

WILLIAM POWELL HAD ONE

By Gladys Whitlock

When my husband told me what the doctor had said after my exploratory surgery, I thought it was his idea of a joke, a bad one. The idea of making an opening in my abdomen to expel bodily wastes was ridiculous. I'd never heard of such a thing. But he wasn't joking. I had colorectal cancer and a fifty-fifty chance of survival.

When my husband graduated from the Missouri School of Mines, I was pregnant. We planned that our two daughters and I would stay with my parents in California for a few weeks until he was situated with a mining company. Brand new mining engineers did not seem to be in demand and he found several temporary jobs at small remote mines while he waited for answers to his applications.

In the meantime, my pregnancy was not going well. With my first two babies, I had been healthy and energetic. This time I was ill much of the time. My back ached constantly and I had a discharge which my doctor attributed to hemorrhoids. When I complained that I was not as well as I had been during the earlier pregnancies, he insisted that all pregnancies were different. He could find no indications of anything wrong.

At last, the great day came! It was an easy delivery of a healthy nine pound baby girl. The last three months had been a miserable ordeal and I went home full of joy that it was over. My optimism was not justified. The backaches increased until I could not sleep at night and the discharge grew to a serious loss of blood.

In the following months there were a number of tests and several referrals to other doctors. As I became weaker through painful, sleepless nights, I felt I was dying and my doctor didn't know why. Finally, the exploratory surgery was performed.

As shocking as the verdict was, it was a tremendous relief to learn that the doctors had discovered what was wrong. The unknown fear was worse than the known danger. At least, it presented the possibility that some treatment might be available.

I checked into the hospital a week before my surgery date to build up my strength. (This was decades ago when hospitals did such things.) Three times a day a nurse brought me a shot glass full of pills, vitamins and antibiotics I think, Each morning there was a quart of half and half in a bucket of ice to be consumed by evening, and lots of Jello for blood building.

I began to feel better, but now there was the ever-present thought of my three little daughters. What would happen to them if I didn't make it? I knew my parents would be willing to under take their care, but it would be a heavy burden for them to assume. My husband was an attractive young man. Undoubtedly, he would marry again. All the stories I had ever heard about cruel stepmothers began to haunt me.

It is said that there are no atheists in foxholes. I doubt that there are very many in hospitals, either. I prayed for time to see my girls through their childhood.

After the operation an intern told me it was quite a show with many doctors watching. There were new surgical skills that had grown out of the battlefield experiences of World War II which were part of this experimental project. One team of surgeons removed the rectum and affected colon. Another team built what I had now learned was called a colostomy.

The following two weeks passed only as hazy flashes of pain between the doses of sedatives. Later, I was told it was a close call. My Dad fainted when he came to visit. My husband was at my beside much of the time, so was my mother, but I knew nothing about it.

When I began to be aware of the world again, a doctor gave me a long talk on living with a colostomy. He assured me that life could be as full and productive as ever. As an example, he

pointed out that the romantic screen star, William Powell, had a colostomy.

This last bit of information was dutifully repeated by all the nurses and doctors with whom I came in contact during my stay in the hospital. They didn't know I was just so thankful to have survived and I didn't know I was supposed to be depressed about having a colostomy.

However, the doctor was right. It took some training to learn how to handle the new system and a few minor adjustments, but the colostomy has interfered very little in my life, or that of my family. This was born out in a recent conversation with one of my daughters. "I just thought all Mamas came equipped that way she said.

Only in one respect was it ever a matter of concern. That was when I asked my husband if it would make him feel any differently about our sex life. He was as insulted as if I had cast aspersions on his manhood. I guess he was sincere. We are now in our seventies and he still likes to buy me filmy nightgowns for Christmas.