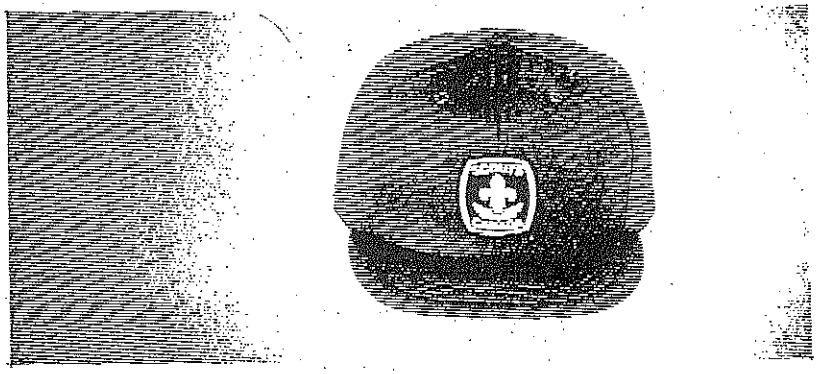
Hugh Garner

THE FATHER

Johnny and his dad have never been that close. But a trip to the Boy Scout banquet could change their relationship—once and for all.



It wasn't the boy who gave him the invitation, but the boy's mother, his wife. Somehow even a little thing like this had become a shameful chore that the boy had avoided. Over the past year or two father and son had drifted apart, so that a strange shame and embarrassment colored every event that brought them into contact.

His wife had waited until the children had gone out after supper, the boy to play baseball and his older sister to run and scream with other teenagers in the schoolyard. Then she had said, "Johnny wonders if you'll go to the Boy Scout meeting with him tomorrow night?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "Scout meeting! What do I look like?" Instead he asked, "Why, what's on there?"

"It's a father-and-son banquet," she said.

"Why didn't Johnny ask me to go?"

"You know he is—I guess he was too shy," she answered.

"Too shy! Too shy to ask his own father to go somewhere?"

"Well, I guess he was afraid you'd say no," she said.

"I'll think it over," he said grudgingly, knowing that he owed it to the boy, and also feeling that it might be a way of overcoming the barrier that had sprung up between them.

He didn't look forward to an evening spent in the company of a bunch of professional fathers, who were "real pals" to their sons. He had seen them making a nuisance of themselves, unable or unwilling to let their kids lead their own lives. They went swimming with their children, tried to umpire their ball games, and wrongly explained the displays at the museum and the animals at the zoo. He wouldn't normally mix with such men, but it was probably a big event for the boy, and it only happened once a year.

He poured himself a small drink and sat before the TV set, thinking of the coolness between him and his son and trying vainly to pinpoint its beginning. He knew that most of the time he was too preoccupied with other things to pay much heed to the boy's activities, but he had dismissed his misgivings with the thought, "He's only a twelve-year-old who wants to be left alone."

Over his drink he remembered the times he had been too harsh with the boy, and the times he had been curt and impatient. And with a feeling of angry revulsion he remembered siding with the teacher when he had been called to the school to discuss the boy's bad marks in reading. The principal had intimated that the boy's slowness might be caused by tensions in the home, but this he had vehemently denied. When the teacher had suggested keeping the boy in the same grade for a second year, he had acquiesced willingly, wanting only to get away from the place. The boy had looked up at him, bitten his lower lip, and had left the principal's office. From then on their distance one from the other was greater than ever.

On the evening of the banquet he was a little late getting home, having stopped in for a few drinks with a customer who was buying an industrial site. He ate warmed-over supper by himself, insisting all the while to his wife that there was no use eating when he was going to a banquet.

"You'd better eat," she said. "You've got to be at your best tonight."

"I'll be at my best, don't worry. I have a couple of drinks with a customer, and you're ready to shove me in an institution."

After he had bathed and shaved he put on his best suit. Though he had only contempt for scoutmasters, he was anxious to create a good impression for the sake of the boy. His suits were getting tight, as were the collars of his shirts. It was sitting at a desk all day did it, and not walking anywhere any more. At the end of the war he had been lean and tough, but now he was middle-aged, fat, with his hair thinning fast on top.

