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CHILDREN'S PAGE STORIES -- 1986

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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CONTENTS

Story 1-a
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-b
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-c
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-d
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-e
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-f
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-g
THE BRIDGE

Story 1-h
THE BRIDGE

Story 2
CHANGED LUKE

Story 3
YOUR HEART IS SHOWING

Story 4
HOW TO BE THANKFUL

Story 5
THE BEST GIFT FOR JESUS

* * * * *

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Story 1-a
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 1

"The bridge! The bridge!" Susie cried, hurrying to the bed and shaking her sister vigorously. "It's on fire again! Or . . . or at least it looks that way."

Jolene popped out of bed like a jack-in-the-box and ran to the window, exclaiming sleepily, "If that old bridge was 'on fire' as often as you say it was it would have been burned down long ago. Now, see, there's nothing at all down there by the bridge: Only the black, dark night, out there and the owls and . . . "But I saw it, Jo! Honest I did. It looked like the bridge was a blaze of light. Just like that, I saw it," Susie declared, snapping her fingers together. "Then it was gone. It's the truth; every single world of it is. And Jolene, it... it's scary."

"The night was made for sleeping, so I'm going to make good use of it. Good-night, Miss Imagination," Jolene said as she jumped back into the bed and pulled the sheet up close around her neck. "You'd better come, too," Jo added, agitated because she had been awakened by her sister. "The mornings come early on a farm."

Susie gave one long, last, lingering look toward the ancient covered bridge that spanned Roaring Creek from one bank of the stream to the other then, reluctantly, she tore herself away from the curtained window in the bedroom and crawled beneath the covers on the bed beside Jolene.

She was in bed, to be sure, but sleep just would not come. She had seen that strange light too many times to push it out of her thoughts and out of her mind. Jo had called her Miss Imagination, hadn't she? Only, it wasn't imagination. Not one single little bit of it was. Why, she . . . Susie . . . would never think of saying she saw something that she didn't see. That would be a lie; and she knew the Bible said that all liars would "have their part in the lake which burneth with fire

and brimstone." (Rev. 21:8). She knew, too, that St. Mark's Gospel said hell's fire would never be quenched. She wouldn't think of lying. Not at all! There was nothing in her heart that made her want to lie; not since Jesus had saved her from her sins and she had gotten sanctified wholly. No, there wasn't. And Jolene knew this, too, she was sure.

Susie turned her thoughts to the bridge again. It had stood there for years and years, her father and mother had said. "We've lived here for twenty-five years," her daddy had said one night as the family sat around the kitchen table eating pop corn. "That bridge was here when we bought this farm. And it was here for all the years that the Haleys owned the farm. Before we bought it, that is," their dad had added.

"How many years was that?" Tom had asked, looking up into their father's face.

"Well, let's see," came the quick reply as the head of the home scratched his head thoughtfully. "Seems to me the Haleys lived here at least thirty-eight or thirty-nine years."

Their mother had spoken up then, with, "Mrs. Haley told me they lived here exactly forty years and seven months."

"I knew it was a long time," their father remarked. "And the Haleys would not have sold the farm to us ... ever., if it hadn't been for Mr. Haley's heart condition. They wanted to die right here in this house. They loved the farm like we love it. Or maybe I should say that we love the farm like the Haleys loved it. They raised all of their children in this house."

"What a lot of memories!" Sherlene had exclaimed. Sherlene was their oldest sister. The oldest child in the family, to be exact. In the Tiffany family, that is. Susie loved Sherlene. She was so much like Mother that sometimes Susie felt that her mother and her sister could have been twins. Identical twins, even!

It was Tom who had brought the family's thinking back to the covered bridge with, "That means, then, that the bridge is at least sixty-five, almost sixty-six years old! Whew! That's old!"

"Some are older than that," Mr. Tiffany had declared. "They are constructed of timbers and beams that will withstand the elements of both nature and of time."

"Do they never rot or decay?" Jolene had asked.

"In time, yes. But they can always be replaced by the same hard, durable timber. Our bridge has had to have repairs made on it. But we do this gladly, since we must have the bridge to get across to the alfalfa fields and the woods on the other side," the father had replied.

Susie's mind wandered now to the sturdy old bridge. How she loved that bridge! Their bridge, really. In the hot months of summer, Peppermint the cat, Muffin the dog, and Miss Calico, her rag doll, used the bridge as a pretend play house, with natural air conditioning. More than once, both Peppermint and Miss Calico had napped side by side on the very same soft pillow which she had taken along to the bridge for that express purpose.

Susie laughed out loud when she thought about Peppermint's name. She had named the tiny kitten, so her mother had told her, when she herself was only four years old. And all because she had loved peppermint candy better than any other candy in the world! Poor Peppermint! Susie thought, laughing out loud again. But Peppermint loved catnip tea, didn't she? So, since catnip tea had a minty taste to it, Susie decided that Peppermint was a rather fitting name, after all, for the fluffy yellow cat, whom she loved every bit as much as she loved Miss Calico.

Miss Calico? Oh dear, she was downstairs!

Susie almost jumped out of bed after Miss Calico, but she knew Jolene would be really unhappy with her if she did. Still, she could hardly bear the thought of Miss Calico lying on the hard kitchen chair downstairs while she, Susie, had a nice soft bed to sleep in. No, she couldn't! She must do something about it

Wiggling her toes softly-softly from beneath the sheet, Susie eased her body to the side of the bed. Soon she was on her feet. Quickly she darted down the hallway and, on bare feet, she ran down the stairs to the kitchen. And suddenly she saw the light again--through the kitchen window--on the bridge!

She gasped. Then, grabbing Miss Calico from the hard kitchen chair, she turned to run up the stair steps.

"Quiet!" A voice exclaimed over her shoulder. "Don't you scream!"

(See Chapter 2 next month)

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February 1986

Story 1-b
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 2

Susie collapsed with fright.

"Sorry," Tom's voice soothed close to her ear as he gathered the slender little girl into his arms. "Why are you down here?" he asked. "Hadn't you ought to be sleeping?"

Susie wiggled out of her brother's arms. Squatting on the floor, her long night-gown drawn tightly and closely around her legs and tucked beneath her feet, she drew Miss Calico to her chest and cried.

"What's wrong with you?" Tom asked kindly.

"You... you frightened me. Terribly, Tom." And the little girl sobbed her fears away.

"There!" she exclaimed, getting to her feet and facing her brother. "I feel better now. But, why aren't you in bed, Tom?"

"I believe I asked you much the same question, Susie," Tom teased. "And I must admit that I think you're a rather brave little sister, coming down here all alone. And in the dark, too."

"I came after Miss Calico," Susie replied honestly. "I couldn't bear the thought of her sleeping on a hard kitchen chair and me sleeping in a nice soft bed. Now, why aren't you in bed, Tom?"

Tom turned toward the window. "There are some things little girls don't need to know, Susie."

