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## Ellen's Christmas Surprise

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Ellen straightened the merchandise on her counter, trying to bring things back to order as she put them in neat rows according to size. She enjoyed the Christmas season and looked forward to its coming but the pre-Christmas sales of May's Department Store were becoming more and more of a nightmare and harassment. People for a large part seemed to have lost all sense of courtesy and respect for their contemporaries and there were, at times, near fightings, as the customers jostled, pushed and shoved and even cursed their way through the crowd to the bargain tables.



"We must do something for him, Tom," she said.

She sighed a heavy sigh as she took a few steps backward and surveyed her now neat and orderly counter. At least it would look that way until the next mad rush of shoppers came -- to look, mainly, she reasoned. A smile played at the corners of her mouth as she remembered how these mad rushes for the bargain tables came in spurts. Great spurts sometimes, though.

"Where can I find ladies' ready-to-wear?" A woman, apparently in a big hurry, asked, stepping close to Ellen's counter and surveying the sale merchandise with quick critical eyes.

"On the second and fifth floors," Ellen answered softly.

Without thanking Ellen, the woman hurried away, looking as though her entire future were dependent upon what she did or bought in women's ready-to-wear. Ellen smiled inwardly, thankful that her heart was not in a hurried state but was in perfect rest with both God and man; thankful, too, that she wasn't a part of the unhappy looking masses she encountered day after day. How she longed to talk to them.., to point them to a Saviour who satisfied the longing of the heart. She knew why the empty, hollow looks and stares; why too, the hatred registered on many a customer's face and in his eyes.

She sighed again. This time out of a feeling and inward yearning of total helplessness. "Oh, God, make me a blessing today!" she whispered under her breath as salty tears found their way to the surface of her eyes.

"You sad, Lady?"

Ellen wheeled about quickly and faced a small boy of not more than seven summers.

"Why... I... I..." she stammered and stuttered, not knowing quite how to explain her feelings and heart longings to a little boy.

"That's all right, Ma'am. You don't need to explain. I know how you feel."

"You . . . you do?" Ellen was astonished at the grown-up wisdom and manner of speech the little lad used.

The little head dropped quickly upon his chest. It was then that Ellen noticed the set of thick red-brown hair. The boy dug one foot into the plush carpet on the floor and when he raised his eyes to hers again there were sad but shiny tears standing in them like great deep pools. "I . . . wish I had a mother.., just.., just like you!" The words poured out of his mouth like a mighty torrent. And with as much impact and force, too.

Ellen gasped in startled astonishment.

The lad continued. "You . . . are kind and good and.., and everything nice.."

"Why th... thank you..."

"I'm Jeffrey Sheffield, Ma'am he said by way of explanation and introduction. "I come in here often to... to... look at you..."

"You do? Well, where have you been hiding?" Ellen teased, not remembering having seen the intelligent but poorly-clad lad before.

"See that post?" He pointed to one of the ornamental store pillars not far from Ellen's counter, "That's where I've been standing. I like to look at your face. It makes me feel all good and warm inside. You... look like my mother did and.., and when I saw you crying, well, I couldn't stand it."

A sudden longing to enfold the boy in her empty, hungry arms almost overpowered Ellen. It was a longing which she had thought long since gone and buried.., for better than six years.., when Tom and she lay the only child God had blessed them with beneath the sod. But it wasn't dead at all! It wasn't! The desire and longing possessed her just as strongly and fiercely as ever. All her motherly instincts and desires were suddenly awakened and strove for the mastery. "You . . . are a very kind and thoughtful young man, Jeffrey," she said through her tears, "and I love little boys very much."

A smile broke full upon the lad's face. "I knew you did!" he exclaimed joyfully. "I knew it! I could see it on your face and in your eyes." He heaved a sigh then and came closer to the counter as he confided softly, "But Mrs. Manners hates me. She told me so."

"Who is Mrs. Manners, Jeffrey?" Ellen asked, a cloud enshrouding her pretty face.

"She's the lady who takes care of me since.., since mother died."

"But your father, he loves you. Surely!"

"No, he doesn't. Least, I figured he doesn't. He left mother and me two years ago and nobody knows where he is . . ."

"Maybe someday he'll come back to find his little boy and to love him," Ellen suggested hopefully, trying to cheer the boy.

" 'Fraid not," he said sadly. "He disappeared. Left mother a note saying he never wanted to see us again."

There was a long pause and silence. After awhile Jeffrey raised his eyes to Ellen's. "I ... I miss mother so!" he said, crying softly. "She used to pray with me and read me Bible stories but Mrs. Manners curses." He looked about him fearfully lest the woman be near at hand. "Mother told me, before she died, that God would take care of me and send me a good mother again.., because she had asked Him to."

