

*“Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth
with his neighbor.”*

– Ephesians 4:25

Jelly Beans Forever

Bert felt positive that a boy who hadn't gone to school would not know anything that he didn't know. He was so sure that he chose his own penalty if he were proved wrong.

“I could eat jelly beans forever,” Bert Baxter remarked to his twin sister, Becky, as he plunged his hand into the bag on the porch step between them.

“Don't **exaggerate**,” admonished Becky. “I think exaggerations are idle words, and you know what the Bible says about *them*.”

Bert tossed a handful of jelly beans into his mouth and shifted them to both cheeks before answering. “Yes, I know; but that's not stretched much. Anyway, I could eat them all afternoon, and that's what I wish I could do instead of going with you and Daddy,” he **retorted**.

“But he is so eager to have us meet that little fellow who thought he had to wear shoes to Daddy's meetings. You know the one who picked blackberries to sell to buy shoes, and then spilled them when his mule jumped away from a black snake.”

“Yes, I know the whole story, but it’s too hot to walk anywhere, and we can’t drive to his house. Anyhow, that Chad what’s-his-name won’t be anything special to see. I wouldn’t miss a thing if I never saw him or his poky old mule.” Bert reached into the jelly bean bag again. He sorted through his handful, dropping the purple ones back into the bag. “These purple ones,” he exclaimed with a disgusted **grimace**, changing the subject. “There are two things I’d like to know about the people who make them. First, do they really flavor them with varnish, and second, do they think anyone eats the things?”

“And there are two things I’d like to know about you,” said Becky, as she took the bag and shook the purple ones aside before helping herself. “One is, why you are so grouchy about going along this afternoon, and the other is whether you think I like those old purple ones any better than you do.”

Bert laughed, then said, “Oh, I have no real reason for not wanting to go, only I wanted to read the new *Popular Mechanics* that came today. And I’m grouchy because it’s so hot, and we’ll have blisters by the time we climb up and down that mile-high mountain.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Becky said again. “Really, Bert, I think exaggerating is sort of like lying, and Christians don’t even sort-of-lie, you know.”

“Aw, come on, Becky, why be so particular? You don’t really think exaggerating is all that serious, do you?”

“Yes, I really do, because it’s not being altogether truthful.”

“Then I’m sure you are the only one in the whole wide world who—” Bert caught himself and laughed a bit **sheepishly**.

“There you go again,” Becky said severely. “See what a terrible habit you have.”

“Maybe so,” Bert agreed carelessly. “But only a girl would make a fuss about such a little thing. You’d never find a boy so particular.”

“I’m not going to argue,” Becky retorted, “but I do wish you’d go along with Daddy and me. Maybe it will be cooler in the mountains. Besides, you can read *Popular Mechanics* any time. More than likely Chad could teach you some things you’ll never find in *Popular Mechanics*.”

“Like what?” challenged Bert.

“I don’t know,” admitted his sister, “but I believe he could.”

“And I believe he couldn’t. Daddy said he never even went to school.”

“That doesn’t matter. There are lots of things to know that aren’t written in books. Likely he knows plenty you don’t.”

“All right, I’ll go along and keep my eyes open, and we’ll see how smart this Chad what’s-his-name is. Furthermore, I’ll eat ten purple jelly beans for everything he mentions that is news to me.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Becky said for the third time.

“I’m not exaggerating. I mean it,” Bert insisted.

Becky smiled wisely. “I just may have occasion to remind you of that promise before the day is over,” she said.

The afternoon found Bert and Becky trudging up the mountain. Their father showed them the little store where he had first met Chad. Then he pointed out the spot where Slow Girl, Chad’s mule, had spilled the precious berries.

After a long, hot trek up a steep trail, they stood panting at

the edge of a large clearing. "A real log cabin!" breathed Becky delightedly, as they came within sight of Chad's home.

Two bony, brown hounds bayed a welcome that brought a tiny old lady to the open doorway. "Howdy, howdy," she called. "I just had a feelin' someone would come today. And I sure am glad to see you again, Preacher. Come on up and set. Chad, bring two more chairs."

A wiry, overalled boy appeared from within the house, carrying two cane-bottomed chairs. From under his wavy yellow hair, great brown eyes looked at them guardedly. The twins instantly noticed an awkward white bandage that covered one ear.

"Howdy," he said, placing the chairs, then taking a seat on the porch steps.

After introducing the children, Daddy and Chad's grandmother were soon chatting away, while Becky and Bert and Chad sat silently pretending not to see each other.

Finally the old lady suggested, "Chad, why don't you take Bert and Becky to see Slow Girl? Maybe they'd like to ride her."

"C'mon," Chad said, leading the way across the bare yard. The twins followed silently. But, out of hearing of the adults, Bert found his voice.

"What happened to your ear?" he asked, indicating the bandage.

Chad laughed sheepishly. "Don't really need the bandage, but Granny makes me wear it." He lifted a strip of adhesive tape to expose a deep ragged tear in the tender part of his ear. "Caught it on a possum hanger. 'Tweren't more'n a scratch."

He pressed the tape into place again and went on.