"But the mornings come fast on a farm. Jolene told me so just a little while ago." "She told you the truth, too."

Tom laughed a soft, good-natured kind of laugh. "And now, why don't you run along to bed? You have Miss Calico"

Susie hugged the rag doll closely to her. "I have Miss Calico, yes; but I don't know why you are down here. So I guess I'll just sit here in the dark with you until you go to bed. I may see that strange fight on the bridge again."

Tom spun around on his heel so fast that he almost fell over. "What did you say?" he asked, coming over to where Susie now sat perched like a little bird on a kitchen chair.

"I said I may see the fight again The fight on our bridge. Jolene said I was Miss Imagination; but I'm not, Tom. I saw that light too many times to know that it is not my imagination. And tonight, it looked like our bridge was almost on fire. I saw it!" Susie exclaimed with utter sincerity and honesty. "It . . . it's scary!" she said, shaking.

Tom stood looking down on his little sister. Then, with seriousness in his voice, he said, "Jolene's wrong. All wrong; it isn't your imagination, Susie. Not at all! You did see the light I had hoped that none of my sisters would see it. I don't want you frightened. And, in a way, it's something which only a man should be concerned over or troubled about."

"But what is it, Tom? I don't like it. It scares me. That's my beautiful big pretend playhouse. Muffin and Peppermint and Miss Calico and I have ever so much fun inside the bridge. And Tom, a swallow has a nest beneath the roof. It's made out of mud and looks like it's plastered onto one of those strong beams. Oh, it's so pretty. And just think, one of these days, soon, there will be little baby swallows in that nest. I don't like to think about anything happening to the swallows. Nor to the bridge."

Tom scratched his head. He looked all serious and deep in thought. Susie felt sorry for her brother; men always seemed to have to know what to do in each and every situation and how to solve the problems entangled in those situations, she thought, as she bowed her golden head and asked the dear Saviour to help Tom. "And don't let him get old before he is old," she added as a sob caught somewhere in her throat and chest.

"What'd you say?" Tom asked, shaking himself out of his deep thoughts.

"I was praying," Susie replied candidly and honestly.

"I don't want you to worry about the bridge, Susie; do you hear?"

"I hear. But how can I help not to worry? Every night, about this very same hour, those frightening lights shine in the meadow and on the bridge. And... and... Tom, once, when I was watching from the bedroom window, I heard a scream. It . . . it sounded like somebody was hurting an animal. Or... or killing it, even. I cried You know I can't bear to have anything hurting, nor suffering with pain. I was dreadfully scared. I wanted to tell Jolene but I knew she'd only tell me to get to sleep and to forget about the noises one hears in the night. She'd have told me it was an owl; I know she would have. But it wasn't an owl, Tom. I know how the owls sound."

Tom straightened up till he stood his full five-feet-eleven-inches tall. "Of course you know what an owl's call sounds like, Susie. You've been raised on the farm and among these mountains, so why shouldn't you know! Jolene just doesn't have the deep love that you have for the mountains and the brooks and for the animals and birds that are in these mountains. But Jolene's a wonderful sister, Susie. God just makes us all different, I guess. Jolene's going to be a wonderful homemaker and wife and mother some day, the Lord willing. She's a regular little 'slave already,' and Tom laughed softly as he finished the sentence.

Susie laughed too. Then she said, "Oh Tom, you know I love Jolene. Oh, I do. I do! It's just that she... well..., she just doesn't understand how much I love the old bridge. And . . . and now, these spooky lights! They... they ter... ri... fy me. I believe that's the word Sherlene used one time when she told me how scared and . . . and frightened she was over something. Did I use it correctly, Tom?" she asked.

"Did you use it correctly! Why Susie, you're getting smarter every day. And more grown-up, too. But now you must go to bed. It's too late for you to be up any longer."

Susie spun around and, just as she did so, she saw the light again. "Oh Tom!" she cried. "There it was again!" Then, turning quickly, she ran up the stairs, clutching Miss Calico tightly to her heart.

(See Chapter 3 Next Month)

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March 1986

Story 1-c
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 3

Susie slid quietly and carefully beneath the sheets; she must not disturb her sister. Miss Calico cuddled softly into the arm that held her, Susie was proud of Miss Calico; she was quiet as a mouse and always in her very best behavior. The little girl was thankful that Miss Calico was only a doll., a home made rag doll, at that! At least Miss Calico would never have to worry about the light down near the bridge nor wonder just what was happening there.

She pulled the sheet up near her chin, not that she was cold; she wasn't. But the sheet made her feel more secure and safe. Then she slid her tiny foot across the bottom of the sheet until she felt Jolene's foot and she felt even more safe and secure.

She closed her eyes, wondering what a little girl like she could do to help find out what was going on down at the bridge, and wishing (for a fleeting moment) that she was a rag doll with no problems whatever to worry over. Then she felt bad, knowing that God had made her to be a little girl and not a lifeless rag doll. God had given her physical life . . . she could eat and talk and see and hear and run and laugh; Miss Calico couldn't.

Susie sighed happily. Why, she could do ever so many things! She could even cry! And beside all these other good things, she had a new heart. A changed, born again, converted heart. Yes, she did. Ever since the night when she had asked Jesus to forgive her for her many sins and to save her soul, she had a new-changed heart. Since then, she was a happy little girl who was at peace with God and with her associates as well as with herself This was something Miss Calico could never experience nor feel and know, she knew.

She hugged Miss Calico to her, feeling suddenly very sorry for the beloved rag doll. Then she remembered that, since she was Jesus' very own child, she could talk to Him about the strange and frightening light down at the old covered bridge. Yes, she could tell God everything. And she could ask Him to do something about it. Didn't the Bible say that His ears were ever open to the cries and the prayers of His children? It even said that God's eyes "run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." Miss Halley had had her memorize the verse in Sunday School class a long time ago. Many times, when she was scared or frightened, Susie had quoted the verse out loud and, always, her fears had fled in the knowledge that God's eyes were watching over her. It was so consoling to know this.

She listened to Jolene's steady breathing and felt a great wave of love rush over her for her sister. Jolene had taught her so many things; things that made her feel a bit grown-up at times and also saved their mother many steps and much time.

Susie reached up and grabbed one of her long braids of hair in her hand. Jolene had taught her how to brush her hair with firm, stout strokes until it felt silky-smooth and the tangles were all out. Then she had patiently worked with her until she, Susie, was able, by herself, to braid her

long, thick, golden hair into two neat braids that fell down her back. Too, Jolene had taught her how to make the bed until the covers were free from wrinkles and lay smooth and flat and neat on top of the mattress and over the fluffed-up pillows. She had even allowed her to help make biscuits for breakfast a number of times. And, when time permitted it, Jolene was teaching her how to make nightgowns for Miss Calico to sleep in.