He went downstairs and waited in the living room for the boy. The food his wife had pushed on to him had destroyed the glow from the pre-dinner drinks, so he poured himself a tall one for the road. From upstairs came the sound of his wife and son having their usual spat about the boy combing his hair. Though his wife and children quarrelled often, there was no tension between them at all.

The boy came down, wearing a pair of flannels and a blazer.

"Where's your scout uniform, Johnny?" he asked.

"We don't have to wear it if we don't want to," the boy said.

"I'll bet most of the other kids'll be wearing theirs."

The little boy shrugged.

His wife said, "Leave him alone, John. The reason he isn't wearing his uniform is that he only has half of it."

He couldn't remember how the boy had been dressed on Scout Night.

"Why hasn't he got the whole thing?" he asked his wife angrily. "We're not on the welfare, are we? Surely we could spend a few dollars for a complete scout uniform."

"Yes, but after you bought him the hockey pads and the rifle last Christmas he was afraid to ask you for anything else. He has the pants, belt and shirt, and all he needs is the neckerchief—"

"Afraid to ask me! That's all I hear around this place. What's the matter with this family anyway? God knows what the neighbors must think of me."

"There's no use getting angry," his wife said. "He'll have the whole uniform before long. He doesn't really need it tonight."

"Jimmy Agnew and Don Robertson aren't going to wear their uniform," the boy said, trying to mollify him.

He wondered angrily if the scoutmaster thought he was too cheap to buy the boy a uniform. Probably he said to his assistants, "It's too bad about little Johnny Purcell, isn't it? There's a kid been

coming here for four months now and he still hasn't got a uniform." He felt a twinge of indigestion as he pictured the scoutmasters—a couple of big sissies running around in short pants playing woodsmen.

He said to his wife, "Listen, Helen, for God's sake take him downtown with you tomorrow and get the rest of the Boy Scout outfit. I don't want those goons down at the church thinking I'm too cheap to buy him one."

He expected the boy's face to light up at this, but he stood in the doorway wearing a blank expression. It was the same look the boy put on when he and his wife quarrelled, or when he had too much to drink and tried to talk to the kid man to man.

When they left the house, his daughter shouted after them, "Thank goodness we're getting rid of the men for the rest of the evening," and she and her mother laughed. The remark irritated him by pointing up the infrequency of such occasions.

As they walked down the street, he felt a warm pride as he stole glances down at the boy. Everyone said the youngster was the spit and image of himself when he was younger, and they both bore the same first name. Fatherhood was the rounding out of a life, probably what was meant in the Bible by a person having to be born again. But even as he thought these things, he knew it was only a fuzzy sentimentality brought on by what he had drunk.

The boy strode along beside him, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, even now managing to convey the distance that separated them. He wanted to get the boy into conversation, but could think of nothing to talk about that wouldn't sound wooden and contrived. He knew there must be a common plane of interest somewhere if he only knew what it was. The boy seemed content to walk along in silence, so he retreated into his own thoughts as they entered the business street that led to the church.

As they passed the schoolyard he asked the boy how the softball team was doing.

"All right. We beat the Tigers yesterday."

"What score?"

"Fifteen-eight."

"Say, that's great! Did you score any runs?"

"One, on Jimmy Agnew's two-bagger."

"Great! Did you put many guys out?"

"No."

He realized that he didn't even know what position his own son played, or even the name of the team. He thought it might be the Cardinals, but it might even be the Eskimos. He tried to picture the name on the front of the boy's sweater, but could not recall it.

"How many more games do you play?" he asked.

"Just two more in the regular schedule, one with the Eskimos tomorrow night, and one on Saturday with the Cardinals."

Well, the team wasn't the Tigers, Eskimos or Cardinals. He tried without success to think of the names of the other teams in the league. When they got home he'd have to take a peek at the name on the sweater.

They walked the rest of the way to the church in silence.

A young man in a clerical collar greeted them at the door to the parish hall, introducing himself as Mr. Redpath, the curate.

"My name's John Purcell," he said, smiling and shaking the curate's hand.

"How do you do. Though I know Johnny, and also Mrs. Purcell and your daughter Joanne, this is the first time I've had the pleasure of meeting you, I believe."

"Yes it is."

