

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDIX

"---A 'side-splitting' story. . ."

By John S. Halbert

Sheffield, Alabama, Early February, 1958:

I started feeling it as soon as I got out of bed on that cold February Sunday morning. At first, I put it down to the big dinner I had eaten the night before, but as Daddy drove me around in the frosty pre-dawn darkness delivering papers on my newspaper route, the gnawing in the pit of my twelve-year-old stomach became "rumbledy," as it felt. By sunrise, an hour later, I knew for sure that something out of the ordinary was going on down there in the depths of my plumbing. When we returned home, I lay down on the sofa in the den without breakfast, a move that may have saved my life.

For once, my mother didn't force me to go to Sunday School, although I would have definitely rather been in church than trying to endure what was happening to me.

By mid-afternoon, the "rumbledy" stomach was now cramps and abdominal muscle spasms. Just before dark, a terrible pain stabbed into my insides, twisting and turning as if I had been run-through by a madman's sword.

When I broke out in a sweat and my knees drew up under my chin, my parents must have finally realized I wasn't pulling an elaborate ruse to get out of going to school the next day. Mother reached for the telephone.

"Hmmm," intoned the family doctor, a long-time family friend of ours, as he listened to the sounds of my stomach through his stethoscope. Frowning, he manipulated and prodded my abdomen prompting a searing, almost unbearable pain that shot through my entire lower body. I was sure I was going to die. "Have you eaten anything, today?" When I shook my head, I thought he looked relieved.

Lying there, moaning in sweat-soaked agony, I couldn't imagine what was happening to me. Had I eaten something the day before that had disagreed with me? Maybe the doctor would just prescribe some Pepto-Bismol, and everything would be fine.

"Hmmm," the doctor interrupted my speculations, as he again drew his stethoscope across my stomach. "Hmmm . . ."

I gave him a wan look---I didn't like the sound of all those "Hmmms." A feeling of foreboding now added itself to the pain, as I realized that whatever was going on probably wasn't going to be fixed with a few swallows of the pink medicine.

"Well, John---" the doctor looked down at me with a professional eye, as he lowered his stethoscope, " . . . I want you in the hospital right away for some tests."

(Hospital? Tests? Wait, doctor---I'm feeling better, already!)

He turned to my parents. "I'll call the laboratory---John needs to get to the hospital at once"

Mother's eyes went wide; I felt like a ton of bricks had fallen on top of my head.

From the living room came the muffled voices of the doctor and Daddy in conversation, then the sound of the front door closing. The doctor was gone.

Mother pulled up the blanket around my shoulders and patted my head, then she turned and bustled about to gather my things.

By the time we left the house, it seemed as if the pain had begun to subside. When we arrived at the hospital, I was in fact, feeling much better.

At the Admitting desk, a lady directed me to a dressing room, where I made my first acquaintance with a hospital gown. When I returned to the hallway, a nurse walking by just then gasped and averted her eyes. A male orderly, pushing a cart, gaped at me wide-eyed and snickered. "What's going on?" I wondered, as I pushed open an opaque glass door bearing a sign in big block letters:

LABORATORY ENTRANCE

In the stainless-steel, white-porcelain medical lab, a young blond guy in a white smock coat and surgical mask glanced at me and did a double-take. "Omigosh!" he burst out, pulling the gauze mask from his mouth, "I don't believe this!" A quick grin flashed across his face. He pointed at the strings across my chest that held the gown in place. "You've got it on backwards!" The fellow nodded at a nearby door. "There's a room where you can go to turn it around!"

When I saw my reflection in a full-length mirror, I realized that anyone looking at me from straight-on, as the orderly, the nurse and the technician had done, got a perfect view of my entire frontside, and since, in the usual hospital fashion, the gown was all I was wearing . . .

In a jiffy (actually, two jiffys), I returned to the laboratory with my gown re-tied in what I hoped was the proper style. The technician glanced at me and nodded.

"We're going to check your blood," he told me, reaching into a cabinet. "Get onto the examining table."