Susie repositioned Miss Calico in her arm and made sure that the doll's nightgown was down around her ankles. It was the first gown she had ever made for the beloved rag doll and, while the stitches weren't the neatest, the flowers in the material were beautiful. Big, bright, bold, red and yellow poppies, they were. Jolene had thought the print was almost too big and bold for Miss Calico; but Susie's "taste" ran differently and, since Miss Calico didn't have any objections whatever to the colors, the gown was cut out and stitched together and worn on the favorite doll.

Susie heaved another sigh. Jolene was such a very dear sister. If only she could understand about the strange light at the bridge and the even stranger and more-frightening sounds which she, Susie, had heard coming from either the woods or the alfalfa fields across the bridge. Or both.

She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, trying to forget about the happenings at the bridge, or near it; she must go to sleep. It would be hard to get up in the morning unless she got enough sleep, she knew.

She listened to a screech owl as it screeched eerily from a near-by tree. They were harmless little creatures, she knew; still, their high-pitched screaming-screeching sent shivers tingling up and down her spine. If the little night hunter would have called during the day she would not have been frightened. Not at all. Day-light took the fear out of many things, didn't it?

She scooted farther down beneath the sheets, taking Miss Calico with her and, finally, she fell asleep. But it was not a peaceful sleep: She dreamed that someone was shooting down near the bridge and, with their shot, came the pitiful cry of a beautiful wild animal.

Trembling violently and perspiring freely, Susie sat upright in bed. She wasn't dreaming! Not at all! Again she heard the crack of a gun. Then, saddest of all, came another pitiful cry..., or was it a moan?... of an animal.

Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed.

(See Chapter 4)

* * * * *

April 1986

Story 1-d
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 4

Susie slept little that night. At breakfast she looked wan and tired and felt like she was choking with every bite of food she swallowed. Jolene pinched her lovingly and said, "Wake up, Goldilocks... my little Miss Imagination and eat your breakfast, or you won't have strength to help Mot, her and me in the garden. Sherlene s been gone to work long ago. Look how high the sun is in the sky already. Mother and I thought we'd wait and eat breakfast when you did. We've picked the peas and some of the green beans. Plenty more out there to pick, though."

Susie smiled at her sister but her mind was not on beans and peas; nor on any other vegetable, for that matter -- it was with the animals that she had heard last night. She was crying ... inside., with them. For them. Oh, when would God uncover whatever was going on, and stop it? she wondered.

She helped Jolene with the breakfast dishes then hurried outside to shell peas. The morning was beautiful; not too hot, and certainly not cold. Whiffs and puffs of cool breezes ruffled and rustled through the clematis vine on the trellis at one side of the porch. It was most refreshing, Susie thought, as she settled down On the bottom porch step and began shelling the tender green peas. Two bushels of them!

She listened to the soft ping, ping, ping as the lovely green peas fell from their opened "jackets" into the pan on her lap. She enjoyed the sound; it was pleasant to listen to and seemed merry and jolly, much like the peas were saying they were glad to be out of their tight, fat "jackets" and were enjoying their freedom.

Susie popped a handful of the tasty little things into her mouth and sighed contentedly. How very, very sweet they were! She was sure she liked them better this way than any other way. Still, when Sherlene thickened them and served them over split hot dogs, well, they were delicious that way, too, she conceded mentally.

Inside the kitchen, she heard Mother ready the jars for canning the beans. The peas would be blanched, chilled quickly, then frozen. It was such a good feeling, having a happy, working home like theirs, a home where everybody loved each other and went about their work with a happy heart. And she was a part of all this! she thought happily and joyously. She knew that at the center of everything in their home was the blessed Lord Jesus, This is why they were happy, and worked together so peaceably and willingly and loved each other. Yes, it was all because of Jesus.

She loved to shell peas. It was fun. Looking into her pan, she knew why the merry little ping, ping, ping sound had ceased and wasn't being heard any more; the pan was fast filling up.

She rushed into the kitchen and emptied the shelled peas into a larger container.

"You're a fast worker!" her mother exclaimed, hugging Susie. "You've been helping to shell peas ever since you were four years old. And I do believe you get faster every year."

"As soon as I get more beans snapped and ready for you to can," Jolene said, "I'll blanch Susie's peas and get them ready for the freezer."

Susie hurried outside, feeling happy all over in knowing that she, too, was having a part in getting things ready for winter's eating. Being helpful was so rewarding, she realized

Hour after hour she worked. Sometimes her eyes felt like they just could not stay open much longer. But the little girl stayed on the step, opening pod after pod after pod, until one bushel basket was totally and completely empty and she was working on the second.

Halfway through the second bushel, her eyes refused to stay open any longer. She leaned her hand on the step above her and, though she hadn't meant to go to sleep, she fell asleep in spite of not meaning to. Her mother, seeing the golden head pillowed on the step, slipped quietly through the kitchen door and gathered Susie in her arms. Lifting her gently, she carried her to the hammock on the lawn. Planting a kiss on the sun-bronzed cheeks, she hurried back into the kitchen, feeling blest indeed for God's gift of children.

The sun was well on its way to sinking out of sight in the west for another day when Susie finally sat up and rubbed her eyes. The bridge! She hadn't gotten to go down to the bridge today! And she had meant to do that. Yes, of all days, today was to have been a sort of looking around day down there; a day to see if she could discover anything about the mysterious light and.., and the animals.

She jumped off the hammock and ran across the lawn to the green pasture where her father had moved the sheep for grazing. She must get to the bridge and look around before it got too dark. Maybe she could find the animal that had cried so sadly and pitifully last night, she thought. Maybe it was hurt. Injured. If so, her father and Tom would bring it home and make it get well. They were so gentle and kind to animals!

Susie's legs moved like little pistons. The sheep paused briefly in their grazing as she cut through their pasture land, greeting her with warm little bleating sounds, then resuming their eating. She called a friendly "Hello" to them over her shoulder as she raced away.

It was cool by the bridge and Susie was almost tempted to sit down and rest a while. But the fast disappearing sun told its silent story of approaching night and darkness and she moved quickly through the bridge to the other side. "Please, dear Jesus," she prayed, "let me find something that will help to get this mystery solved. Thank You for it. You said we were to ask and You'd answer; I'm asking"

She slowed down to a brisk walk when she started through the forty acre alfalfa field. That light could have come from the alfalfa field. Or maybe the woods, even. Or the creek. She wished she knew.

(See Chapter 5)

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May 1986

Story 1-e
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 5

Susie stopped for breath in the middle of the alfalfa field. She looked toward the woods. Already it looked dark in there. Far to her right, where the sun's rays were lingering in rosy-red hues in the west, the woods didn't look nearly so dark and foreboding. Maybe, if she ran real fast, she could take a quick look around just inside the woods before it got really dark, and... and just maybe, she would find some clue to the light on the bridge and the mysterious night happenings down here, she thought.

