold, but overnight she had developed a fever, and now she seemed to be burning up.

The reverend said "I'll take you along, Jerri. You'll help me with the gates."

Jeb spoke up. "Perhaps I can be 've some help, Rev'rnd. I've a little experience."

"Well, come along then, both of you."

Jerri and Shep rode in the back, now fast friends, as the automobile bounced and lurched over the rough roads. J.B. Payton was a gentle soul, but his demeanor as a motorist in those jaunty days was to attack the road. He liked to create new ruts, not bog down in the old. Snow drifts were to break through, not go around.

Before the invention of cattle guards, time could be saved if there was someone along to help with the gates; otherwise, the driver had to alight, open the gate, climb in the car, drive it through, get out, close the gate, get back in, and continue for perhaps only another mile to do it all again. The handling of the cumbersome barbed wire gates on that

trip fell thankfully to Jeb who had the burly physique to make it easy work. The route to the Iverson's home place required the negotiation of four gates, and having Jeb along saved them several minutes off the nine mile trip that usually took more than half an hour.

The scene at the Iverson's was of Christmas, but the mood was sedate. The air was fragrant with pine, a few wrappings still scattered about the tree. Ellen Iverson had managed to prepare a Christmas dinner, but Carl and their three sons of 15, 17 and 20 had eaten of it sparsely and at different times during the afternoon. June slept, breathing heavily and ineffectively, in the Iverson's big downstairs bedroom, where she could be looked after. The house was warm, almost too warm, because no one was sure what else could be done. The boys found chores around their big dairy farm to keep them busy. Carl and Carl Jr. went to the barn to smoke because they didn't want to bother June with it.

When the car rattled and bounded into the yard Carl and Ellen were there to greet them. Jeb was introduced and they all went inside. J.B. went to June's bedside, heard her rasping breath and felt her fevered forehead. He wasn't trained in medicine but his job brought him to more sick beds than any profession next to doctor or nurse. Jeb watched from the door, but kept a distance appropriate for a stranger. Jerri lingered at Jeb's side, in her own private terror.

J.B. came back to the front room and smiled to Carl and Ellen. "Pneumonia," he said, not saying but knowing she was near death, and that the Iversons knew it. Pneumonia, in those days before the development of sulphur and then the miracle of penicillin, was an illness that too often brought a slow and difficult death, effectively smothering its victim.

"We'll need to pray," he said. They all reflected as Byrd said the words of prayer, and offered a quiet "amen" in conclusion.

Jeb's eyes brightened. "Remember, Rev'rnd, I told you I've a bit of experience" he said. Byrd had thought the experience Jeb cited earlier was in opening gates.

"Turn of the century my dear mother had a spate with pneumonia. No doctor about. Hotter'n hell she was...sorry, Rev...do you have bran in your granary, Mr. Iverson?" Jeb continued, "Missus, we'll need your empty flour sacks!"

Recognition dawned in Byrd's eyes, and he explained to the couple what Jeb and he were thinking. "It will take some

time, but it's worth the try", he said. "I'll need your telephone to call Ida." Ida said the guests had stayed to help her clean up, but most had left.

"We need you here, Ida. Pack a bag for the three of us. Jeb and I will come for you in an hour". Then to Jerri, "You stay and help Ellen find flour sacks."

It was after six that evening when the tin lizzie bounced back into the yard. The women commenced to cut and sew the flour sacks into smaller bags, about six by ten inches. The men brought bran from the dairy barn and helped pack it tightly into the sacks. The ladies stitched the bags closed, laid them out on baking sheets, and put them in the oven. The bran formed a density that would heat consistently and would hold warmth for a generous time.

The bundles were removed from the oven just as they took on a toasty aroma and before they became too warm to handle. Ellen packed the warm bags over June's chest. Her breathing eased.

It would be necessary to change the packs regularly throughout the day and night, so the couples agreed to take shifts. The Iversons, being dairy farmers, were already accustomed to rising early in the morning, so it was decided they would rest first. There was an extra room upstairs for Ida and Byrd to share with their daughter. Jeb was shown a place in a back room where he could put out his bedroll.

Everyone was on hand for the first changing of the packs, and the cool ones were returned to the oven. By 9:00 p.m. Jerri was asleep in the Payton's room, the Iversons and their boys had retired, and Jeb had enjoyed a bath and was nestled down with Shep in his first warm sleeping place in weeks. Ida and Byrd had a little time to chat and read, but mostly they spent their first shift changing and warming the bran sacks, and keeping June comfortable.

During the night the nursing shift changed, but Jerri and Jeb slept undisturbed until about 7:00 as the morning sun peered into their sleeping places. They wandered at the same time to the kitchen which served as the center of operations for the family and farm. Mrs. Iverson was visibly more cheerful that morning, and Carl was relaxed and enjoying his coffee. The boys were busy as usual with chores, the milking completed more than two hours earlier.

Jerri and Jeb found June resting still more comfortably, but yet not breathing easily. Jeb said she would take some lookin' after but he thought she'd be fine one day soon.

After a typical farmer's breakfast of eggs and bacon, and as Jerri petted Shep, Jeb donned his winter coat and retrieved his sack and his staff. Jerri walked them to the first gate, and they were off, warmed, fed and invigorated in their quest for a benevolent climate. "Merry Christmas, Lass," he turned and waved again from a distance. Shep ran half way back to the gate, barked twice, and rejoined his master as they vanished around the bend in the road.

The Paytons stayed with the Iversons all week, taking their regular turn as the treatment continued. J.B. drove back and forth from town for his regular duties, to write his sermon, and to conduct Sunday services. Jerri was out of school for Christmas vacation and delighting in the experience of a dairy farm, getting under foot while the boys did their chores, and generally being an even bigger pest than their little sister. The boys taught Jerri to ride, and allowed her to come along as they checked the fences together on horseback. These were working excursions, but the youngsters always came back laughing and hungry.

June improved daily, but some days' progress seemed terribly slow, and yes, she did take some lookin' after.

On New Year's day, Jerri Payton rose with the sun and, for the first time in better than a week, so did little June. The girls played in the kitchen as if she had never been ill; a noisy game of tag that came so close to the hot stove that Mrs. Iverson scolded them loudly. "Heavens, you girls! You'll be burned!"

Carl and the boys had finished their morning chores, and were at the back porch. Ida and Byrd were just drawing into wakefulness, when they heard the commotion and scolding, and hurried down to find Carl, Jr. hugging his little sister, the rest of the Iversons laughing merrily and dancing around the kitchen.

Ida and Ellen made breakfast as June, Jerri and the men found their usual places at the table. Mrs. Iverson, without even a thought, set out ten plates that morning: six for her brood, three for the Paytons, and a place for the angel.

*This story is based on some of mom's childhood experiences. It's true that our grandparents always set a 'place for the angel' and that it was often taken. It's also true grandma and grandpa helped save the little girl's life by using the bran-filled bags. The Scotsman is entirely my invention. -1997*