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The story of a father's fight to save his son, against  
 heartbreaking odds

## The Miracle of Donny Morton

Condensed from Chatelaine

Alma Edwards Smith

IN A POVERTY-STRICKEN farm near the little village of Archerwill in the bleak bushland of northern Saskatchewan lives Arthur Morton, whose desperate search for a miracle that would save his four-year-old son from a hopeless brain condition is a shining epic of devotion, faith and courage.

The Mortons, Arthur and Ella, already had two children, a boy and a girl, when Donald was born on April 25, 1947. But from the day he arrived a special bond of emotion drew him to his father. They were together every possible moment — while Arthur did the farm chores, called on a neighbor or worked in the garden. "Donny wasn't like our other children," Ella Morton says, eying them affectionately. "They have temper tantrums and get into all sorts of mischief. But Donny was always happy and gay and patient. And he had a wonderful sense of hu-



mor for such a little fellow. How he laughed when we played little jokes on him!"

Then one day when Donny was two the Mortons noticed he was limping. They took him to the doctor in Archerwill, 13 miles away. But, as Arthur Morton explains, "the limp was only noticeable right

after his nap. By the time we got him to town the doctor couldn't find anything."

Winter closed in and the Morton farm was all but isolated from the outside world. As the weeks went by the limp grew worse, and the handsome, well-built little chap began to lose weight. In the late winter his worried parents saw Donny reach for things and miss them by inches. He couldn't handle his toys, and he'd run into the furniture and knock things over.

Then he developed a severe intestinal infection. Deeply anxious, the Mortons decided they must chance a trip to the Rose Valley Hospital, 11 miles beyond Archerwill. And so one wintry night Arthur Morton milked the cows, did the chores and set off in the sleigh over rough, snow-blocked roads. It was bitterly cold.

Ella Morton's heart broke a little that night. She longed to go with her husband and son, but the other children needed her and she was expecting her fourth baby in a few weeks. So she wrapped Donny in warm blankets, made sure there was plenty of wood for the stove in the tiny caboose built on the sleigh, and wished them Godspeed. Down the road Arthur stopped to get a neighbor woman to come along and hold Donny, while he drove the team.

A few miles from home the bright moon which had been lighting the way disappeared and a raging blizzard struck. Arthur tried to turn back, but his trail was completely

covered. The wind threatened to topple the caboose and cutter.

When matters seemed at their worst, Donny had a convulsion. Arthur gave the horses their heads and turned full attention to his son. By the time the boy was sleeping, the snowdrifts were so high that the animals couldn't push through them.

Arthur Morton went out into the blinding snow, urging the horses through waist-deep drifts, keeping the sleigh from tipping, and praying that they were going toward town. About six in the morning, far-off lights blinked through the flying snow. Fearing the cold wind on Donny if he opened the caboose door, the exhausted man clung to the back of the sleigh, trusting the horses to make their way alone. The next thing he was aware of was the flash of lanterns and strong arms helping them all into warmth and safety.

The 11 miles from Archerwill to the 14-bed Rose Valley Hospital were covered in comfort by car, on the open highway. There the doctor recommended that Donny remain a few days for observation. "It was hard for me to leave the little tyke there alone," Arthur Morton says. "But when I said I'd be back soon, he gave me a big kiss and a grin. He was a plucky kid."

Donny's hospital stay lengthened into weeks. He contracted pneumonia and was desperately ill. But his days were made brighter by the arrival of his mother, who presented him with a baby sister.

It was while both parents were at the hospital that the doctor told them the boy's brain tissue was deteriorating — he would die within six months. There was no treatment he knew of that could help. He suggested they leave Donny in the hospital, but the Mortons would hear none of it. As soon as Ella was strong enough, Donny came home. He was spastic, had frequent convulsions and so much difficulty in swallowing that he ate practically nothing.

Ella gave him a few spoonfuls of baby food or cooked cereal every 20 minutes or so, and Donny began to gain slightly in weight. He could not walk, but he could crawl at a great speed. He had wonderfully happy times with his family, laughing over amusing little games. When the roads were passable he loved to go to church.

Yet the gain was only temporary. "The hardest thing to endure during those weeks," says Ella, "was to watch Donny, who had always been so robust and healthy, going back to being a baby. Soon the new baby was eating more than he was."

Summer came, and after the crop was in, the Mortons dipped into their meager savings and took Donny from doctor to doctor in Saskatoon, and then to Regina. Always they gave the same verdict — a hopeless brain disease which would gradually paralyze him more and more until death came.

The Mortons would not accept the word "hopeless." "When we looked at those trusting blue eyes,

we knew we could never give up." In April 1951 they sold three of their eight cows to pay for a plane ticket to Rochester and the Mayo Clinic. After extensive examinations the verdict was discouraging.

An almost beaten Arthur Morton, and a boy more dead than alive returned to the prairie homestead. But once again, under Ella's constant care and her gentle coaxing to drink a mouthful of juice or swallow a spoonful of porridge, the boy rallied.