He was a little put out to discover that his family had a life separate from his. Of course they went to church fairly regularly, while he never went at all. When he was asked if he attended church he always answered, "Not since I was marched there with the army."

The young curate didn't seem to know what to do now that they had been introduced. He turned to the boy and asked, "How is the swimming coming along, Johnny?"

"Fine, Mr. Redpath."

The curate said, "He's going to be a great swimmer someday, is your son."

"Yes I know," he answered. Though he was aware that the boy had been going two nights a week to a neighborhood high school pool, he had never thought of him being an exceptional swimmer. He seemed to know less about the boy than anyone.

They were interrupted by the appearance of the scoutmaster, a very tall man with glasses, wearing a Boy Scout shirt and long khaki trousers.

Mr. Redpath said, "Mr. Purcell, I'd like you to meet Bob Wooley, the scoutmaster."

"How do you do," he said, putting out his hand. He noticed the two Second World War medal ribbons on the man's left breast, and knew the scoutmaster had never left the country.

The man peered at him as he took his hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch the name," he said.

"Purcell," he told him, his smile frozen on his lips.

"Oh yes, Johnny Purcell's father!"

He managed an amiable nod, but decided that the scoutmaster had come up to expectations.

"Well, Mr. Purcell, I have a disagreeable duty to perform," the man said, pulling a sheaf of tickets from the pocket of his shirt. Holding out two of them he said, "That will be three dollars please," giggling at the curate.

He decided to get into the spirit of the thing, and as he reached for his wallet he said, "Three dollars! Why I could have taken Johnny to a burlesque show for less than that."

The curate and the scoutmaster snickered politely, but he noticed them exchange significant glances. He handed over the money and pocketed the tickets.

"Right upstairs, Mr. Purcell," Redpath said, his tone much cooler than it had been.

When he looked around for the boy, he found he had disappeared, and he climbed to the banquet hall alone.

It was a large room, probably used for the Sunday-school. It had an odor of sanctity about it, an almost forgotten smell of hymnbooks and varnish that carried him back to his choir-boy days. Down the middle of the floor stretched two long plank tables supported on sawhorses, and covered with paper tablecloths. There were about fifty places set. Hanging on the walls were various exhibits of scoutcraft, and in one corner of the floor a tent and an imitation campfire had been set up, surrounded by imitation grass probably borrowed from the church cemetery next door.

He spied his son, in the company of two other boys and their fathers, looking at some photographs on the wall, and walked over to them. As soon as he reached his side, Johnny led him away from the others and began pointing out the various knots that were illustrated by twisted pieces of sashcord mounted on a board.

"Have you anything on exhibition, Johnny?" he asked the boy.

"Only the Cree mask I made last winter."

Cree mask! He'd never seen the boy making a mask, though he had wondered vaguely what he was doing in the basement sometimes. "Let's go over and see it," he said, and the boy led him around the tables to the opposite wall.

They stopped before a wooden mask, painted red and yellow with holes cut in it for the eyes and mouth. He was no judge of such things, but he was amazed at the workmanship and artistry of it. He could see the tremendous amount of work that had gone into its carving, and felt an immeasurable loss as he realized he had not even inquired what the boy was doing all those long evenings in the basement.

"Say, Johnny, that's great! It's just great!" he said, slapping his son on the shoulder. "I never knew you could make things like that. Did you carve it out of a single piece of wood?"

"No. I had to glue two pieces together."

"Where did you get it—the wood I mean?"

"Mr. Robertson gave me it. He helped me shape it, but I did most of the carving."

"Who's Mr. Robertson?"

"Don's dad. *You* know Don Robertson." "Oh sure." He didn't know one boy or girl who came to the house from another. It must be the tall blond kid who went to the movies with Johnny on Saturday afternoons.

Two boys and their fathers came along and stood beside them, admiring the mask. He was about to tell them it was the work of his boy, but Johnny was suddenly in a hurry to get away. "Come on, Dad," he said quickly. "There's a picture over here of Danny Mahaffey winning his mountaineer badge."

He followed the boy to the end of the room, aware for the first time that his son was ashamed of him. As he pretended to look at the photograph, he wondered what he had ever done to make the boy feel that way. Now he remembered the times he had met Johnny with his friends on the street, and had received only a grudging wave of the hand from him. And he remembered going to watch the boy play ball in the schoolyard, and being pointedly ignored throughout the game.

