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"Puddin' and Pie"

BY DeFORBES

I stood outside and watched them as they pranced before the small barred window, little children singing a twisted version of an innocent nursery rhyme. I had sent them away several times before, but they seemed to be fascinated even by the very dirt on which the jail stood. There they played their games of mumblypeg,

*Sliced up Mae and made her die.
Tomorrow's the day he has to pay.*



little girls brought their corncob dolls—and they sang:

*“Georgie Porgie, Puddin’ and Pie
Sliced up Mae and made her die.
Tomorrow’s the day he has to
pay—
Poor Georgie Porgie can’t run
away.”*

Once again I sent them off. As the childish prattle echoed up and down the heat-laden twilight streets a pair of soft, pudgy hands clutched the lowest visible part of the barred window. The hands themselves were obscene—fat and soiled, yet white—like the underbody of an eel. To me they represented untold agony, expressing the torment within the creature who owned them. Torment that could never hope to be realized, much less expressed.

Murder had been committed, the trial held, and the verdict delivered. There was nothing the jury could do but find him guilty. But it was obvious to all that he wasn’t responsible, that he had no idea of the enormity of what he had done. When I protested this they told me that their laws provided no alternative. “You folks back East,” the Sheriff said, “You got places to put ones like George here. Out here there’s nothin’—just the end of a rope.” I have vowed that I shall try and change this situation. But, as in the way of all reform, it will be too late for Georgie and his mother. Now it was time for me, as a servant of

God, to try and bring some sort of peace to that poor body with the empty mind. It was the most difficult task I had ever faced in my long years of service. I knew in my heart that I would fail, but I had to go in—to try again.

The thing that was called George Finley hunched in the darkest corner of the sweltering cell. It resembled, at first, a massive pink spider clad in overalls. As I approached there was movement and a head emerged from the shapeless mass. The eyes were blank and the mouth moved, drooling slightly. The hair was sparse and the pink scalp made me think of hurt, new-healing flesh. The wet mouth stretched and I knew he was smiling. Georgie was glad to see me—a fact which made it all the harder. I did not know how to help him die tomorrow.

“Howdy, Mr. Ryson. Did you come to play with me? I know a new game.” The voice was a man’s, as was the grotesque body—but the thoughts were perpetually child-like. Each day I came he urged me to play some game or another that bloomed in the arid soil of his idiot brain.

“No games today, Georgie.” I sat on the stool by the bed. “How do you feel?”

“All right, I guess. I don’t like it much here though. Ma will be comin’ soon to take me home, won’t she?” The bass voice quivered in childish concern.

"Very soon, Georgie, very soon," I soothed him. Then hoping to divert his simple thoughts I asked, "What have you been doing all day, Georgie?"

"Just sittin' here listenin'. I could hear them out there singin'. It's such a pretty song. Why can't I go out and play with them?"

It was a pretty song! Father in Heaven! I wondered as I sat there and watched him how he had managed to live so long. Only because his mother was always with him from the very beginning. Except for that one day. She was his friend, his play-mate and his protector. And one day she left him alone for just a little while. She went to a seamstress for a new dress. Now Mrs. Finley would wear that dress—at her son's hanging.

The first name I heard, I think, when I came to Dawsonville was that of Mrs. Finley, the doctor's wife. "She's a saint," they told me. I felt that they were right. Georgie was her cross—and the load was heavy. But if she were a saint and Georgie was the fruit of their union—did that make Doc the devil?

I sat in the abysmal cell and tried to find words to tell Georgie that God loved him, regardless of what he'd done. As I fumbled with the seemingly unsolvable problem I heard the corridor door open and she appeared, her black-gloved hands welded in unspoken supplication.

"Georgie," she said and he wiggled like the whelp of some unspeakable animal. "Georgie, are you all right? How do you do, Reverend?"

"Ma," he cried. She went swiftly to him, her fingers smoothing the wrinkled clothing. She searched the faded blue eyes anxiously.