She looked back at the bridge then headed due south, trying to remember to stay on the same "course" as she felt the light would have shone from, on to the bridge. She was glad no one had seen her leave the yard . . . Tom especially. Yes, especially Tom! He would have headed her off, she knew, and told her not to come down here. But she had to know what was happening to the dear little animals. They were like friends to her. She loved them every bit as much as she loved Peppermint and Muffin.

She thought of the many deer that came into the lush alfalfa field to feed and her heart did a quick jump inside her chest.

Why, it was their feeding time now! Yes, it was. And early morning, too. If she was really quiet, maybe she'd see them. At least some of them. They were such bright creatures, she thought, so very intelligent. They looked so very alert as they stepped from the woods into the alfalfa field, she remembered. Sure, they ate some of the alfalfa, but, like her father often said, "They must eat too; the same as we do."

Susie was thankful for her wonderful father He reminded her so much of how she pictured God, her Heavenly Father... kind, tender, loving, and compassionate. Many a year, if the winter was a hard and bitter one, her father and Tom had hauled bale after bale of hay to the edge of the woods and fed the lovely little creatures to keep them alive.

She crept into the woods and stood for a while, looking back across the field to the bridge which, by light of the sun's last rays, looked anything but scary. But then, like her parents had often said, bridges, and even old houses and barns, or any such like thing, could not harm one; they were inanimate objects..., whatever that meant... and they would not rush out at, nor after, a person It was wicked people who lived in (or just "bummed" around in) these places who made the place what it was, either a haven of peace and love and happiness and rest or a den of sin and wickedness and evil and iniquity. So there was no need to be afraid of her beautiful pretend house . . . the bridge. In itself, it was harmless.

By now, Susie's eyes were adjusted to the fast-falling shadows of night in the woods and, seeing flowers blooming in clumps in a nearby area, she hurried after them, deciding to pick armloads of them to take home to Mother and her sisters. How very beautiful they would look on the table and in the bedrooms! she thought silently as she hurried through the woods, gathering the fragrant blooms, completely unmindful of how far she was traveling.

A brush crackled nearby and Susie looked up from the flowers to see a giant buck crash through the woods. His antlers were magnificent; almost kingly looking, she thought, smiling. Well, maybe kings didn't wear antlers on their heads; they wore crowns. But at least the deer's kingly crown was his antlers.

She laughed softly out loud. Pretending could be such great fun, she thought, straightening up and noticing that she could scarcely see through the darkness. Oh dear! She had been so busy gathering flowers that she hadn't noticed how dark it was growing. Nor how fast. Worst of all, she had forgotten all about looking around for a clue. She had nothing whatever that would help to solve the mystery of the strange light and the mystery surrounding the bridge. Not one single thing!

For a moment, Susie felt like crying. She should have been looking for clues. Or, at least, for only one. But, instead, she had forgotten all about a clue as soon as she had seen the flowers. And now, with the curtain of darkness pulled over the woods and the land, there was no way she would be able to discover ... or uncover..., a single thing.

She almost scolded herself for neglecting the important thing; for forgetting to look for a clue..., or clues, in the plural. And all because she had seen the beautiful flowers and had become totally and completely absorbed with them. And now, here she was, somewhere in the woods, but she didn't know exactly where. If it hadn't gotten dark so fast she was sure she would have known where she was. Or would she?

Fear churned inside Susie's heart. And what fear! She had never, not in all of her life, been alone in the woods when it was dark. Oh, if only she knew which direction to go to reach home! But she didn't. And since she didn't know, that meant that she was lost.

Lost! Lost! Susie was scared. Oh, why did she come to the woods so late in the evening? Why?

Clutching the flowers to her she began running through the woods, not thinking that she might be going farther away from the alfalfa field rather than getting closer to it. Tears were running down her cheeks. "Please help me, Jesus dear!" she cried. "Help me!"

(See Chapter 6)

* * * * *

June 1986

Story 1-f

THE BRIDGE

Chapter 6

The sun was now well hidden by its drop into the sky in the west and a heavy darkness descended upon the woods. It was so dark that Susie had no idea where she was going, whether east or west or north or south; worse still, she couldn't see. Every tree looked like a tall giant with waving, swaying arms. Of course, she knew there were no giants anywhere near her and that the waving, swaying arms were only leaf-covered branches shaking in the early night air. She wanted to cry, but she knew that wouldn't help at all. Not one bit! She felt like shouting for help, but when she tried to call, no sound came from her voice. Not even a teeny, tiny squeak! Oh, dear, had she become so frightened that she had lost her voice, too? It was bad enough for her to be lost in the great dark woods but it was even worse to have lost her voice.

She felt utterly exhausted, and so very tired and frightened. If only she could rest! If only she hadn't come! If only she were in her very own soft bed this very minute! Oh, if only

Susie's thoughts were all canceled out by something she knew she heard somewhere nearby. What was it? She stopped dead-still, not taking another step nor making any sound whatever. Her heart was racing and jumping and pumping ever so loudly. Would it stay inside her chest? she wondered.

She leaned her tiny body against a tree trunk and listened as the night breeze whispered through the trees and around her trembling form. She wanted to run, but something kept her still. Then, from somewhere nearby, she heard a man's voice, not loud nor boisterous, but soft and low, "Guess it was only a deer, Malloy," he said. "Let's move on. Tonight should be another good night. If we can get as many deer this night as we got the past few nights we'll be able to buy some of those things we've been wanting."

"I never knew there was such a demand for venison in those out of State restaurants," the man Malloy remarked.

"It's the big meat item in the ritzy restaurants, Malloy! That's why we're getting such big money for every one we send up there. And that alfalfa field across from the covered bridge is the perfect place to get them."

"What if the farmer gets suspicious?" Malloy asked quickly.

"I told you we have nothing to worry about. They have no idea what's going on."

"But the light..., it's a bright one, Sul. They can't help but see it. It lights up the bridge something fierce.

"By the time we're using this light to blind the deer those people are off to the land of dreams. They work hard all day, Malloy, and when bedtime comes they're asleep almost as soon as they hit the bed. A laboring man sleeps well. Now stop worrying and let's be quiet; deer are

sensitive creatures. They hear well and their sense of smell is acute and sharp. Fortunately for us, the wind's in our favor tonight; it's carrying our scent away from them."

"Unless, of course, they're coming in from the same direction we are," Malloy remarked. "They're almost too beautiful to... to"

"Be quiet!" Sul exclaimed. "You're too soft. Now let's move on. Everything seems clear...."

Susie's body felt limp; much like Miss Calico's was. She could hardly believe her ears. Malloy; that was one of the names, and Sul was the other. Oh, she must remember their names. And she must try to remember all that those wicked men had said, too. Just as soon as she could get to her father and Tom, she must tell them what she knew.

Suddenly Susie's body straightened up tall. She had come to the woods for a clue, or clues, and here was more than any clue; she had the answer to what was going on! And ... and if she followed the two men, she'd get to the alfalfa field and to the bridge!

