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Thanksgiving Surprise

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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"Peter, come here." Papa's voice reached my ears before I was at the top of the hill even.

"Coming, Papa," I called, topping the hill at last, almost breathless from running. A pair of skates dangled loosely over my shoulders.

"Where've you been?" Papa asked kindly.

Gingerly I held the prized skates before me, laughing the laugh of the victor. "I did it, Papa! I did it!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. "I learned to skate."

"Good! Very good, Peter. I knew you'd learn. Is the ice thick?" he asked, with a twinkle in his kind fatherly eyes.

"Thickest it's ever been for this time of year," I said, repeating what I'd heard my four older brothers and five older sisters say.

"Good. That's good, Peter. The Lord willing, Mama and I may join you one of these days. Might have a family contest, too, to see who wins in the farthest race -- Papa and his sons or Mama and her daughters."

"Oh, Papa, when?" I asked eagerly, remembering other such wonderful family affairs when Papa and Mama joined all ten of us in skating down Buttermilk Creek or having family spelling bees, taffy pulls and butternut and hickory nut hunts. Oh it was



"There will be no bitterness, Peter?" he asked

wonderful. We were all of us a most important part of our family. No one member was excluded. Consequently, we were a closely-knit family unit with love and respect for each other.

"I have something on my mind, Peter," Papa said, getting to the reason for calling me. He had a far-away look in his eyes and I could tell he had been praying... his eyes were red from weeping.

"Yes, Papa? Can... can I help?" I asked quickly, anxious and eager to alleviate any of his burdens.

"I believe you can . . ."

"How?" I asked impulsively.

"You know those new skates you wanted for Christmas...?"

I looked thoughtfully at the skates dangling by their laces from my thickly-mittened hand. Old skates they were. All four of my older brothers had learned to skate on them when their foot was a size three.., same as mine now. I had wanted (more than anything else) new skates for Christmas. What's more, I was sure Papa and Mama were saving up money a very, very little at a time., to try to buy them for me.

Papa didn't push his query and I had plenty of time to think so I thought, long and hard. I knew what was coming. I wanted to be honest when I answered.

"You . . . you're needing the money . . . for something better, Papa?" I ventured. "For something.., more worthwhile and... enduring...?"

"Precisely, Peter! Ah, my son," and Papa put his kind hands on my shoulders and stood back and looked at me with fatherly pride registering in his eyes, "you are growing much each day in the things of God!" he commended, drawing me close to his manly bosom. "You may even get the skates for Christmas, Peter. God may even yet supply the money for a pair but... Mama and I felt we must give our little savings.., the money we were putting aside for a few Christmas gifts . . . to our Thanksgiving missionary offering. There will be no bitterness, Peter, and no resentment coming from your heart?"

This time I didn't need to wait in order to reply. Always, when Papa had something like this to present, he wanted us to take time to pray about it and think it through before answering. "Oh, Papa, no. No! My heart has no bitterness nor resentment!" I exclaimed joyfully. "Ever since I got sanctified the Holy Ghost gave me a clean heart that is free from resentment and bitterness and rebellion."

"Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord!" Papa shouted, overcome with joy. His dear, kind eyes told me more than words could have said as he beamed proudly down on me. "God

will repay you," he said. "And Peter," he continued, "we may not have turkey for Thanksgiving either..."

Papa walked briskly toward the house. I knew what was going on. He didn't know I knew. You see, I had had earache one night. Knowing that Papa and Mama were still sitting in the living room I tip-toed down the stairs, wanting ever so badly to have Mama cuddle me close to her on her lap and to sing some dear hymn into my aching ear when I heard Papa's voice. It was sad and sounded all full of tears.

"These people know nothing of self-sacrifice, Mary," he was saying to Mama. "But by the grace of God, you and the children and I shall give more than ever. We can't allow this selfish spirit to rob the missionaries of the money they so badly need to spread the gospel on foreign soil. It's going to be a sad day when professors of religion stand before God to give account of the money He entrusted in their hands for distribution among those less fortunate. He gives in order that we may invest that which He has entrusted us with in spiritual causes."

"Sad indeed!" Mama had answered. "But Papa, so long as God sees that you and the children and I have bread to eat and water to drink, we shall not allow one single missionary to suffer needlessly. There's Tom," I heard Mama say, "I've been feeding him since he was a baby. Fattening him for our Thanksgiving dinner; but I'll dress him and sell him to the grocer. He should bring a good price. The money will go into our Thanksgiving offering. I'll think of something else to prepare for dinner. Perhaps the boys could get us some wild rabbits . . ."

Papa didn't try to change Mama's mind. Oh, no. Everyone was going to offer a willing offering of something he had sacrificed or done without. "By the grace of God, Mary," he was saying, "we'll be examples of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the pastor and his family don't set a good example one can't expect too much from the congregation."

And that's how my hoped-for skates fit into the picture. Well, it was a small thing to do for the cause of Christ, I reasoned as, alone, I headed down the hill for Buttermilk Creek and the ice again.