As soon as I climbed onto the table, he pulled up my arm and jabbed me with the biggest, scariest-looking needle I had ever seen. An attached giant-sized clear glass syringe started filling with foaming red blood. *My blood.* "Why are you taking my blood?" I was concerned that I would now bleed to death before dying of the food poisoning I was sure I had. "What does blood have to do with a stomach ache?"

"We're going to count your white blood cells . . . if you have an infection somewhere in your body---and I'll bet you have---your white cell count'll be elevated." From my perch on the examining table I watched as he put a smear of my blood on a laboratory slide and slid it under a microscope. "Hmmm---" (By now, I had decided it was a standard medical expression,) He started to click a hand-held device I had not noticed before. The technician squinted into the microscope for the next several minutes while he clicked and clacked what I took to be a corpuscle-counter.

At length, the laboratory man jotted something on a pad, then turned to me. "Your white blood cell count is 'way up . . . I'll notify your doctor---" I wasn't sure what it all meant, but it sounded pretty serious.

When I stepped back out into the hallway (this time with the gown properly tied), a nurse with a sheaf of papers in her hand bustled up to me. "Your name 'Halbert'?" I nodded. "Sit in this wheelchair." I dropped into the seat, then she shoved me at breakneck speed through a set of double doors into another hallway. After a couple of zig-zagging turns, we arrived at a big nurse's station. The lady handed the papers to a middle-aged orderly and then disappeared into an inner office.

The man glanced at the missive and gave a sardonic grin. "This way, please," he said, and

we soon found ourselves in a big open room with about a dozen hospital beds subdivided by white draw-curtains suspended from the ceiling on rails. My eyes widened when I spotted a sign just inside the door that announced:

PREPARATION WARD

A grizzled, grimacing, consumptive-looking old man with a bandaged chest raised up on a skinny elbow and gazed at us with mucosed eyes. When the orderly spotted him, he jerked around the curtain, cutting off the aggravating fellow's view of us. "You'll need privacy," the hospital man said, motioning to an empty bed next to me. As he was turning to leave, he gave an enigmatic look. "Other people will be dealing with you, shortly."

I climbed up onto the white-sheeted bed, wondering what he meant about "other people?" And what that "privacy" thing was about to happen to me in this big hospital ward---a room that seemed to offer little, if any, privacy in the first place?

I found out a few minutes later, when a hand clawed its way around the edge of the curtain, heralding the arrival of another orderly. Under his arm he carried a small leather-bound kit that he placed on the table next to where I lay. He reached down and dragged from underneath the bed a squat, three-legged stool. "Sit on this and pull up your hospital gown!" the orderly ordered, as he unsheathed what looked like a tiny meat cleaver! Seeing my wide-eyed look of alarm, the man gave me a sharp look. "This is a straight-razor . . ." He held up the wicked-looking (to me) instrument and tapped its handle with his forefinger. "I'm going to shave you below your waist for the surgery."

Surgery! So *that* was why I was in this "Preparation Ward"---they were "preparing" me for an operation!

In a few minutes the deed was done; the fellow took his paraphernalia and left. I had hardly crawled back beneath the sheets, wondering what was going to happen next, before another hand swept back the curtain. "Well, here we go!" a lady nurse announced, wheeling a gurney next to the bed. A second nurse edged into the space by the bed.

I stared at the new arrivals. "Go? Where?"

"To surgery!" the second nurse said, with a smile I thought was probably a little forced. "You're going to have your appendix out, right now!"

Before I could open my mouth to argue that I was now feeling fine, a husky-looking orderly appeared and the three lifted me onto the padded conveyance. The trio wheeled me out into the hallway.

Yet another nurse, this one holding up a hypodermic syringe, arrived on the scene. "Roll over," she ordered, "this'll relax you." Knowing that further protest was useless, I presented my bottom and she gave me the shot.

From that point onward, everything unfolded in a wavy, slow-motion, dream-like sequence. Squinting through an opaque mist, I saw that I was now in an operating room lying on a table. Directly overhead hung a gigantic circular light. As I blinked in wonderment, the wavering doctor floated into the room, followed by two or three undulating surgical nurses and a faceless anesthesiologist. All were weaving back and forth in a disjointed dance of rubbery rhythm. In my trance-like state they seemed like beings from another planet; their foggy voices sounded a long way off. Every one of them were decked-out in green gowns with matching green headcovers---some even wore goggles. The walls of the room (that seemed to be closing in on me) were painted the same sickly-looking green color as the space-creatures' outfits.