Taking a step away from the tree's trunk, against which she had faded like a little shadow when she first heard the noise, Susie listened. Oh, how she listened! She would have to walk ever so softly and quietly, she knew, so they would not hear her. If she were a little Indian girl she would know exactly how to walk without making much, if any, noise, she thought.

But she wasn't an Indian girl; she was Susie Tiffany, and she had to walk like Susie Tiffany, she knew.

Stepping as softly and as carefully as she could in the darkness, she started following the two men, staying far enough behind to not let them know they were being followed yet close enough to know she was headed in the right direction. She was scared, and tears rolled down her full little cheeks, but the thought that she would reach the alfalfa field eventually made her walk on. With every step she took, it seemed, she was asking Jesus, her kind Heavenly Father Shepherd to keep her safe and to please lead her home to her father and her mother.

At thought of her parents, a great flood of tears rushed from Susie's eyes. What would they think of her for going into the woods so late in the evening. And without asking, too? Why, they must be sick with worry over her. She could just see Mother sobbing and hear her saying, "Oh, where could Susie have gone? She never goes away without asking me if she may go! I carried her to the hammock when she fell asleep shelling peas; but she's not there any more. She isn't anywhere! Oh, Susie, Susie!"

Susie sobbed. Never, never would she go away again without first asking could she go. Never. It had gotten her into trouble and it was causing everyone at home needless worry, she knew.

Praying and sobbing, she pushed through the darkness.

(See Chapter 7)

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July 1986

Story 1-g
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 7

Susie stifled her sobs; those men must never hear her, nor know that she was following them. Once she stumbled slightly over a fallen tree and almost fell to the forest floor, but she grabbed hold of a sapling just in time to break her fall and to stand upright on her feet again.

"I'm sure I heard something," one of the men declared, stopping and listening.

"Shall I flash the light around?" the other asked quickly.

"Don't you dare!" came the flat rejoinder. "You'd frighten the deer away. Anyhow, it could well have been a deer. This woods is full of them. They love the farmer's alfalfa field. Good, lush eating for them. And the creek's handy for drinking when they get thirsty. This is the ideal set-up. Now be quiet; we're almost at the field"

Susie didn't hear anything else. Her frightened but happy little heart almost burst with joy over knowing that she was almost at the beloved and familiar field. Oh, she could scarcely wait to get home. Home, to Mother and Father, Sherlene, Tom and Jolene and, yes, home to Muffin and Peppermint and Miss Calico, too.

She stood still and remained deathly silent, waiting and listening to hear the men move on again. Oh, why didn't they start to walk again? she wondered. Were they waiting to hear the noise again, which her near-fall had made? What would happen if they discovered her presence in the woods?

She closed her eyes tightly and prayed hard and earnestly, asking Jesus to protect her and to keep her safe from the men and to not even so much as allow them to know that she was there. God had blinded the army of the Syrians when Elijah prayed, hadn't He! Surely He could keep the two men blind to her presence here! He was still the same God; He hadn't changed nor had He lost His mighty power either, she knew. And even now, while she was scared and trembling with fear, God's big all-seeing eyes were looking down upon her. He was watching her. He would care for her, too. Didn't the Bible say that He noticed the little sparrow when it fell? If a sparrow was important to God, Susie knew that she was also.

She waited and waited. Her heart was hammering inside her chest. Would the men hear it? My, but it sounded loud. At least, to her it did. Especially in the woods on a dark night! Oh, if only she was wrapped in Mother's or Father's arms now! How secure those loving arms made her feel!

She heard a brush crack somewhere ahead of her and she knew the men had resumed their journey. Breathing easier and more lightly, she waited in the darkness, listening until she felt it was safe to follow once again. Then, stepping as softly quiet as she could, she began walking after the man Malloy and his companion, Sul. Sul seemed to be the leader. She must remember to tell Father and Tom this as soon as she got home.

Who were these men, and where had they come from? she wondered. And was what they were doing called poaching? Wasn't that the word Mister Harschmann, their near neighbor, had used when talking to her hither one winter night about someone who had been killing deer out of season, and on his land? Susie was sure that was the very word she had heard their neighbor use when talking about the deer. So, could it be that this is what was happening at the bridge and in her father's alfalfa field?

Susie shuddered. The men must be cruel, she thought, to take the lives of the beautiful deer. Especially when they were doing it for money by selling the meat. That's what Sul had said they were doing, he heard the words with her very own ears. Malloy seemed a bit more sensitive, she thought. But was he? Did either of the men have a little girl? she wondered. Or a boy? If so, what would their little children think if they knew what their father was doing?

Susie shivered in the darkness. The men were indeed wicked, this she was certain of; else, why would they try to hide what they were doing behind the cover of darkness and of the night! The words which her father had read from the Bible in family worship one day now came back to her forcibly and with full illumination and enlightened understanding: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

"For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd,"

She walked on, quietly and softly, her mind deep in thought over the Scripture verses which had come so suddenly and fittingly to her mind. Didn't the men know that nothing was hidden from God's eyes? Didn't they have a mother or a father who had taught them about God and His all-seeing eye? Why, nothing was covered from God. Not even the killing and the selling of the deer. God saw everything in everyone's life and heart. Everything! No matter how hard one tried to hide a thing from God, it couldn't be done: God saw everything. Not even the cover of darkness could hide wickedness from Him; He saw. He knew!

She felt a surge of pure joy wash over her as she realized that her God saw the good and the righteous things one did, too. And, since she belonged to Jesus and was His child through salvation and entire sanctification, he was beholding every good and upright thing she was doing and He was well pleased. More than anything, she wanted to please Jesus. All the time, too! Not just now and then, or some of the time. No indeed! But all the time!

Without realizing it, Susie came suddenly out of the deep, dark forest to the alfalfa field. Where were the men? she wondered. And would she be safe to walk through the field, or would they think she was a deer?

Again her heart began its ceaseless hammering.

(See Chapter 8)

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August 1986

Story 1-h
THE BRIDGE

Chapter 8

Susie Tiffany stood like a statue at the edge of the forest and the alfalfa field. Her whole being wanted to race like the wind for home. Her heart jumped and thumped with joy over knowing that she was no longer lost and knew her way home now. But a still small voice within her told her to keep silent and to stand deathly still.

She raised her eyes toward the indigo blue-black sky and saw myriad stars studding the canopy. They twinkled, blinked and winked down upon her. Oh, how she loved their lovely little twinkly lights! They seemed to give her courage and a degree of strength. God was up there, she knew. The stars were His gift of one of the "lesser lights" to rule the night. This, too, her father had read in family worship one time. She had thought it so beautiful when she had heard it read and, now, with no bright lights to take away from these "lesser lights," Susie was sure that the stars had never been more beautiful. Nor more welcome, either.

