



## John and Family

*by V. Huntington*

The bay horse trotted down the fence row. John was riding in front of his mother, Elizabeth. He was big enough to ride by himself, but for the longer rides like this, they rode together. Hank (the bay) didn't seem to mind. John liked to hang onto the saddle horn and watch his mother's hands on the reins. He watched her wedding rings as they caught the sun. The rings were always polished. Mother and son trotted off to find Samuel. Sometimes they took him lunch or just something to drink. They saw him a field away on a tractor. They waved. John smiled as he sat high on Hank's back with Mom's arms around him. He felt like a warrior on his proud charger, crossing the fields to a glorious battle. He pretended the songs they sang were battle cries, echoing into the green distance, frightening their deadly foes. They sang songs that Elizabeth's dad had taught her when she was growing up. John's favorites were "The Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia" and "Shine on Harvest Moon." His mother sang the little maid's part and John sighed at the right spots.

Jonathan belonged to the Corrington family. He was a brave little boy with huge brown eyes with green flecks in them. He had a small mouth that smiled and giggled frequently to show his sharp white baby teeth. His brown hair was always messy, except maybe for the times when his mom or dad could catch him and comb it. They didn't know that his red cap (also his battle helmet) messed it up. It wasn't his fault! A warrior has to be protected.

His best loved possessions were a slightly used stuffed koala and the hair messer hat. Mom said that the bear, officially named Vern, was a special creature that had kept watch over her and Daddy for a long time. When Jonathan was a little older she had felt it was time for his own Vern. Dad had given him the hat the first time they had worked together, riding to Dayton in

the Peterbuilt. Of course, he worked with Mom too. They made cookies and fed Scottie, their border collie, and Hank, their bay Quarter horse. Hank and Scottie were his special friends. Hank was a very big horse, and a careful one. Every time John was around he placed his large black hooves carefully, almost daintily, and would stand very still while Mama and Jonathan brushed him and cleaned his feet.

As for his papa, he felt he was lucky. His dad seemed bigger and stronger than anybody else's. Daddy would throw him high, up and up, always catching him with his strong hands. They were rough with chewed nails and a Band-Aid or two, but they were kind, warm hands. John noticed that Mommy and Daddy held hands a lot. When they went shopping they all three held hands, fighting over who got to be in the middle.

Daddy and Jonathan went on secret expeditions, searching for hidden temples and fabulous treasures that his mother had hidden in the cookie jar.

Slowly and quietly they crept. The great bwana, his red hat, a safari helmet, rode Tantor the mighty elephant. They rode through the jungle, past the Wooden Mountains, the Fountains of Zest and the Terrible Whirlpool of Despair. At last, tired, sore from fighting cannibals, insects and alligators, when the fantastic chocolate jewels were almost won, CRASH! A mighty monster, guardian of the temple and the treasure, reared up, waving deadly fly swatters. It challenged them, Medusa snake curlers waving from its head.

"Stop! Thieves! How dare you come into my temple! The great god will drink your blood for this! You will pay with your very lives! I will sacrifice you on the holy altar myself!" Then the monster jumped on them and began (horror!) to tickle. Tantor, the huge elephant, saved bwana, tickling the flailing, roaring monster to death on the kitchen floor. Then he claimed the treasure for his master.

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So Jonathan was happy. His mother read to him about his heroes: Aslan, Lucy, Edmund and Peter from the Narnia books. His parents took turns reading pages to him in front of the stone fireplace on winter nights. Or if it was nice, outside in the porch swing Dad had built for them.

John liked to hear the sound of their voices, comforting above storms and winter's wailing. Mom would put her head on Dad's lap, and John would sit in his mother's childhood rocking chair and listen.

Sometimes he caught them kissing. Seeing him, one scooped him up and all three would share a hug and kiss, laughing.

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His favorite holidays were Halloween and Christmas. This year he and Dad dressed up in monkey suits. Dad was a fierce gorilla with sharp fangs. "At least he doesn't drool!" laughed Mommy. John was a much smaller monkey. They were terrible, ferocious, trying to scare Mommy by hulking around corners and growling, "Boo!" His mother wouldn't tell them what she would be, even when offered **three** Milky Ways. John knew she meant business after that.

Finally it was Halloween. A fairy appeared in the doorway to his parent's room. Her dark hair was bound up with a sparkling crown, straight from the dime store jewel chest. She wore a white gown that winked in the light and seemed to float around her. In her hand was a magic wand.

The larger ape smiled when he saw her. John heard him growl and threaten



to carry the fairy off.