The last thing I remembered just before the anesthesiologist placed a mask over my face was telling the goggled doctor (I think he was the doctor) in the spongy voice I now had, that I thought operating room people wore *white* uniforms, not green. As I inhaled, a gray curtain drew across my eyes, accompanied by a peculiar roaring sound---and . . . and . . .

* * *

"John!" Someone in a galaxy far, far away, was calling my name. "John . . .!" The voice---a man's voice---was nearer this time. "Can you hear me?"

As I opened my eyes, the person connected to the voice began to swim into focus. In a few more seconds, I made out my father's anxious face peering down at me. "He's awake!" he called to someone behind him.

Shaking the cobwebs from my brain, I saw that I was lying on a hospital bed in a brightly-lit room. Squinting and blinking, I made out my uncle leaning over daddy's shoulder; concern written on his face. (I always wondered how he did that.) "What happened?"

"You had your appendix out!" daddy answered, "just in time, too---the doctor said it was about to burst!" I wasn't sure what he meant, but it sounded important. More awake now, I tried to shift around on the bed, an activity brought to an immediate halt by a searing pain on my lower right-side.

A nurse stepped up. "You must remain quiet and still," she ordered, "you had a little operation---there's an incision in your abdomen, so take it easy." A *little* operation? Fire radiated from where the doctor had taken out my appendix. The nurse took hold of my left arm and gave me a shot. "That'll make you feel better," she said, holding up the syringe in triumph.

"Well, you gave us some excitement!" My mother bounced into the ward and squeezed my hand. "How do you feel?"

Silly question. I felt *terrible*. My side was aflame, I was still only half-awake, there was an awful metallic taste in my mouth and my bladder felt like a bomb was about to go off.

I looked at the nurse. "I gotta go to the bathroom."

She reached for a call button and motioned to the others. "You folks need to wait outside."

A couple of minutes later, a grinning orderly snatched back the curtain and stepped into my cubicle. (*By now, I had noticed that orderlies seemed to grin most of the time.*) "All right, let's see about that bladder of yours," he said, with what I thought was exaggerated cheerfulness. The fellow opened a cabinet and pulled out a white porcelain object that looked like an outsized, misshapen tea-kettle. He then described the proper procedure for using a urinal.

But no matter how hard I tried, nothing happened, even though I thought I was about to explode.

The orderly snapped his fingers as if he had just remembered a long-forgotten secret. "No problem," he smirked, "we have a way of loosening tight kidneys . . . works everytime." The attendant stepped over to a nearby lavatory and twisted a faucet handle. "Let's try some psychology---"

The sound of water rushing into the sink had an immediate effect and in a few seconds the bladder matter was on its way to being magically solved.

After a fitful, drug-induced sleep, I was jolted awake the next morning when someone yanked back the curtain. "Well, here we go!" an orderly grinned, in typical orderly fashion, pushing a gurney up next to the bed, "you're going to a private room!" For once, I didn't protest, as I was plenty ready to leave this big open space where all the patients were privy to each

other's most personal activities. He lifted me onto the big rolling stretcher and wheeled me down the hallway to an elevator.

A few minutes later, we entered a small upper-floor room that contained only one bed. "This is more like it!" I thought, relieved to be free of the prying eyes and ears of the cavernous ward I had just left.

A nurse joined and helped the orderly lift me onto the bed. "You're lucky to be out of the ward," she remarked, as my eyebrows stitched in a question. "The reason you're here so soon is because a man died in this bed a few minutes ago!"

"You're very fortunate!" the orderly chattered in cheerful tones, as I visibly blanched, casting about where I was lying with a cold feeling of horror. I was lying in the same bed in which a man had just died! Now, I wasn't so sure I wanted to be in *this* room, after all. The two attendants meanwhile stuffed me under the covers with a casual air and fluffed the pillow, as if people died in my bed every day.