She waited, listening, and wondering what had happened to the two men. Where were they? Had they, perhaps, seen her? How near., or far ... were they to or from her? She looked up at the stars again and whispered a prayer to God. Oh, she was thankful that He heard her faintest whispered prayer. Hadn't Hannah whispered her prayers to God? Indeed she had! And God had heard those prayers and He had answered, too: The baby Samuel was proof that He had heard and answered. (It was one of Susie's favorite Bible stories.)

She looked toward the bridge and had a sudden urge to run to it. But the alfalfa field was big. If she ran, the men might think she was a deer. And they had a gun, she knew. She had heard the shots from the security of her bedroom more than once.

"Please help me, dear Jesus," she whispered heavenward. "You know how to get me home safely. I won't ever come out alone again so late in the evening without asking. I'm sorry for doing this, Jesus. Please help me..."

Susie had scarcely finished her prayer when she heard a man's voice to the right of where she stood statue-like, say, "Must be doing something over at the farmer's tonight; I see lights on inside and out. Even out at the barn. We'll lay low for awhile. Can't afford to take chances. Let's

head down around the bend and come back in an hour or two. They should all be sound asleep by then."

"Might as well," came the quick reply. "We can't do anything that will arouse suspicion. And, if we're careful and quiet, we may see some deer down there"

"Possibly. But nothing like right here Well, let's go."

Susie scarcely breathed as the men passed right in front of her. One was tall and broad-shouldered; the other was almost as tall, but more stocky in build. And they each carried a gun! She shivered with fright.

She waited until she was sure they were gone; then, like a frightened deer she raced across the broad alfalfa field toward the bridge. Oh, the beautiful, beautiful bridge! Her pretend play house! It was now a haven for her trembling body. She was through it in less time than ever and when she saw the familiar lights of home, she began sobbing brokenly. Never had home looked so welcome nor so wonderful. She raced up the back porch steps and in through the kitchen door, crying, "Mother! Father! Oh, Mother!"

"Susie! Susie! Oh, my baby!" And Mrs. Tiffany's arms crushed Susie's body to her heaving breast as she cried thankfully, "Thank God! Thank God! The lost is found! The lost is found! Call everybody and tell them Susie's home. Oh, my darling, where were you? What happened?"

Suddenly Susie exclaimed, "Oh Mother, get Father and Tom. Quick! Something wicked's going on in our alfalfa field and down by the bridge. Please let me down; I must tell Father and Tom. I went to the field for a clue. Then I walked into the woods. Forgive me, Mother, for going away without asking you. But I...."

"And what's this about a clue?" Tom asked, bursting into the house with Father at his heels "I told Dad I was afraid you had gone exploring."

"Please Tom, you must listen to me. I found out what's going on. I got lost in the woods, picking flowers for Mother until it was too dark to see. Then I didn't know how to get home. So I asked Jesus to help me. Along came these two men... Malloy was one man's name and Sul was the other I heard them call each other by these names. One was tall with broad shoulders; the other was almost but not quite so tall and he was more stocky, as you say, Father. They're coming back after more deer tonight."

"You're sure?" Mr. Tiffany asked, picking Susie up in his arms. "They are, Father! I heard them say so. One of them said he saw lights on up here, and they couldn't take any chances. So they went down toward the bend. But they're coming back. They kill the deer and sell the meat to some restaurants 'out of State.' These are his words. Please, Father, don't let them kill our beautiful deer. Please!" Susie broke out in a sob.

Kissing his little daughter and hugging her close to his manly chest, Mr. Tiffany said, "I'll call the game warden immediately, honey. You can tell him everything you told us when he gets

here. And you may be sure that this poaching will be stopped. Now suppose you eat something while I call...."

Long after Susie was in bed and sound asleep, the game warden had the two poachers in custody. As before, the deer would now be able to graze in peace in the Tiffany alfalfa field and the bridge, with its once mysterious light, was now free from suspense. The mystery was solved.

The End

* * * * *

September 1986

Story 2

CHANGED LUKE

"Oh, no!" Luke grumbled as he pulled his socks on and slipped into his school shoes, stopping long enough with his mumble-grumble to tie his shoe laces. "School again!" he growled. "Oh, I hate it. Hate it! I do wish I'd never, never have to go."

"Luke, your breakfast's getting cold." Mother's voice floated up the stairs for the second time. "Hurry!" she exclaimed emphatically. "You'll miss the bus unless you hurry."

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" Luke parroted to himself as he headed for the bathroom. He must wash his face; his mother would send him back to the bathroom unless he did, he knew.

"School!" he exclaimed again in disgust. "Ugh!"

"Luke! I'll not call you again...." Luke shifted his shuffling feet into "high gear" and really moved. He knew what Mother's statement-sentence meant. How well he knew! The thin switch automatically but really put motion and fast action into one's being.

"Coming, Mother," he called, wiping his still-wet hands along the legs of his denim jeans. Oh-h-h, they were stiff, those new pants. So very stiff. He wished he could wear his old, much-worn, softer-feeling pair.

His feet hit the landing with a heavy thud. He wanted Mother to know he was downstairs.

"Your eggs will be completely cold unless you eat now, Luke. And we may as well have an understanding, you and I, this very first morning of this new school year: I will call you one time to get up. One time only! Do you understand?"

Luke looked up from where he had slid onto the kitchen chair at the table. "Yes, Ma'am," he replied politely.

"You will see that your bed is made and your room tidied up before you leave for school, Luke. Also, your hands and face are to be washed thoroughly before you come downstairs. Immediately after breakfast, we will have family devotions, then you will brush your teeth, God willing."

"Yes, Ma'am. But, Mother, I hate school. I can't help it. I wish I'd never ever need to go. Not ever again!"

"Luke Allen Blimers, you can't mean that!" Mother exclaimed in shocked disbelief.

"But I do mean it! I do. I do! Why can't I just stay at home and learn? You could teach me, Mother. You'd make a good teacher. And... and then I could play outside all the rest of the day. After I knew my lessons."

Mother stared at her son in disbelief. "What would you do if you couldn't go to school; like Billy Owens can't?" she asked, looking with sad eyes into Luke's brown ones. "Billy wants to go. Oh, how he wants to go to school! And to church, too. But he'll never go to either again, Never! Unless the Lord does a miracle on his poor little body, which is fast and rapidly wasting away."

Luke ran the fork around his eggs. A lump popped up into his throat. He loved Billy. Very, very much, he loved Billy. They were always only the very best of buddies and playmates. Then Billy got sick. Oh, so sick! He had to go to the hospital, and when he finally came home he couldn't get out of the bed because of how his body was wasting away and he was too weak to walk any longer.

"Billy would gladly trade places with you, Luke," Mother said, with a sob in her voice and tears in her eyes. "But he is ready to meet Jesus, and this is the most important and wonderful thing of all. If you were in Billy's place, or Billy's condition, I should have said, would you be ready to meet God, Luke? Do you know that Jesus saves you just now? This very minute? And would you be anxious to see Jesus, the way Billy is?"

