



Boyhood Memories

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My boyhood was a mosaic of fragmented experiences. Motherless at a little over one year old, my early memories are those of staying with an aunt (who was really a sort of 42nd cousin once removed) and uncle in a house where arguments frequently erupted,

between the uncle and other relatives. The tender and watchful care of my sister, herself just a slip of a girl, is something for which I shall always be grateful.

Preschool years were filled with violin lessons and practice two hours a day, with tutoring provided by professors at the school where my father was the janitor. I was, I admit, a little shaken when my violin teacher took me aside one day and said, "Robert, I must tell you that you will never be a great violinist; but if you study and practice faithfully, you may turn out to be a pretty fair fiddler."

Fourth grade brought me to Toledo, with six months study that led to promotion to the next level. Now to a farm with another aunt and uncle, where I spent the academic year in seventh grade, having skipped fifth and sixth grades.

Eighth grade brought me back again to Cleveland, to stay with my father, Charles (they always called him Cholly) Cook. By the time for me to enter tenth grade, we moved to Toledo, where I began a precarious career as a "chef cook and bottle washer" for my father. How the dear man ever lived through those meals, I don't know. But God was merciful to us both, and I spent the three remaining years of high school there on Toledo's East Side, living in what was then called a "light housekeeping room" — a room with a kitchen stove, a cold water sink, a bed and some cupboards. I suppose my best memories of my father date from those three years. For one thing, I noticed that he faced his own personal problems with his Lord and with the hope the Christian faith affords to the believer. Sometimes, with the unconscious cruelty of the very young, I would look at him and say, "What's the matter with you, Pop?"

Often he would sigh and say, "Oh, I guess I'm just lonesome for your mother." (Charley Cook always carried the torch for his Daisy, never remarried.) Like as not, however, he would then reach over to the bookcase nearby, pick out one of the scores of songbooks he owned, and begin to turn the pages in search of a song that fit his mood. Soon I would hear him sing, "Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me..." And then it wouldn't be long before he would look over at me while I stood at the sink washing the dishes and day, "Hallelujah, my boy, one of these days I'm going to see your mother again, and we'll walk down the golden streets of glory together!" My Father had learned how to look heavenward and conquer his blues.

My father linked his discipline of me to his commitment. I can still hear him say, "My Dear boy, it would be far easier for me to say "Yes" to you,

than to say "No". But I have to give account to God for you... I have to build your life for Him!" He never wavered in that commitment to his Lord, and to his boy.

Commitment must have been the reason, then, for what I experienced many mornings in the early hours, say five of five-thirty a.m.. I would awaken to hear my father praying. There he knelt, before the little gas heater that was used to warm the room on wintery days. "God bless my boy today, my motherless boy," he would plead softly, "Keep him from harm and sin. Lead him through the day. Help him grow up to be a man of God."

He never knew I heard him, nor that I observed him through half-closed eyes as he rose from his knees and wiped the tears from his eyes, straightened his tie, picked up his lunch pail, and went to work.

That scene, more than sixty years ago, is clearly etched in my memory. Charley Cook's motherless boy is still grateful, and, like his father, still praying.