"Yoo-Hoo!" chirped a familiar voice and a second later my mother bounded into the room. Cracking open the venetian blinds, she looked through the glass. "Nice view!" she observed. It was the first time I had noticed the window was even there after all the hubbub of being dumped into a bed where a man had just passed on. My impression of the scenery was that it really didn't look all that great---what I could see beyond the bottom of the windowsill was just an ordinary roadway down there flanked by a hodgepodge of nondescript stores and gas stations, But it certainly *was* an improvement over the monotonous white curtains of the "Preparation Ward."

"Here's a book I bought for you to read." Mother placed a small novel on the bedstand, "when you have time for it, of course."

"Thanks." The book was a reminder that I would probably have very little to do for the next several days in this place besides reading and recuperating. (*This was 1958---years before there was a television set in every hospital room.*)

Lunchtime!" A grandmotherly-looking, white-uniformed lady burst into the room bearing a metal tray covered with waxed paper. With a flourish, she wheeled a tray-cart over me and cranked the bed into a sitting position. All at once, I realized how hungry I was---I had not eaten in almost two days, and was ready for a *BIG* meal with all the trimmings. Thank goodness, the hospital authorities had remembered me; of course they understood that I needed massive quantities of food to recover from the operation. Looking forward to a glorious feast, I lifted the cover from the tray to behold a plate of---watery green Jello, a couple of pathetic celery sticks, and a glass of water!

"Wh---where's the food?" I stared in consternation at the measly meal in front of me.

"Standard post-operative diet, dearie." The hospital lady gave me a condescending, upraised-eyebrow look. "That's what you get right after surgery!"

She cracked open the window blinds and peeked out at the dreary scene below. "Nice view," she observed, with what I thought was a touch of sarcasm. "Well, enjoy your lunch!" The woman flounced out the door and a moment later I heard the food cart squealing toward the next room. I gaped glumly at the skimpy contents of the tray, and longed for the biggest hamburger on earth.

Scant seconds later, after gobbling down the miserly meal, that I thought would be insufficient to keep even a mouse alive, I was still just as hungry as ever, and dinner was hours away. I wondered if I could recruit someone to smuggle up the back stairway some real food for me.

Just then, the same lady who had delivered the tray returned. "I see you ate it all!" she gushed, not noticing that I had just had a total lunch-letdown.

"Do I get anything besides *this*? I'm still hungry---"

"I'll look at your chart . . . the doctor has the final say-so." With that, she turned and left.

For a while, I lay there on the bed, staring out the window, wondering if to to the pain of the operation was to be added the agony of starvation. The incision now had a peculiar tugging sensation every time I tried to move.

Adding to the discomfort of hunger, its cousin---boredom---was already setting in. Looking around, I spotted the book my mother had brought earlier. Picking it up, I saw it was a "Hardy Boys" mystery. With nothing else to do, I opened it and started reading. After turning only a few pages, I made the pleasant discovery that the book was actually interesting

Here we go!" A woman's voice came from outside the door. A nurse and a male orderly popped through the doorway. "Let's go for a walk!"

"What!" my eyes went wide, ". . . do you mean, 'walk'?"

"Just as we said---you're going to get up and walk---doctor's orders!" Reeling in disbelief, I reached for my robe and slipped into my slippers. The two lifted me off the bed and positioned themselves under my shoulders. I thought I would faint from the pain; my side felt like it would rip apart. To complicate matters, after having spent the last two days lying down, I was having a hard time locating my feet. I couldn't believe they were in earnest about having me walk in this condition. The first try was an ordeal; with my arms over the nurse's and the orderly's shoulders, the three of us lurched out into the hallway, took a few tentative steps then stumbled back to my room. Even though the round-trip took just two or three minutes and covered only a few dozen feet, I was completely exhausted when I sagged back onto the bed and right away dropped off to sleep.