Stepping lightly across the room she said:

"If you two nasty beasties will take me trick-or-treating with you I'll turn you into King Arthur and a daring knight."

Grunting, the two apes discussed her proposition.

"What do you think, my son, the great and terrible John?"

"I think it would be fun. Let's take her."

"Wouldn't you rather climb trees and throw bananas at the stupid fairy?"

"She's not stupid. I wanna be a knight, you can be King Arthur."

"Okay, okay, we'll take her. No beating up fairies tonight," the larger ape snorted. Taking off his mask, he became human again and smiled. "I'm just teasing John, you know I'd never hurt Mommy. I love her and you too."

"I love you too, Daddy," answered John, and gave Samuel a fierce ape hug.

Halloween, with its pumpkin guts and black cats passed, John was knighted.

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John looked forward to Thanksgiving. He and Elizabeth took down the Halloween decorations and put up little pilgrims and turkeys. John noticed that Daddy worked late more often.

"Mommy, why doesn't Daddy come in for supper with us anymore?"

His mother tensed. "He's got to get the crops in, honey. Sometimes he doesn't have time to eat until after you've gone to bed."

"I miss Daddy."

His mother looked out the window at the fields. "I do too." She hugged John.

John knew his mommy was unhappy. He wanted to help. He would ask Daddy to come to open house at school. They could all go together. At Sunday dinner he asked his father.

"I'm sorry, John. Got too much work to do."

"That's all that matters to you, isn't it?" his mother said sharply. Her eyes were ready to cry. "You don't even have time for Johnny anymore—let alone me. Why, why can't you ever put work last for once!" She sat there, staring.

"Now Elizabeth, you know it's always hard in the fall. Why can't you understand that?" His leg began to bounce.

John wished for a magic ring to put on so he could disappear. He hated to see them fight.

His father got up and went outside. John hurt for both of them. Maybe they don't love each other anymore, he thought. Did I do something? Maybe I shouldn't have asked Daddy to go! He wanted to cry.

The next day at breakfast his parents avoided each other. Usually Mom fixed eggs or oatmeal while Dad made coffee or hot chocolate. This morning she didn't have anything. John ate Fruit Loops. There was no coffee.

"I'll be late today, Johnny," his mother said. "I have a lot of work at school." She kissed him and left.

John decided to talk to Vern about his parents. The koala didn't offer any advice, just a hug. Coming in from working, dirty and tired, his father overheard John asking Vern what was wrong with his parents. Black smudges under his eyes, he entered his son's room, the hand-painted bears on the walls drawing a smile from him. John's mother had painted them there when she found out she was pregnant.

"Johnny, what's the matter? Are you upset about Lizzie and me?" he asked, picking the red cap off the floor.

John nodded. A tear rolled down his face. He missed reading time. He missed Tantor and the temple priestess. He missed the way they held hands at the table when saying grace.

His father reached down with his muscled arms, held the little Corrington. "Mommy and I are just having a few problems, that's all. I have to work really hard this time of year. Sometimes I neglect you and Mommy. But I still love you, son. Mommy and I love each other very much. . . We'll be all right." He gave him another hug. His wife had taught him the importance of touch.

The next day his father took him to lunch at the Pizza King. They both loved burritos. As they drove by his mother's school, Daddy asked John if he wanted to stop in to see her.

"Sure, Daddy. Isn't she busy though?"

"She's not busy all the time, you stinker-bug, let's go surprise her."

"Okay," Johnny grinned.

They went to the office to ask where she was. Two pairs of Osh Kosh walked to her English class. His father knocked on the door.

His mother went to the door and came out when she saw who it was.

"Hiya Mommy!" John whispered loudly.

"What are you two doing here?" she laughed, giving John a hug and looking at her husband.

"Milady," intoned John's father, sweeping off his hat and bowing, "We, the knights of the cardboard table, come to tell you of our love and devotion and our sorrow at our recent disagreement." He smiled slightly. "We love you honey. I love you and I'm sorry."

John was crushed as they all embraced.

"I'm so glad you stopped," whispered his mother, wiping a tear away. "Now get on home with you so I can attempt to teach! . . . I love you two so much. I'm sorry too."

They looked at each other.

"Come on, Daddy, we've got work to do."

"Bye doll," said his father. Two pairs of Osh Kosh skipped down the hall. John heard his mother's giggle as she went back to her class.

A few days later John noticed small red and white flowers on the table with a big envelope. He knew that Mommy liked flowers and cards. He picked dandelions for her when he could find them. The day after that, a box of candy sat on the television; the envelope with it said, "Sammy." John never bothered presents that weren't for him. His virtue paid off since his parents always shared.