Then Arthur remembered a faith healer, the Rev. William Branham, who had accomplished wonders for two deaf friends with whom he had worked several years before. The Mortons located the evangelist in Costa Mesa, Calif., near Los Angeles, where he was reportedly curing the sick by prayer.

With hopes renewed, they sold more cows; they now had a total of \$250. Once again Ella sent them off — the dogged father and the trusting child, now barely able to breathe, and wasted to a frightening 20 pounds. Arthur took \$240, leaving Ella \$10 with which to manage the family.

At Yorkton, Sask., Arthur found that a plane ticket cost nearly double the amount he had. "Everyone I met said, 'Go home, you have done all you can.' And then I'd look at the little tyke in my arms and his eyes would search my face as much as to say, 'We can beat this thing, the two of us,' and I couldn't go home."

So he bought a bus ticket, and

started off on a nightmarish journey. He chose the back seat where he could cradle Donny in his arms more easily, or lay him on the seat and massage the tiny wasted limbs to ease the muscle spasms.

The supply of baby food soon ran out. At village stops Morton would slip across to a grocery store for suitable food for the lad, but when they stopped at larger centers he had to rely on depot restaurants. Twenty-minute stopovers were too short for the father to choose something his son could swallow, rinse out diapers in the washroom and get lunch for himself. More often than not Arthur went without food or drink.

"Donny couldn't cry to let me know when he was in pain, or needed something," says the quiet Morton, "so I had to watch him constantly. When he grew restless I tried to guess his trouble. After a lot of trial and error I became quite proficient."

In spite of hardships Arthur Morton looks back on that 2800-mile bus trip with happy memories. "We were so close together all the time. Even though Donny couldn't smile, when I told him funny things that happened along the way his eyes would shine, and I knew that even if we didn't find our miracle we were both happier than if he had stayed in the hospital waiting to die."

Morton arrived in Los Angeles in June 1951, 18 months after Donny's condition had been pronounced hopeless. Now the unflagging faith that had carried them through so many

adversities began to be rewarded. Bewildered and nearly penniless, Morton asked Travelers' Aid to help him find the faith healer. They phoned the Los Angeles *Times* for information.

The editor asked, "Why in heaven's name would anyone come all the way from Saskatchewan?" And Travelers' Aid answered, "Because this man believes that if God helps to heal others He will help his son."

Here was a rare and wonderful devotion! A reporter was immediately assigned to drive the Mortons to the evangelist's meeting at Costa Mesa.

At the revival tent people were waiting in line for an audience with the man they hoped could heal their illnesses. But when they saw the slight, haggard man clutching the wasted little form they moved aside and motioned Morton into the tent ahead of them.

The healer asked no questions, but his eyes searched the boy's wide blue ones and saw his emaciated, twisted body. "Your son is suffering from a serious brain malady," he said to Morton. "But do not give up hope. With faith in God's power, and help from the medical world, your little son will live." Then, while 2700 persons bowed their heads, he prayed to God to save the child's life. Donny managed a smile for the first time in weeks.

Unbelievably, Arthur's miracle began to take place. In response to the *Times* story of the Mortons' pilgrimage, letters arrived at the newspaper office, among them one from a physio-

therapist and child educator. She recommended a noted Pasadena surgeon, Dr. William T. Grant, who had saved her after three years of helplessness following a brain injury, and she offered to assume expenses for his services.

Arthur Morton will always remember the doctor's words after the examination: "I think this is far from hopeless — if the boy can live through the operation."

That night Donny was admitted to St. Luke's Hospital in Pasadena. Doubtful that the undernourished, dehydrated child could survive, a small army of specialists stood by with oxygen, whole blood and emergency equipment during the delicate operation on the following morning.

Hours later Donny was wheeled out of the operating theater, still alive! As Arthur Morton joyfully walked beside the stretcher, his eyes greedily devoured the little face, relaxed at last after months of painful, taut expression. There would be many hard days ahead, the doctor cautioned. The boy would need more operations and expensive medications — though the doctors had donated their skill.

Arthur only shook his hand gratefully and grinned. "I don't know where I'll get the money, but I will — I promise. After one miracle it's not hard to believe in another."

The doctor, in response to dozens of phone calls, issued a statement. "The child had a subdural hydroma: a layer of clear fluid that compresses

the brain. This morning openings were made in the skull, and a subdural hydroma of moderate size was released from right and left sides. He withstood the operation well."

The story was flashed across the country by news services. Letters of admiration, sympathy and encouragement poured in to the hospital and newspaper. Most of them contained checks and cash to help with the staggering medical bills. Never once did Arthur Morton ask for a financial handout. He was fighting against desperate odds for his son's life, and he was willing to pay for victory with years of backbreaking labor if necessary.