Behind Chad's back Becky and Bert frowned at each other in bewilderment. Suddenly Becky's face broke into a wide smile. She raised both hands with the fingers spread wide. "Ten purple jelly beans," she mouthed at her brother.

Bert grimaced and turned his back on her.

After plunging down a steep slope through sumac and scrubby pines, Chad stopped. "There she is," he announced.

"Where?" Bert asked, craning his neck in all directions.

"Over there by the stake and rider," Chad pointed.

"Oh, I see her now. Who did you say is riding her?"

"No one," Chad looked a bit puzzled. "But we can if y'all want to."

"I sure would. Let's go over there," Bert suggested, starting out. He had an uncomfortable feeling that Becky was trying to catch his eye.

She was. When Chad left them to walk over and hook an arm around Slow Girl's neck, Becky said in a low voice, "Stake and rider is a fence—a rail fence, Brainy One. I know that much myself."

Bert frowned and walked away, while Becky sang, "Twenty purple jelly beans," under her breath to the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Riding Slow Girl proved to be fun. They guided her by a cord Chad tied to her halter, and made her go by banging their heels into her ribs. But none of them could get her to go faster than a walk.

Then they sat on the brown carpet of needles under a pine tree and talked.



“Are there any wild animals around here?” asked Bert.
“Bear or deer or anything like that?”

“No deer, but some bear, and once in a while we hear a painter.”

“A painter? What’s that?” inquired Becky.

“That’s the same as a panther, isn’t it?” Bert put in quickly.

“Yes, and some folks call them mountain lions.”

Bert flashed his twin a triumphant look that said, “You didn’t catch me on that one.”

Then Becky began asking questions. “Chad, what do you do all the time up here? Isn’t it lonesome with no one to play with?”

“No, I’m never lonesome. I like it up here. I work mostly, but sometimes I go fishing or hunting. Then we go to meetin’. Ever since your pa preached here, we go to meetin’ whenever we can. Granny says we must learn what the Bible says so we know how to live right. She says we must be partikler about doing some things, and about not doing other things—stealin’ and lyin’ and such. That’s what your pa said God wants us to do; and I know your pa’s no lying man.”

“No, he isn’t,” Bert agreed readily, in a thoughtful tone.

“Well, I don’t want to be no lyin’ man when I grow up, either, do you? Lyin’s one thing I know is plumb wrong. Granny’s whaled me often enough for lyin’, so I’m plenty partikler about *that*, I can tell you!”

A dull red color crept into Bert’s face, and he avoided Becky’s eyes as he asked quickly, “What do you do when the weather’s bad?”

“Oh, then I play my dulcimer.”

“A dulcimer?” put in Becky. “Never heard of that; have you, Bert?”

“Well, isn’t it some kind of loom you use to weave rugs?” Bert spoke uncertainly and scowled into Becky’s impish face when the mountain boy wasn’t looking.

“No,” answered Chad. “It’s an instrument, sort of like a guitar or a banjo, but not as many strings.”

“Oh, I see. Uh—uh, what animals do you hunt?”

“Coon and rabbit and squirrel and ’possum, mostly.”

“Do you use a gun?”

“Yes, for all but the rabbits. I make deadfalls for them. It saves shells,” replied Chad.

“Deadfalls?” Bert was **genuinely** interested. Becky started to hum the tune to “Mary Had a Little Lamb” again. Bert ignored her and turning to Chad, asked, “Could you show me how you make them and how they work? I never saw one.”

“Sure. Let’s go to the house. I’ll need an ax.”

An hour later Daddy could hardly get Bert started down the mountain toward the car. But finally good-byes were said, and they left. As they walked along the trail, Daddy asked, “What are you carrying those sticks for, Bert?”

“This is for a deadfall. Want to see how it works?” Bert knelt in the trail and, after selecting a heavy flat stone, demonstrated the deadfall.

Becky watched with interest, but under her breath she was singing, “Forty purple jelly beans.”

Her brother ignored her while he showed how the stone was balanced and where to place the bait.

Late that evening the twins again sat on the porch steps. Bert was unusually quiet, but Becky didn't notice. She was shaking the jelly bean bag, picking out the despised varnish-flavored purple ones and placing them beside Bert.

"There are your beloved jelly beans," she said at last, giving the bag a final shake. "After all your big talking, did you learn anything new from Chad this afternoon or didn't you?"

"Yes, Becky," Bert's voice was unexpectedly humble. "I learned more than you might think. I learned that the Lord isn't pleased when I exaggerate. I don't want to be a lying man when I grow up, and from now on I'm not going to be a lying boy either."

"I'm glad, Bert," Becky spoke quietly. Then she looked at the pile of purple jelly beans. "Shall we just pitch these into the garden?"

"Of course not. I need these to help me remember." Bert scooped up the purple candy and clapped it into his mouth. He chewed rapidly, making horrible faces at his twin all the while.

"But that's only nineteen," Becky said, laughing. "You'll have to eat twenty-one out of the next bag we get."

Bert grimaced and gave a final swallow. Then he said, "As for those other twenty-one jelly beans in the next bag, there just isn't going to be any next bag. I don't think I want to see any more jelly beans forever. And that's no exaggeration."

And Becky believed him.

—Ruth K. Hobbs