Luke tried to eat a bite of egg but it seemed to get stuck on the lump in his throat.

"Billy knows that he doesn't have long to live," Mother continued softly. "Only two days ago he told his mother that he had seen Jesus and he knew that the Lord would soon be coming to take him home to Heaven. He's that sure that he's going to Heaven, Luke. Would you be able to say this, if you knew you were dying, like Billy is? Do you know that your sins are forgiven? Billy knows this. So does your father; and so do I. You can know it too, Luke."

Tears swam around in Luke's eyes. He knew he wasn't ready to meet God. And he knew he couldn't say that he was ready for Heaven, like Billy said he was.

"Mother," he said, pushing his plate away, "I'm not ready to die. And I'm not ready for Heaven, either. My heart is sinful. I never have asked Jesus to come into my heart and to save me. But I want to do this now. Billy's been different ever since Jesus forgave him of his sins and came

into his heart. I want Jesus to change me, too. I want Him, Mother. I do. I do! I've hurt His heart by keeping Him outside so long." And Luke was crying now.

Placing her arm around his shoulder, Mother said, "Jesus wants to save you, Luke. He's been wanting to come into your heart for a long, long time but you kept Him outside. Now we're going to pray...."

Luke was on his knees beside the chair. He knew what he must do. Yes, he did! He began praying earnestly. Jesus was listening. He heard. He answered. And the angels rejoiced. Luke could scarcely wait till he could go over to Billy's house and tell him the good news that he got saved and that he, too, was going to Heaven when he died. With a light heart, he kissed Mother good-bye then hurried out to wait for the school bus. Even school would be better now, he knew: Jesus, living in his heart, would make the difference.

* * * * *

October 1986

Story 3

YOUR HEART IS SHOWING

"Uh! Uh! Freddie's wearing the bad part of his heart on the outside again. It's plain as daylight."

Jaclyn's words rang and echoed inside the boy's head as he ran from the kitchen, through the peach and apple orchard, into the clover field. Let Jaclyn fret and worry over his disappearance! he thought, with anger surging through his being in great rushing billows.

He stopped and tried to get a breath of air; his breathing came out in little labored, gasps. Asthma! It was all stirred up from his anger and the hard run away from his sister and the house. He should not have done it, he knew. Now he wouldn't be able to breathe properly for hours. Maybe a day even! Or more. He began coughing.

He turned and looked back toward the house but saw no one. "Good!" he said out loud. The orchard blocked the house from view completely That suited him just fine. Now Jaclyn would really worry when she could not find him.

Freddie's heart was hammering inside his chest, partly from running, but mostly because of anger. He walked toward the cool stream, feeling hot and thirsty. His sister would fuss at him for not wearing his baseball hat while out in the hot sun, telling him that he would get more freckles on his nose and face, no doubt. Well, let her fuss, the little boy thought It was his nose and his face. Already he had an abundance of freckles; a few more wouldn't make much difference.

He sat on the bank of the gurgling, happy sounding stream and plunged his feet into its icy-coldness. For a brief moment it took his breath away. But in a little while he adjusted to the coldness and even enjoyed its refreshing goodness. At least it made his body feel cooler

When his heart ceased its fierce racing, he waded out into the shallow stream, wishing for all the world that he wouldn't need to go back into the house until his mother was home. Why did the neighbors always have to send for his mother when their babies and children got sick? Freddie wondered bitterly. Sure, his mother had once been a nurse in the hospital; but why couldn't people remember that his mother was not nursing anymore?

Anger boiled and churned inside the little heart. If Mrs. Boden had learned how to take care of her own children instead of sending for his mother, Jaclyn wouldn't be allowed to boss him and tell him what to do and what not to do, Freddie thought, rolling his pant legs up near his knees and wading farther out into the water.

"But your mother told you to obey Jaclyn just like you obey her," a little conscience-voice reminded him loudly. It made the statement-injunction with such clarity and in such a no-nonsense way that it startled Freddie. He felt funny and strange inside; guilty-strange.

"And why couldn't you have gathered the eggs?" the little voice prodded loudly. "You're being stubborn and rebellious just because your sister told you to do it. You know this is the truth. And what does the Bible say about the sin of rebellion? It says that it's like the sin of witchcraft, that's what...."

"Witchcraft! Oh no!" Freddie gasped. Witches would go to hell and burn forever unless they repented and forsook their evil ways and became converted. He knew this. But rebellion...!

Freddie waded back to the bank of the creek. His heart was hammering again. This time it was because of fear. Rebellion! Witchcraft! God's Word linked them together. Each was sin. Hadn't God's Holy Bible said so?

He dropped his pant legs, then raced back into the clover field. Tears were running from his eyes and tumbling down his fat little sun-browned cheeks. A great dark fear was in his heart. Since rebellion was as the sin of witchcraft, that meant that all the rebellious people, too, would burn in hell unless they repented and became converted.

Freddie felt almost like someone had shot an arrow..., a sharp, pointed arrow..., into his soul. He was guilty of the sin of rebellion, he admitted silently to his speaking conscience. Yes indeed, he was! And since God didn't have any favorites nor show any partiality whatever, well, that meant that unless he, Freddie, repented of his rebellion he'd be lost and burn in hell's flames forever.

The little boy was scared. He didn't want to be rebellious. He didn't want to be naughty and disobedient. And, for sure, he did not want to be tormented forever and ever in the burning lake of fire, which he knew the Bible said was waiting for the wicked people who wouldn't repent nor give God their heart. No! No! He must never, never go to hell. God had made a way of escape for him... for everybody, really; everybody who wanted to escape hell: Jesus Christ and His salvation was the way of escape.

Freddie was sobbing now. He had known what to do and how, he realized suddenly, but he had never done anything about it. Yet his soul was the most priceless possession he had. His bag of beautiful marbles would get lost and scattered and his much loved toy trucks and tractors would rust and go to pieces; but his soul would live on forever and ever and ever.

Running like he couldn't wait to get home, the boy headed for the house. Jaclyn knew how to pray. She would stay on her knees with him until he knew he was forgiven by God; until he was born again of God and knew it. Really knew it!

His feet felt almost like they had wings.

* * * * *

November 1986

Story 4

HOW TO BE THANKFUL

It wasn't fair, Bobby thought, pulling the laces of his skates tight and starting across the pond on his father's farm. Whoever heard of Thanksgiving without having turkey, he wondered as he skated furiously, trying to clear his brain of the confused thoughts that chased each other back and forth inside his head.

"Why? Why? Why?" the skates seemed to ask as they cut swiftly across the glass surface. Thinking of other Thanksgivings, with golden-brown roasted turkey, Bobby felt suddenly sick on the inside. A feeling of depression closed in upon him; joy fled from his soul, and the birds stopped singing in his heart. With each new turn he made on the pond, a single thought kept projecting itself before him It wasn't fair, not to have turkey for Thanksgiving! His mood matched the lead-gray clouds above him, and the silence around him became almost unbearably oppressive.