It was invigorating, skating up and down the creek, and it gave me plenty of time to think.., and wonder if there wasn't some other way I could fit into the missionary offering. My special Thanksgiving offering to Jesus for saving and sanctifying my soul.

Suddenly (I'll always believe God did it) I remembered one of Papa's members. An old man he was. Crotchety, too. He rarely ever smiled and seldom, if ever, had company. Through one of my schoolmates I had overheard one day that he needed a boy to run errands for him and keep his wood-box filled.

"You won't catch me doing anything for him!" the boy, Randy Simmons, had exclaimed. "He's a tyrant! A brute..."

I had walked sadly away, hating to hear such talk and this kind of remarks about anyone, least of all, one of the church members in Papa's church. I liked it, living in Bitterroot Falls, even though the people were different from those in Papa's last pastorate. I was expecting (any day) a revival to break out and make these people spiritual, like God wanted them to be. It was on the way, I was sure. I could feel it every time I prayed. And in family prayers, too.

I skated easily and smoothly to the edge of the creek where I sat down on the crusted snow and changed from the skates into my shoes and boots. Then, skates dangling over my shoulder, I headed for Mr. OKeefe's house.

I was careful not to stomp my feet too hard nor too loudly when I stood on the porch before the door, remembering that the old man had a severe case of some sort of arthritis.

I knocked ever so softly. With knotted, twisted looking gnarled hands Mr. OKeefe opened the door.

"Come inside, Peter," he said brusquely, almost sternly. "The cold hurts my arthritic condition dreadfully."

Making sure that I had either brushed or swept all the snow from my boots, I followed him inside and closed the door.

"It's good to have a child in my house again," the old man began. It sounded like there were tears in his voice. "You do me a favor by coming, Peter. Once, long ago," he paused and looked far far into the distance, "I had a little boy." His voice broke and he was weeping softly now. I was shocked at him. Hard boiled? Not now.

"Don't cry, Mr. OKeefe!" I said, running suddenly to him and throwing my childish arms around his neck in a tight little twine. I patted his white hair like Mama patted me when I was hurt. "We all love you," I said simply. "Papa and Mama and all of us."

"Thank you, Peter. Forgive me for breaking down like this but... but . . . you brought back many precious memories of another day. A day when my wife and our little boy were all so happy together. Then God... took them..." He said it with something akin to hatred. To bitterness.

"Your little boy is in heaven then, Mr. OKeefe, if God took him. He's waiting for you." My heart was happy, oh so happy, at knowing that the dear little boy was with Jesus. "And he's happy! Very, very happy." I added quickly. "Your wife is waiting for you too. She's watching over you..."

The old man's countenance changed abruptly. He looked at me with hope and... and with confidence! "Why," he began, "Why, Peter, I never thought of it like that before. They are waiting for me. Both of them. Watching, too. Christine was such a godly wife and mother. And Sammy, well, he was too little to know the difference between right and wrong when the Lord called him Home. But I shall meet them again. They cannot come to me; I shall go to them. I will, Peter! I'll get everything made right with God and my fellow man and I shall ask God for Christ's sake to have mercy upon my soul and to save me. This very hour, too!"

I almost hated to ask him about the work I heard was needing done but after a short while I mustered up enough courage to do so. "I came to ask if you needed any wood in the wood box, Mr. OKeefe; and . . . and anything else you needed done around the house."

The aged man looked long at me and studied my face earnestly. "You . . . mean you'll be my errand boy, Peter? I've needed a boy badly."

"Yes, sir. When do I begin?"

"Right now, if you can." His eyes were suddenly bright and young looking in spite of his many years. "My wood box does need filling. Indeed so. And the back porch needs swept and freed from snow. My grocery stock is badly depleted, too. The grocer boy hasn't been by after my order for days." He took on a sad look again as he added softly, "Guess I could have been a lot kinder to everyone, though . . ." His face looked suddenly remorseful. "I tell you, Peter, it's been a lonely life since Christine and Sammy left me."

"Papa says there are some things one must forget and put behind him in order to attain spiritual things, Mr. OKeefe . . ." I said quickly.

"Like my sinful past maybe?" The old eyes searched my honest face intently.

"Just repent of all your sins, Mr. OKeefe. Tell God how sorry you are that you committed them and ask Him to save you and to come into your heart. And... and after you've confessed and Jesus has come within, well, just forget all the bad things you ever did. When you get converted you will be a new man. The old Mr. OKeefe will be made all new."

"I see it, Peter! I see it and I'll do it. This very hour. Here, take this grocery list and hurry down to the grocer's. You can fill the wood box when you return."

