

POOR DADDY!

By K. G. Merrill

LAST EVENING when I called for my little daughter at a neighbor's home where she and another ten-year-old had been watching television, she commented, "We saw Buck Rogers. Gosh it was exciting!" Then with a certain loftiness, she went on, "Poor Daddy! You didn't have anything like that when you were young, did you?"

As she said this, for some reason a sudden swift flash of recollection — as vivid as a curtain rolling up on a brightly lit stage — brought back a childhood setting I had not envisioned in many years. This setting, laid in St. Paul, Minnesota, at the turn of the century, revealed a stark, bare box of a house, set on a desolate, treeless, windswept bluff high above the Mississippi. A mile from the nearest habitation, it was appallingly alone. Far below on the river bank was a railroad switchyard, where swarms of bums were booted off the rods daily. Upon the broad bosom of the stream itself plied steamers and barges from St. Louis and St. Joseph, which were everlastingly casting off without sundry members of their sodden, vagrant crews — men who, lost in the shambles of a shanty town bordering the tracks, had found competition

with the riff-raff from nearby logging camps too interesting to leave.

A fine place to leave an unusually handsome woman alone! Alone with four small children, during the long days while Father was on his accountant's stool in the city, the long evenings while Father was out singing with his quartet. Mother, however, immediately evolved a defensive routine. From the kitchen she could watch the path to the dirt road. The moment she saw a tramp approaching, she'd blow a whistle and all four of us would tumble into the house, slam the door and lock it. Mother would mount guard. As soon as the man knocked, she'd call: "If you're hungry, I'll set out a bit. But don't move off the path or I'll shoot . . ."

It wasn't long before the bo's put some sort of hex sign on the gate, for after a while we were seldom molested by anyone setting foot on the path. But the occasional prowlers who scrambled up the bluff and, unseen, approached the front of the house, were something else. They really frightened us. But Mother handled them pretty well by the simple expedient of answering the door with a loaded Colt 38 in her hand. They were surprisingly polite...

THE LIGHTING of the scene changed; there were evening shadows; and the whole thing became strangely contemporary. It is after supper and we are all seated around the dining room table under the golden light of an ornate hanging kerosene lamp — warm and comfortable with the indescribable sense of intimacy and security that only a circle of light, outlined against the darkness, can give. Father, as usual, is off with his quartet to add a few sorely needed dollars to his clerk's salary. Mother is reading *Oliver Twist* aloud.

(I am to hear all of Dickens' novels read before I am twelve. During that same period I am to become acquainted with *Vanity Fair* and *The Rose and the Ring*, with *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, with *The Sign of the Four* and *The Speckled Band*, with *The Last of the Mohicans*, with *Moby Dick* and a host of other stories that were a part of the birthright of a child in that era.)

In the middle of the table is a bowl of apples, and at each place a smaller bowl of popcorn which we eat with fine calculation that the last half hour may not find us rationless. Mother's place at the table looks the same as ours — with one addition. Nestling beside her plate is the loaded revolver.

Now Mother has just come to the place where Fagin is delivering young Oliver over to Bill Sykes,

and, having more than a little dramatic talent, is putting spine-tingling conviction into it:

"Take heed, Oliver, take heed," said the old man, shaking his right hand before him. "He's a rough man as thinks nothing of blood when his own is up. Whatever falls out, say nothing, and do what he bids you! Mind!"

Quivering with a pleasurable, vicarious terror, I raise my eyes to the blank, black surface of the window opposite me — and am transfixed with horror. There, nose flattened against the pane, is a face, bestial, degenerate. A blotchy purplish face with bloodshot eyes, and loose wet lips draping snagged teeth. And he's looking at me!

Too scared to scream, I just sit there staring. I see his gaze shift to my mother and his eyes widen into an unspeakable leer. But it doesn't last long. His glance follows her shapely arm downward. Suddenly his expression changes. Consternation, fear, flight, register in split-second succession — and he is gone!

I look at Mother. Her hand is idly fingering the handle of the gun, and she reads on, unperturbed.

FLICK! And the curtain was down again. My daughter's question still hung in the air.

"The Buck Rogers program?" I echoed as we fell in step. "No, darling, Daddy didn't have anything like that when he was young. . . ."

by HARRIET SMITH HAWLEY

They Never Retire

“OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE,” but old clergymen go them one better. They never really retire.

True, at about seventy, they usually step out from active parish work, but this does not mean retirement. The dedicated life and the small pension make retirement impossible for them. Hence, no minister ever becomes an armchair fossil and rarely does one become a mental case.

Businessmen, on the other hand, often go to pieces completely when the office door closes on their daily routine, for even though they may have money, they often lack a directive faith that spells the difference between making a living and living a life.

To ex-ministers, old age is just another challenge to serve; so, we find them moving out into all kinds of interesting activities.

Continued reading keeps them alert, alive to the world of ideas. They not only read, but many of them write. We see their articles in magazines and their books in libraries, for a minister's mind does not cease to function when he leaves active church connection.

Always on call, they substitute for ministers on vacation. They fill

interim terms for churches seeking a new pastor. They officiate at weddings and funerals. They speak before service groups and clubs.

Those who like the country often buy little places and go in strong for gardening, which not only keeps muscles firm but also helps to make a small pension stretch farther. They plant fruit trees and berry bushes. They grow flowers. They see God in sunrise and hear the stars singing together as darkness comes.

“Oh, he's a wonderful man,” say the neighbors of a rector emeritus I know. People of all faiths go to him in trouble. He likes to serve and now at eighty, in spite of a heart ailment, walks a mile every other day to shave an aged friend living alone and in financial stress.

A missionary of many years' service in China, who was a prisoner for two years in a Japanese concentration camp, came back to a village home willed him by a friend. A wreck physically, this ex-missionary was no wreck of spirit, however. With determination, he began to work on his lawns and garden. Before long, he was able to relate his experiences in the East to small groups. Restored to strength at seventy, he answered the call to