"Ma, I want to go home. I don't want to stay here anymore. I'm tired of playing jail. Let's go home and play something else. Can't we, Ma? Please."

She turned towards me and the anguish in her eyes was such that I had to leave. I, whose purpose in life is to give solace, had nothing to offer this woman in her hour of need. They sat there together—mother and son—saint and sacrifice—stone and sand.

Sheriff Collins was reading wanted circulars at his desk. "Howdy, Reverend. Converted Georgie yet?" The remark was intended to be humorous, but the Sheriff's eyes were not laughing. I read in them the puzzled anger of a man who has a job to do, but has not the will to do it. George Finley had been the object of derision all his life—but no one wanted to kill him—in spite of the crime he had committed.

"Has Doc Finley been around yet?" I asked. Doc Finley had disappeared into the depths of his office the day of the murder and had remained there, not even coming out to eat as far as we could

tell. The scorn of the whole town was cast upon him. His only child convicted of murder—and now would die—and his father had not even come to say good-bye. He had been a taciturn man, the Doctor, a hard man and not really well-liked, but he had done his job well and was respected, as suited his position, until now.

Of course, there had been rumors about him and Mae Miller. Mae Miller, who had been carved up like a Christmas turkey by her employer's idiot son. Rumors about Mae Miller—and the others before her, but the whispers had never seemed justified. The girls had just quit working and left town never to be heard of again. Mae Miller wasn't as lucky as her predecessors. Mae hadn't been able to leave and begin again—Mae, with her pretty face and her starched white nurse's uniform.

No one knew the motive for Georgie's horrible crime—but then no one knows what battles occur between a child's mind and a man's body. He had done it—there was no doubt about that. He had stood there with the bleeding scalpel, pleased beyond reason with his hideous accomplishment. "That was fun, wasn't it, Mae? Let's do it again." He had protested when the mangled body didn't respond—he had protested when they had taken the knife from him. A razor-sharp blade stolen from his father's instrument bag. As I said, there

was nothing the jury could do but find him guilty. And now there was nothing we could do but carry out the dreadful ritual.

I should have gone back to the parish house—I had a sermon to compose—but since the time was so near I somehow couldn't tear myself away from the proximity of the jail. Like the children who had returned again to sing their little song . . . "*Georgie Porgie, Puddin' and Pie* . . ." The lure was irresistible—I could only pray that my reason for remaining was not morbid curiosity, too.

Mrs. Finley came into the office, weeping silently. She was a big woman, typical of those who first came to this pioneer country. Doc, his wife and child showed up in Dawsonville when Georgie was a baby. It was before my time there, but they tell me Doc was a gay blade with a handsome wife. Time had aged them and marked them with sober faces and sad eyes. But time had passed Georgie by—he would never be more than that baby. I couldn't find a soul to whom they had complained. So we didn't know how they felt toward George or toward each other. We could only guess of the devotion—and watch George's mother's hands. They were the gauge to her feelings—sometimes the only gauge. She was strong and silent for the most part, though she seemed to talk often enough with Georgie. Many's the time I had

seen them together, the big woman holding the big child's hand as they ventured forth into the surrounding countryside on some mysterious errand of their own.

Why, I wondered, hadn't Doc Finley come forth to comfort her? What sort of man could fail his family at a time like this? I didn't know Doc well, but then no one did. And he never attended my services. I sighed and looked through the window to the sky for some sign of help. But all I saw was the scaffold looming black and tall against the vivid sunset.

Perhaps, I thought, that was something I could do. I set out for Doc's office through the black desert heat. There was no light in the small building, but I pounded on the door. There was no answer.

"Doctor Finley," I called, "this is Reverend Ryson. May I please come in?" A stray breeze lifted a scrap of paper in reply.

I pleaded with him then. I told him in the best words I could choose how his family needed him. But words were not enough and in the hot silence of the night he answered, "Get out of here. I have no family!" And so it seemed that there was nothing I could do.

We sat the night out, Mrs. Finley, the Sheriff and myself. We said very little, but towards morning she whispered, "It is, perhaps, just as well. Who would look after him when I am gone?" There seemed to be no answer.