He heard laughter more often behind his parents' bedroom door. Daddy shaved more often. The men of the family got hair cuts. John saw more of Renee, his aunt, since Mommy and Daddy went out more. When he found Mommy's earring in the old blue pick-up, he asked Daddy how it got there. His father got pink. Daddy said that she must have lost it when they checked on the cattle the other night. What's so funny about that, thought John; Daddy sure is grinning. So he got to see Renee. She and John were dancers together. Renee turned up their small stereo (Mommy would have a fit) and danced in the middle of the living room rug. John told Renee that he was going to marry her when he grew up.

Jonathan got up one December morning and helped his mother clean up the house. He had promised to help her while they watched cartoons. Later he would help Dad. Mommy got out her special red candles and put them into the brass candlesticks that John had polished during the "Smurfs." She ran the sweeper and he dusted. John proudly made his own bed with his "He-Man" sheets. His father's favorite, Boston cream pie, was baked. John



took out the trash and picked up his room.

After that, he put on his Osh Kosh and Lee jacket. Grabbing his red cap, he went out to help Dad.

He walked into the elevator shed. Daddy looked extra big in his work clothes, like he could do anything. John thought he looked like a bear with his shaggy face and mustache.

"Get me that screwdriver over there, will you John?" his father called. He was working on some wiring. John stepped quickly over to the box of tools and handed him one. He knew that Dad appreciated his help. He liked to work with him in the shed. The cobwebs and the grain dust made it easy to imagine that this was an evil sorcerer's castle. He and Daddy were brave men trying to cast the evil creature from power.

"Did you know that Mommy used to help me like this?" he called from the top of the saw horse he stood on to reach the wires.

"Really, was she good help?" John asked, another yellow screwdriver in his hand ready to give to Sam.

"Sure was, though she didn't know a whole lot about farming in those days. I think you're special help too. Look how many steps you saved me by handing me that screwdriver. . . Will you run to the shop and get my pocket knife? Make sure it's closed when you carry it, son."

"Okay Daddy!" answered John, as he ran to the shop as fast as he could.

He returned with the pocket knife firmly in hand. He liked to work with Daddy because he could get as dirty as Daddy was.

Through the afternoon they rode up to the hardware store for some glue and a part for the electrical box. Then they fed the cattle and returned to see if the glue had dried in the shed. Dad crouched down in front of the box to check it. John peeked over his broad shoulder.

"Do you, hand me that wire, do you think that Mom's going into town today?"

"Uh, nope."

"Well, I'm planning something special. It's our anniversary today."

"Oh, that's neat Pa."

"But don't tell her anything, okay? Don't even tell Vern about it."

They worked and wired and laughed the rest of the afternoon. When they came in, Mom was gone. There was a note on the table that said: "be back by six, don't worry, love, Liz."

"Well, it looks like she went to town after all. That gives us time to gussy up and put out the presents." So they showered. His father shaved with John's help.

"Feels like we're going out on a hot date, huh John?" he grinned.

"I guess," John answered and grinned back.

John noticed that Dad wore his wedding ring tonight. It was silver, a complement to his mother's gold.

The two of them looked good. Shaved, combed and in his good cords, Dad was handsome. John looked spiffy in his new jeans too. His mother always told them what a handsome pair they made.

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On the table was a card and small present for his father. On the fireplace was a wrapped package and tag, bright and shiny with "Jonathan" printed carefully. On the television was a long flower box and another smaller box. The room was candlelit. Red and white candles smild everywhere, flickering shadows on the ceiling. A fancy white tablecloth covered their table. Two red

candles lit it. His father had started a fire in the stone fireplace; it glowed on the rug, mixing with the candlelight. Outside the snow fell quietly, softly to the ground.

The family sat down to dinner. It was their favorites, crab meat with melted butter, homemade bread with jam, chilled shrimp with cocktail sauce, baked potatoes with sour cream dripping, and wine. For dessert they had Dad's pie. Mom put the flowers, miniature red and white roses, into a vase, but they saved the rest of the gifts for later. John thought they would never finish eating.

After supper, they opened the gifts. John got a new toy truck he'd been wanting. For Mommy there was a delicate band of gold set with diamonds and rubies. Red and white had been the colors at their wedding. She cried, smiling. She held Daddy for a time and whispered "thank you." For John's father there was a crowned figure on a horse. The soft light slid on it. The card said: "To my true gentle prince." Samuel had lost this private title, secret to the two of them. Now it had quietly been restored.

They raised their glasses, wine for the elder two, Sprite for John. His father said, "To us."