The dinner consisted of the usual creamed chicken and peas, and the after-dinner speeches contained the usual intramural jokes shared by the scoutmaster, the curate and the boys. During the meal he became quite friendly with the father sitting on his right, not realizing until it was too late that he had acted over-loquacious, his earlier drinks, plus the heat of the hall, making him talk and laugh too loudly. Once he stopped himself in time before criticizing the scoutmaster's home-service ribbons.

Johnny hardly spoke to him at all, but attached himself conversationally to a boy sitting on the other side of him. They laughed at the speakers' jokes and whispered conspiratorially, ignoring him completely.

From the anecdotes of the speakers, he was surprised to find that many of the fathers had visited the summer camp, and that some even joined in the weekend hikes. He had been under the impression that only the scoutmaster and his assistant went along with the boys. He began to feel like an outsider, and he glanced along the line of adult faces across the table, wondering if he was alone in his feelings. Every other father had the look of belonging.

Just when the curate's stories were beginning to gripe him, that young man ended his speech and announced a five-minute break before the presentations would be made. With a loud clattering of chairs, the boys and their fathers pushed themselves away from the tables.

When he looked around for Johnny he saw him running towards the stairway in company with the boy who had been sitting beside him. He pushed his way through the crowd to the back door of the hall, and stood on the outside steps and lit a cigarette.

The door behind him opened and a man came out.

"It's kind of stuffy in there," the man said.

"Yes, in more ways than one."

The man laughed. "You said it. This is the first time I ever came to one of these things."

"Me too."

"Good. I was afraid I was the only one."

"My name's Purcell—John Purcell," he said, offering the other his hand.

"Glad to know you, John. I'm Charley Murdoch—Murdoch's

Radio and Appliances up on Lorimer Street."

"Sure, I've seen your place."

"What line of business are you in?"

"I'm with Saunders, Gordon and Company, real estate and industrial appraisers."

"Fine."

Murdoch lit a cigarette and they stood talking about the Boy Scouts and their unfamiliarity with dinners such as this one. They discovered they had a couple of mutual friends downtown.

Then Murdoch said, "This may not be the exact place for it, but I've got a bottle of liquor in the car. Would you care for a snort before we go back to hear how the curate got marooned on the island in Elk Lake, or how the scoutmaster's tent blew down in the storm last summer?"

"You're a lifesaver," he said.

They walked to Murdoch's car, which was parked against the cemetery wall. Murdoch took a pint of whiskey from the glove compartment, and then began to feel around in the back seat. "I've got a small bottle of gingerale back here somewhere," he said. "Yeah, here she is!" He straightened up and took the top off the ginger-ale with a practised motion beneath the dashboard.

They had three good drinks apiece before Murdoch said, "Maybe we'd better go back inside. If we don't get in there soon that kid of mine will tell his mother for sure."

The presentations were well under way by the time they returned to the hall, and there was a craning of necks by almost everyone as they crossed the floor. As each boy's name was called, he and his father would go forward to the dais, where the scoutmaster presented the badges to the father, who then presented them to his son.

Johnny gave him an apprehensive look when he sat down, and then crowded as far away from him as he could get, trying to associate himself with the boy and his father on the other side of him.

He sat back in his chair and gave his attention to what was taking place on the platform, smiling to himself as the boys and their fathers left the tables, received their presentations, and returned to their seats. As the whiskey began to work, he took a friendlier view of the affair, and applauded heartily as each twosome sat down. He

mentioned to his neighbor that it looked like an investiture at Buckingham Palace, but the man shushed him with a finger placed to his lips. Once, he tried to catch Murdoch's eye, but his new friend was looking somewhere else.

When the assistant scoutmaster called out, "John Purcell," he tapped his son on the shoulder and stood up, saying, "That's both of us." There were a few titters from the boys, and a couple of the fathers smiled. Johnny hurried to the platform without waiting for him. He followed, grinning at the upturned faces he passed. Now that he was on his feet the room began to blur, and the faces at the tables seemed to run together into one big bemused grin. He grinned back, feeling a fellowship with every other father in the room. They really weren't a bad bunch once you got to know them.