With the sunrise she went in to Georgie, taking his breakfast. I went too—still searching for something—anything to make it easier for them. He ate happily and noisily, some of the food dribbling down his chin. His mother did not seem to care. She crooned to him and caressed his sparse fine hair. "We're going to play a new game today, Georgie," she told him, a strained smile on her bony face. "I'll tell you how it goes and we'll have a good time and when it's over—" her voice wavered, "when it's over, I'll take you home. Will you like that, Georgie?"

"Yeah, Ma. Sure. You know I always like new games. What is this one called, Ma?"

She stared at her hands a moment, then clearing her throat she began, "It's called Hanging, Georgie. Hanging. Reverend Ryson, here, he'll play, too, and the Sheriff and maybe some more of your friends will be there to play. You'd like that, wouldn't you? It won't take long and then we can go home afterwards like I promised."

"Aw right, Ma. You explain it to me so I'll know how to play. I wouldn't want to make a mistake." As I watched the two of them I knew I was not needed. I could do nothing she couldn't do. She was playing a game with her child and she was his whole world. Quietly I withdrew as she began to explain the "rules" of Hanging,

Back in the office several men sat staring at the tobacco-stained floor. Outside a false breeze stirred the dust faintly and then subsided in a hopeless fight against the inexorable desert. I joined the waiters. The door opened and more silent men entered. There were no more seats and they stood, blocking the windows, especially the one window framing the dark finger of death. We all waited . . . and soon she came.

"It's almost time, isn't it?" she asked as she wiped her reddened eyes. The Sheriff nodded. She looked around at the silent faces. Her hands trembled slightly and clutched each other. "Has anyone," her voice stumbled, "has anyone seen Doc yet?" No one replied. The answer was obvious. "It's all right," she said, "He'll come home soon." The hands were calm again as though she had forced their pose. "Georgie is ready, Sheriff . . ." you could hardly hear the last words, ". . . and so am I."

There was quite a crowd outside. An eerie, quiet crowd. I had never seen a hanging before, but I had some sort of idea that these vital, fighting people with their black and white ideas of wrong and right would feel a frightening emotion, almost of elation, at a time like this. I was wrong. They stood without a murmur, their faces stony, as he emerged. Georgie shuffled happily along between his

mother and the Sheriff, crooning the insidious nursery rhyme and greeting old acquaintances.

"Hi, Lennie. We're going to play a game. Isn't this fun? Did you come to play, too? Hello, Tex. I missed you lately. You ain't been in town for quite a spell. Hi, Slim. Don't forget you said I could ride your horse. Maybe after we play hanging, huh?" He greeted almost every one of the long row, but they could not answer. Most had never answered him in life so he didn't seem to mind or even notice as he walked in the shadow. They left her at the gallows steps and there she stood, a great rock of a woman who moved only her hands in meaningless gestures and looked upwards as the final act was about to begin. Georgie wavered and tittered in childish amusement as the rope tickled his elephantine neck. I opened my prayer book and stepped forward.

Georgie was not through, however. He called from behind the red kerchief that served as a blindfold, "Isn't this enough, Ma? I don't want to play this game anymore. I want to go home now, like you promised." There was no answer, just a muffled sob from somewhere deep within the crowd. "I been good, Ma," he tried to step forward, but the rope pulled him back. "I did just like you showed me. I played the game. But I'm tired now, I want to go home." The Sheriff's hand reached

for the trap lever, eager to shut off the childish pleading. "Come on, Ma, let's go home. You promised I could play Doctor again. That was the best game of all. You said I could operate again—like I did with Mae. You showed me just how to do it, remember, and you said I could operate again . . . on Pa. When are we going to operate on Pa?"

The Sheriff's hand moved in fatal surprise and could not be stopped. The trap door yawned.

God's words were on my lips, but I could not speak.

Above the murmur of the crowd, the snap of the neck, the thud of the body, droned the dry rasp of the mother's voice . . . "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want . . ."