"Hmmm---" I recognized a familiar sound. Cracking open my eyes, there was the doctor standing over my bed, holding a notebook in his hands. Without his goggles, he now looked like a regular human. He pulled back the covers, poked my midsection and peeked at the incision, nodding in what I assumed (*hoped?*) was suture satisfaction. "Tell me---how are you feeling?" he boomed in his resonant doctor's voice.

"If you want to know the truth," I cleared my throat, trying to find my vocal cords, "this is not one of my better days---everything hurts . . . they keep dragging me up and down the hall, and I'm starving with this hospital food. How long is this going to last?"

"You're not happy with the food?" I thought he sounded a little surprised.

I told him about the "meal" of a while ago ago, hoping he would have mercy on my hunger and tell the kitchen to start feeding me some real food, instead of the microscopic diet I had had so far.

"Let me tell you about your operation," he changed the subject, "you actually had a pretty close call!" Seeing my raised eyebrows, he went on. "We got your appendix out just in time---if we had operated even a short time later, it would have burst, and you'd have been in *big trouble*---"

"But the pain was gone," I argued, "I was feeling fine when I went into the operating room."

The doctor shook his head. "Your body had blocked out the pain, but you were really at the edge. That happens sometimes. Like I said---we got to you just in time."

I could hardly believe it. I knew I had been in terrible pain earlier, but I had no idea my appendix had been as serious as the doctor was letting on. "How am I doing, now?" I was almost afraid to hear his answer.

"Fine!"

I let out a long sigh of relief.

"You'll be out of here in a few days, and in the meantime, we'll gradually get you back onto a regular diet."

This was certainly good news, although it didn't help my current hunger pangs. And I couldn't imagine why I had to endure physical torture so soon after the operation. "Why do I have to do all this walking?"

"We've found that walking soon after surgery helps prevent blood clots," came the surprising answer. "They can form in deep veins---usually in the legs---and travel to the lungs, which stops your breathing . . . *permanently*. Walking helps to keep that from happening."

The doctor slapped shut his notebook and reached for the door handle. "One more thing . . ." He turned and looked at me as if he had an important point he wanted to make. "The fact that you didn't eat breakfast or take any medicine the day of the operation was probably what held your appendix together just long enough until we got it out---if it had burst---well, you'd be in a lot worse shape right now, believe me!"

I breathed a silent thanks for the "rumbledy" stomach of the paper route that had kept me from having breakfast that morning.

Now feeling as if I might actually *survive* this hospital ordeal, I settled back onto the cranked-up mattress and returned to my "Hardy Boys" book. When my mother came to visit me that evening, I asked her to bring me a couple more of the little mysteries---if I was going to be confined to this claustrophobic room, I should at least have some decent reading material.

When I wasn't reading, I spent long periods gazing out the window. After a while, I began to notice some interesting things going on in the outside world. I watched as a road-building crew put the final touches on a street-paving project that spanned several blocks. But the day after they finished their paving job, *another* road crew came along and dug a big ditch down the middle of the newly-paved street! When they re-filled the trench and patched the roadway, a bumpy, lumpy-looking mound ran the whole length of the new pavement. Even in my weakened state, I could have told the ditch-diggers to do their job first---*then* pave the street! (*Over fifty years later, the mound was still there.*)

Before long, a veritable parade of visitors began to show up to see me. My Uncle Durward came by every day, and a goodly number of other relatives and friends also made the scene. Aunt Elsie opened the venetian blinds and looked out the window. "Nice . . . view . . ." she observed. As her visit coincided with the disorganized ditch-dig, I could tell she was just being polite and didn't really believe her own words.

By the third day after the operation, I was thoroughly fed-up with the hassle of urinals and bedpans, and resolved to take unilateral action. Although I was still in a lot of pain, I decided to try walking on my own, and calculated that I could make the few steps from the bed to the bathroom and return in a couple of minutes. The next time, and when no one was looking, I eased off the bed, *c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y* made my way to the bathroom and closed the door. A minute later, just as I was about to come back out, I heard a man's voice casually ask, "Where is he?"

There was a loud shriek and a woman's voice yelled, "*HE'S GONE!*" At once, sounds akin to a riot erupted outside the door, along with a stampede of footsteps.