"Hey, Bobby, wait for me!" a cheerful voice called, slicing into the boy's morbid thoughts. "I came over to skate with you...."

"Oh, hi, Alan. Glad you could come," Bobby said, still lamenting the unfairness of not having turkey for Thanksgiving.

"Say, this is great skating!" Alan exclaimed brightly. "And what a day for skating, too! It's perfect... gray clouds that hint of a new snowfall and nippy, biting, tingly cold Oh, I love it, Bob! 'The Lord is good, and greatly to be praised.' It's wonderful to be a Christian!"

"Uh-huh," Bobby mumbled, doing a quick turn-about on his skates.

"You're a great skater, Bob! Me? ... I'm what you'd call mediocre, I guess."

Bobby watched his friend. A sudden sense of shame washed over him. Alan's family was poor, very poor, but always happy and thankful. Bobby gulped. He was an ingrate. An ingrate who always wanted what he wanted when he wanted it! Certainly, this must be a part of the carnal nature Rev. Thornton had preached about, the boy thought, feeling miserable inside.

"Can't you imagine how very thankful to God the Pilgrims must have been on that first Thanksgiving Day, Bobby?" Alan said seriously. "They gave us so much to thank God for, religious freedom, especially."

"Uh-huh," Bobby mumbled again.

"Our table won't have turkey on it, that's for sure, but I know that whatever Mother prepares, we'll all be deeply grateful and thankful to God for it," Alan said. "You know, I learned something wonderfully valuable from my folks when I was very small...."

"What's that?"

"I was taught to say, 'Thank Thee, dear Lord,' for everything, regardless of how small the gift or how little the portion of food that was on my plate. This developed a truly thankful heart within me. Now, when I hear boys my age complain about what they don't have, and what they want, well, I feel sorry for them. I feel they have never learned that a happy heart is a thankful heart and a thankful heart is a happy heart. It kind of goes around in a circle, doesn't it? But it works this way, when one is a real Christian, especially."

Bobby's heart suddenly condemned him. Alan had preached as great a sermon as Rev. Thornton had, he thought, and he knew what he must do; God could not bless self-pity; he would have to be forgiven for his "I feel sorry for myself" attitude, and then he would be ready to get sanctified wholly. Suddenly, he wanted to pray.

"Alan," he said quickly, "I'm going to the house for awhile. I have some very important business to take care of. I'll be back as quickly as it's settled. How about all of you spending Thanksgiving Day at our house? I know Mother and Father would love to have you I'll ask them and let you know what they say. But I'm sure I know their answer. We have plenty of ducks and chickens roaming the barnyard...."

"It sounds great, Bobby! The Lord is good!"

"He sure is!" Bobby exclaimed, skating for the shore, determined that he would develop an attitude of thankfulness like Alan had.

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December 1986

Story 5

THE BEST GIFT FOR JESUS

Ding, dong, cling, dong, ding. . .

Trenton stopped piling the snow to listen to the ringing bells. How very beautiful and clear they sounded, he thought, digging the shovel into a fluffy marshmallow drift before hurrying across the lawn to where Jennifer and Barbara were putting the finishing touches to a much-overweight snowman.

"Don't you just love to hear the church bells ring?" he asked his sisters as he picked up a long, slender golden-orange carrot and shoved it into the face for a nose.

"Oh I do, I do!" Jennifer exclaimed happily as she inserted coal into the snowman for eyes and used six scarlet radishes for his mouth.

"I do too," Barbara chorused. "And I like our snowman even if he is fat."

Placing an old black hat on the snowman's head, Jennifer turned serious eyes upon her brother. "I wonder if church bells rang the night Jesus was born," she said out loud.

Trent stood back and surveyed the finished snow creation. "Hey, the hat gives that frigid old man personality and... dignity!" He complimented his sister profusely.

"Trent," Jennifer said seriously, "didn't you hear me? Did church bells ring for the baby Jesus when He was born?"

Trenton turned away from the portly looking snowman and faced his sister. Then he hung his head. "No, Jennifer," he said sadly, "there were no church bells that rang for Jesus when He was born."

"Why not?" came Jennifer's immediate question. "They should have; cause Jesus' coming was special and ... and important"

"Well, for one thing," the older brother explained, "not too many people were looking for Jesus to be born in the way He was born. Dad said the Jews expected their Messiah to come as a king, not as a tiny baby. And, especially, not as a baby born in a stable and laid in a manger!"

"Oh, Trent!" Jennifer cried, as tears slid out of her great, round dark eyes. "Why didn't they welcome Jesus? WHY? Mother said He left Heaven and came to earth to die for our sins! And... and Trenton, He wouldn't have needed to do this. But He did it just the same..., all because He loved us so very much. He should have had a grand and wonderful welcome. Bells should have rung and ... and ..."

"You remember who heard the good news first, and who welcomed Him and rejoiced over His coming," Trenton said, interrupting his sister's unfinished sentence "It was the humble shepherds."

"And I wish I could have been a shepherd then," Barbara added seriously and thoughtfully. "I would have run as fast as I could to the stable and the manger. Oh, wouldn't it have been wonderful to see Jesus and.., and.., to kiss His dear face!"

"It really would have been," Jennifer declared. "And maybe we could have picked Him up and held Him in our arms too."

"What a beautiful subject," Uncle Joel exclaimed, coming upon the children as they talked. "I just know you all would have been loving and kind to the Saviour if you could have seen Him. But I know something really wonderful..." and Uncle Joel's sentence was left hanging enticingly somewhere in mid-air above the children's heads.

"What is it?" the three children cried in unison. "Please tell us, Uncle Joel!"

A broad smile parted the uncle's lips. Rolling tiny snowballs and tucking them into the front of the snowman's chest to simulate buttons on a coat, he said, "I know what you can do to make the blessed Lord Jesus very, very happy. In fact, it's something each and every one of us can do..."

"I know what it is," Trenton declared. "We can give Him our heart. That makes Him happiest of all."

"You are so right," the uncle replied. "This is the very best thing anyone can do for Jesus. When we give Him our heart and life, and surrender everything to Him, we are proving to Him that we really do love and appreciate Him and what He did for us by leaving Heaven and His dear Father to come down to earth to be our Saviour. And while bells didn't ring to welcome His coming, every time a sinner repents and gets saved, there is great rejoicing in heaven over the soul that has been converted."

The children looked at each other and smiled.

"We made Jesus very happy, then," Jennifer said softly with shining eyes, "because we gave Him our hearts and now He lives inside."

Uncle Joel nodded his head reverently and brushed the happy tears from his eyes, knowing the best gift any boy or girl, man or woman could give to Jesus would be a total surrender of the heart.

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THE END