Whistling softly, I hurried away. I knew Mr. OKeefe wanted to pray. When I returned forty-five minutes later I saw a new man. He wouldn't have needed to tell me that he was converted; I saw it written all over his face. It shone like an angel's and when I left for home after having done every single chore to "perfection", as the dear man phrased his praise of my work, I felt like shouting. Besides the crisp dollar bill that rested

comfortably in the palm of my mittened hand, I had received a blessing and a reward heretofore unknown and unfelt... I had won my first soul to Jesus Christ. Oh, my joy knew no bounds. I felt for sure, for sure, that the revival for which we were all praying was on the way. What's more, I had a steady job!

Things began changing fast after Mr. OKeefe's conversion; and when the day arrived for the Thanksgiving offering and better than one thousand cash dollars were laid in the offering plates I could have shouted for sure. I knew, besides the twenty-dollars I had saved, from being Mr. OKeefe's errand boy, plus the once much-desired skate money, that mother and father and all my brothers and sisters had truly sacrificed to give to make our total family sum of giving better than eight hundred dollars.

"We'll lead the way," Papa had said. "But every single dime each of you gives must be given unselfishly and willingly..., if you would receive the blessing of the Lord upon your life."

And we gave that way. Each of us. This is what made it such a blessing and so enjoyable.

Imagine our surprise when we got to church for the mid-week prayer service the day before Thanksgiving and saw the front of the church piled high with groceries of every description, size and shape. Instead of having one turkey . . . namely, Tom, like Mama had planned but sold him to the grocer's instead., there were four there! All dressed and packed and ready for stuffing and the oven! There were hams and bacons enough to do us all winter. And that's saying something when you consider that there were twelve of us going to the table three times a day (except when a member felt he should fast). There were potatoes galore; and flour by the hundred pound sacks and baskets filled to overflowing with every conceivable kind of canned goods displayed on the grocer's shelf.

Papa was speechless and Mama wept for joy. Each of us was overcome with joyful surprise. We didn't know what to say.

In just such a state it was that old Bro. OKeefe, leaning hard on his stout, sturdy cane, hobbled painfully down the aisle and stood in front of the pulpit. Each time he tried to speak he was stopped by a sudden gush of tears and weeping that shook his old frame too hard for speaking. Finally, he said brokenly, "We have been a selfish people. All of us. This includes me!" He pointed a boney, knotted, twisted index finger at himself. He paused to allow his words to sink deeply into each heart.

"I got converted a few weeks ago," he continued now. "Not because any of you had a concern over my poor lost soul. Ah, no!" It sounded like what Papa called an 'indictment', I thought as I listened intently. Old Bro. OKeefe was speaking again so I forgot all about the big word. "The Reverend's little boy . . . Peter by name., loved me

enough to come by my place and talk to me about the Lord. He led me to Jesus. God bless you, my dear boy!" he exclaimed, looking right at me.

I felt my face blushing scarlet and hung my head, hoping no one was looking, as Mr. OKeefe continued, "Well, I had a sneaking feeling (when all that cash came in for foreign missions on Sunday morning) that the Reverend and his family did all the sacrificing that was done. Unless, of course Sister Merritt, poor widow woman that she is, did more than her share again as always. Well, my conclusions were right. Except for Sister Merritt and a paltry few other scattered dollars that were given, the preacher and his family have given nearly all that money that was given. While I appreciate the way each of you has rallied to this generous pounding for our minister and his family, I want to suggest that we, the congregation of this church, give at least a couple thousand to this worthy cause. I have one thousand dollars to begin. Has anyone else caught the vision? Perhaps, like I had been, some of you need to be converted and sanctified . . ."

I inched my way noiselessly to the edge of the seat and sat there . . . right on the edge, the very edge., holding my breath and listening to what was going on. Suddenly, I had the most glorious feeling that God was walking the aisles of Papa's church. It was a holy and sacred feeling. One I didn't want to do anything to break or disturb.

Then, like the sound of a rushing mighty wind, the Holy Ghost came! People ran screaming to the altar, begging God to save their soul or to sanctify them, whichever was needed. Many, many hours later, I couldn't get over the change in Papa's congregation. They were shouters, I tell you. And, instead of something better than one thousand dollars for foreign missions, there was over four thousand dollars! Revival fires were burning brightly all over the place. Faces, once stolid, set and sour-looking now bore a semblance to heaven. No one wanted to go home.

It was early Thanksgiving morning when Papa and Mama and all of us settled down for a few hours of sleep. I didn't awaken until many hours later. When I did, it was to the smell of the temptingest odors that a little fellow could wish for. It didn't take me long to get dressed., not with turkey roasting brown and the spicey fragrance of pumpkin and mince meat pies sending their subtle aroma to my nostrils.

I knelt beside the bed I had just made and thanked God before hurrying downstairs.

As we gathered around the table that Thanksgiving dinner and each offered up a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His manifold blessings to us, I sent up a secret prayer of thanks for, of all things, the new skates I felt sure I would soon be getting.

I ate heartily, suddenly eager to hurry down to Buttermilk Creek and be on the ice again. I must be at my very best for when those new skates arrived on Christmas!

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THE END