As he climbed the steps to the dais the scoutmasters stared at him with a quizzical look, and the curate turned to the audience with an embarrassed smile. The scoutmaster approached him and said, "Mr. Purcell, I am happy and honored to present this lifesaving certificate to your son, John Purcell, and also this badge for hobby-craft. It is not very often that a boy as young as John earns a lifesaving certificate, and I'm sure you must be very proud of him."

He nodded his head and murmured his thanks. When he looked down to face the boy, the room swam before his eyes, but he managed to stay erect. "Here you are, Johnny," he said, handing the boy the certificate and badge. He felt prouder than he had ever felt in his life before, and just handing the awards to his son like this didn't seem enough to mark the moment. In a paroxysm of pride and happiness he grasped the boy's hand, and facing the audience, held it aloft like a referee signifying the winner of a boxing bout.

There was a short burst of embarrassed laughter from the tables. He turned to the scoutmaster, who was trying to smile with little success. The boy broke away from him and ran back to his chair, his chin lowered on his chest.

He stepped down carefully from the dais, and, with all the dignity at his command, made his way to his table. As he turned around its end, he staggered slightly and fell against it, pushing the planks askew from the saw-horse that supported them. Two or three of the fathers prevented the whole thing from toppling, but a

vase of flowers and a couple of plates fell to the floor with a loud crash.

After apologizing profusely to those who were picking up the flowers from the floor, he reached his chair with extra-careful steps and sat down. Some of the small boys stared at him wonderingly, but their fathers showed an absorbing interest in what was going on upon the platform. He now saw the humor of the accident, and turned to wink at his son to show that everything had turned out all right after all. The boy was sobbing silently, his thin shoulders shuddering beneath his blazer.

Suddenly he was shamed by the enormity of his act, and had to prevent himself from taking his son on his knee and comforting him as he had done when the boy was younger. He pulled himself together instead, setting his mouth in a defiant line, and stared unseeing at the people on the platform.

When the meeting came to an end, he was the first person out of the hall. He walked about fifty yards down the street and stood in the shadows of the cemetery wall. The boy hurried down the steps and came running towards him, and, when he drew abreast, he stepped out and took him by the arm.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," he said, placing his arm around the small boy's shoulders. "I acted a little silly in there, but it was really nothing. It'll be forgotten in a day or two."

The boy turned his tear-stained face up to him and said, "Leave me alone, Daddy, please."

"Look, Johnny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you like that. Listen, I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll go downtown tomorrow and I'll buy you a whole new Boy Scout outfit."

"I'm not going to the Scouts any more."

"Sure you are. Listen, you've got that lifesaving certificate and—"

"I left them behind. I don't want them any more."

"But, Johnny, listen—"

"Leave me alone, Daddy, please!" the boy cried, breaking away from him and running down the street.

"Johnny! Wait for me. Johnny! Listen, I want—"

The boy was half a block away by now, running as fast as he could. He hurried after him, knowing it was useless but afraid to let him go like this. Why had he done it, he asked himself, but could

get no answer from either his head or his heart. Had there always been something between himself and the boy that neither of them understood? "No," he said to himself. "No, it's your fault. It's always been your fault."

Already the running form of the boy was two blocks ahead of him, and he would soon be out of sight entirely. As he hurried after him he wondered if he would ever be able to draw close to his son again.

Responding

1. Who is the protagonist of the story and what is his goal? Does he fulfill his goal? Why or why not?

2. The exposition and antecedent action (flashback) of this story provide good insights to the source of conflict between father and son. What attitudes and events led to their drifting apart? How accurate is the father in thinking that "He seemed to know less about the boy than anyone?"

3. Why does the son run away from his father? Is he justified in this action? Explain.

4. Do you feel that father and son will ever be reconciled? Discuss, using evidence from the story. If the father had a second chance to relive the evening, is it likely he would do anything differently? Comment.

5. Do you think the title is appropriate? Explain. Is John Purcell a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Does he conform to your mental image of what a father should be like? Why or why not?

6. In your opinion, which is the most powerful episode in the story? Explain how the author uses dialogue and description to make this episode have a dramatic impact.

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