I opened the door and looked out. "What's going on?" I asked a nurse, as she dashed by. The lady glanced at me and froze, seemingly in midair.

"*HERE HE IS!*" she shouted. At once, a squad of nurses and orderlies sped into the room, screeched to a stop, took hold of my arms and eased me back onto the bed. "You're not supposed to be out by yourself---your incision could have ripped open!"

I hadn't intended to upset the prickly hospital people, but I *had* accomplished my mission,

and to tell the truth, felt pretty proud of myself for having outwitted the aggravating urinals and bedpans, at least this once.

While I was still congratulating myself, there was a quiet knock on the door, which slowly opened, then the church's pastor stepped into the room. "Didn't mean to cause problems . . . but things sure got loud, all of a sudden!" I told the parson how my bathroom jaunt had set off all the fireworks.

The minister, nodding and appearing to be meditating on this, stepped to the window and looked out at the bleak landscape. "Uh . . . nice . . . view---" he observed, in an obvious bending of the truth. I guessed even preachers had to fudge, sometimes.

His visit, that I guessed was one of his ministerial "tending the flock" duties---was brief and cordial. After he left, I lay back and rested, still amused by what became known as "The Great Bathroom Caper."

The doctor must have taken pity on me, as lunch that day was much more like a regular meal than the earlier starvation session. Coupled with the "Hardy Boys" books and the gaggle of visitors who were now coming around to visit me, time began to pass much more quickly.

Later that same day, when the nurse and the orderly appeared for my afternoon walk, they had some interesting news. "There's a young girl down at the other end of the hall who just had her appendix out---maybe you'd like to walk down there and talk to her. She has a good sense of humor," the nurse added, as we shuffled out into the corridor.

A few minutes later, we arrived at a half-opened door. "Visitors!" the nurse called out, knocking on the door frame, "here's the guy who also had your kind of operation!"

There was a rustling, then a young voice called out, "Come in!" The three of us clumped into the room and were greeted by ten-or-eleven-year old redheaded girl who was propped up in her bed surrounded by banks of flowers. My first impression was that we had lurched into a florist's shop. A man and a woman, evidently her parents, smiled at us and stepped aside. As we introduced ourselves, the little schoolgirl extended her hand and shook mine in what struck me as a very grown-up manner. "They took out my independix!" she declared, and everyone in the room laughed.

"That's interesting," I replied, "since they took out *my* 'appendix!'"

"'Independix'---'appendix'---*whatever* it was, they sure took it out!" she went on. We talked and laughed for a few minutes, comparing operations and hospital experiences. The two of us agreed that the food needed a lot of help; I told her that the menu would improve in about one more day and recounted what my doctor had said about the importance of walking. As she had just returned from her first wobbling trek out into the hall, I slung my arms over my attendants' shoulders, and with a wave, took my leave.

I dropped by her room several more times until I was discharged a few days later. Her walks brought her to my room, as well, and we compared views. Her room faced a different direction, and she turned up her nose at what I had to look at, pronouncing her scenery much better-looking than mine. It was the truth---*anything* was an improvement over what I had to watch---except for the horrid "Preparation Ward".

Just short of a week after the operation, the doctor signed me out and. I was finally free to leave the hospital.

On the ride home, as we drove down the same road I had watched being paved . . . then dug-up . . . then patched-over---I confirmed my earlier impression that the once-smooth thoroughfare had been turned into a tire-tripping caricature of itself. The unsightly, several-blocks-long-mound had completely ruined the looks of the new paving job.

* * *

The next day, daddy took me to the doctor's office to have the stitches pulled-out. At first, I was fearful that, without the little wires to hold me together, the incision would burst open, but I needn't have worried. Aside from a quick sting when the doctor snipped the stitches and a few twitches as he pulled them out with tweezers, the whole thing turned out to be no big deal at all.

* * *

The following Monday, when I returned to my seventh-grade classes, as I walked onto the school grounds, Charlie a classmate, slapped me on the back and welcomed my return. Glad to be back into the regular swing of things, I looked up at the familiar old brick-and-stone "Annapolis Avenue School" building, and thought, "Nice view!"