A brittle, sophisticated city saw a picture of a dying child, with trusting eyes and a lopsided smile, tenderly cradled in the arms of a poverty-stricken father who clung tenaciously to the belief that God is good, and the city's heart warmed with a desire to aid these strangers. Extra help was needed at the hospital to attend to the phone calls and mail. One of the desk clerks said happily, "We need two switchboards — one for regular calls, and one for Donny."

Said Arthur: "Last week we came to a strange city, a strange country even, where we didn't know a soul. Now when I walk down the street folks come up to me, shake me by the hand and ask me, 'How's the boy?' When they walk off, I look down and there is money in my hand."

During the anxious days, Arthur

was always at the boy's bedside, encouraging him in a constant flow of chatter. Donny's eyes, when open, never left his father's face, and his frail hand, when he slept, still clutched Arthur's.

The crisis came Saturday night. Donny showed signs of weakening and the doctors were summoned. But once again the combined forces of a father's faith and the wonders of modern medicine coaxed the tiny life back from the valley of death, and the lad fell into a healing slumber just as dawn broke over the city. The anxious staff of St. Luke's Hospital uttered a little prayer of thanksgiving for the plucky little fighter.

Then came the wonderful day when the doctor said with cautious optimism, "Donny Morton is going to get well." The *Los Angeles Times* put through a call to Archerwill. "Donny is going to get well," Arthur cried to his wife 2800 miles away. "He weighs 23 pounds now." Sobs of joy and relief were Ella's answer.

A second operation to relieve pressure was necessary, and after the child spent six hours on the operating table another long vigil began. When the boy became restless Arthur would take the fumbling hand and murmur, "I'm here, Donny." His constant presence was considered a vital factor in the child's survival.

Western Airlines decided the best reinforcement for a little fellow facing his third brain operation would

be his mother, and they flew her to Los Angeles. The other children were left with a relative. Warm-hearted Saskatchewan neighbors took care of the haying. Four days after his third operation the boy was pronounced out of danger.

In mid-September a gay leave-taking was held in the St. Luke's Hospital sunroom. Donny could now sit up and reach out his arms to his parents in the first definite response since his surgery. He weighed 35 pounds. But his leg muscles were so badly atrophied, and the tendons so shrunk from inactivity, that another operation and many weeks of costly treatments were still needed. Donny was left behind, in the capable hands of the Pasadena physiotherapist who had first befriended him.

At home, radio station CKOM launched a "Donny Morton Fund" for the leg treatments. Children brought change from their piggy banks; a blind man gave five dollars; two orphans gave their birthday money. More than \$900 was raised, not as charity but as a medal for the shining glory of a father's faith and courage.

And then one day late in October a newscast informed radio listeners that Arthur Morton had flown to the coast to be with his son again. After surviving four critical brain operations, Donny — with tragic irony — had contracted pneumonia.

Donny's oxygen tent was removed as his father, haggard with anxiety, bent close to the little form and

coaxed, "Donny, Daddy's here. Come on, tyke, you're going to pull out of this."

But on November 2 Donny Morton died in his sleep, defeated in the end by an inexorable combination of pneumonia and meningitis.

Skeptics will say, "You see? Miracles don't happen in the 20th century." But they are wrong. The personal miracle Morton sought — that his child's life be saved — was denied. But out of his search for it came another miracle, because this Saskatchewan farmer's selfless and unquestioning pilgrimage across half a continent stirred the hearts of thousands. There are plans for a new wing to be built on St. Luke's Hospital, to further the advancement of children's brain surgery, and reports of a book and a movie that would

spread the story of Donny Morton. Arthur and Ella have dedicated in advance every dollar of the royalties to helping children who need care beyond their parents' ability to pay.

The Pasadena surgeon who operated on the boy has made this statement:

"Donny Morton is dead, and it would seem that the tenacious struggle of the child and his father had not been justly rewarded. But the case of this one boy has brought to light the fact that there are hundreds of Donny Mortons; and some of the cases since discovered are already on the road to recovery. Arthur Morton's unselfish devotion has not given him back his little boy, but it has opened the way for many other patients to receive adequate treatment."

### *Tit for Tat*

AN OXFORD medical student dug up an ancient University regulation that said he was entitled to a pint of beer as refreshment while cramming for final exams. He was so persistent that the authorities finally gave in and provided him with his pint.

They also searched the regulations, and slapped on him a fine of £5 (\$14) for not wearing a sword.

— *The Lancet*, quoted by UP

AN ANNAPOLIS midshipman, irked at having to attend chapel services every Sunday, finally hit upon a plan of escape. He announced that he had been converted to Mohammedanism, and asked to be excused from chapel and allowed to worship in his own way.

The Commandant agreed. But at dawn the next morning the midshipman was awakened from a sound sleep by the Officer of the Day and told to face Mecca to perform the rites of his new religion. The midshipman was shortly reconverted to Christianity.

— Contributed by Cdr. A. Talerico, Jr., USN