Ellen's voice caught. She swallowed hard. A lump rested in her throat.

"Where does Mrs. Manners live, Jeffrey?" she asked after awhile.

"Not far from here. That's why I can come to the store so often. She tells me to get out 'under foot.' And since I have no place to go I come here and.., and watch you."

"Do you know what street it is that Mrs. Manners lives on, Jeffrey?" Ellen asked suddenly.

"In an apartment on Plazaway Court."

Plazaway Court! Ellen gasped when she heard the name. She knew the place. It was for the elite! The fashionable, mainly. Why, she wondered, would anyone from Plazaway Court have applied for a welfare child? Which is what Jeffrey undoubtedly was.

Quick to detect and ascertain her reaction and smart beyond his years, Jeffrey queried, "You know what kind of people live in Plazaway Court! Mostly, they have poodles." He scratched his thick set of hair thoughtfully then said as an afterthought, "I don't know why Mrs. Manners got me instead of... a poodle.., unless it's because of the money someone pays her for keeping me."

By now Ellen had come around the counter and stood in front of the boy. Her hands were placed in a loving motherly fashion upon his broadening shoulders as, looking deep into his honest but appealing eyes she said challengingly, "Maybe God put you there to help Mrs. Manners, Jeffrey. Do you know Jesus? Have you ever been converted?"

The eyes of the boy lighted with an instant light. "Oh yes!" he said joyously. "Before she died Mother helped pray me through and I'll tell you, Mrs. ...."

"Worthington, Jeffrey. I'm Mrs. Thomas Worthington."

"Well, if Jesus wasn't living in my heart, Mrs. Worthington, I... I believe I would have run away from Mrs. Manners. She doesn't like for me to talk about Jesus and . . ."

"Maybe God put you there to help her though, Jeffie," Ellen said the second time.

With honest, sincere, and straight-forward eyes, Jeffrey exclaimed softly, emphatically, "I believe He put me there so I could meet you, Mrs. Worthington. I do!"

Ellen was shocked. Could it be! Could the boy have spoken the truth and could it have come from God! She smiled as she patted him. Seeing a customer come toward her she said hurriedly, "Come back and see me, Jeffrey, as often as you can. I see I have a customer so I must get busy."

With utter courtesy and politeness, Jeffrey walked away . . . to the ornamental pillar where he could watch Ellen.

The store filled suddenly with people . . . old people, young and middle-aged, and for a long while Ellen's mind was lost and absorbed completely in her work. When the rush was over and she set about to straightening merchandise once again, she thought of Jeffrey. Looking anxiously toward the pillar she sought for the boy but he was gone. She breathed a fervent silent prayer heavenward for his safety and God's keeping power in the little life, determined that she and Tom would look the boy up and make some kind of arrangements with Mrs. Manners for him to get to Sunday School and Church.

She told Tom all about him as they ate supper that night. "We'll have to do something to help him," she said emphatically. "He... he . . . God seemed to have sent him to me as an angel, Tom!" she exclaimed reverently. "It's strange. Beautifully strange!"

Tom's eyes brightened. "How many days till Christmas?" he asked.

"Twelve," Ellen answered quickly, having counted them over and over again and again as the harassing days at the store continued.

"Buy the boy some needed clothes; a good book and Bible and a ball and bat," Tom said eagerly. "We'll see he gets them, Lord willing."

"Oh, Tom!" Ellen exclaimed, rushing to her husband and throwing her arms about his neck. "He'll be so happy!" she whispered through her tears.

The days sped by quickly. Ellen was thankful when, on Christmas eve, she finally walked through the revolving doors of May's Department Store to the outside. No more work till after Christmas!

A clean, white sparkling snow was spreading itself beneath her feet as she headed homeward in the gathering dusk of twilight. Tom had told her he'd be late tonight so she walked leisurely, rather reluctant to leave the outdoors for the inside. Something about the crispness of the air and the carpet of snow made her feel young again. If only she and Tom had a child to share their love and happiness with! She stifled a sob, thankful to God for the gift of their child, if only for a few brief months. Thankful, too, that she and Tom had not chided God foolishly and wrongly when He had called the baby Home to Him again.

Upon entering the kitchen, Ellen found a neatly scrawled note on the counter top. "I'll be even later tonight than I thought, honey," the note read, "Don't wait up for me. Business. I love you. Tom."

"Hm-m! Now what kind of business could that man be involved in on Christmas eve?" Ellen asked aloud, studying the note carefully. "Well, I have plenty to do so I may as well get busy." Whereupon she set to finishing her baking, which she had been doing

in spurts this year. She had six batches of cookies to finish before she retired for the night. She couldn't possibly afford to disappoint the widows and widowers in their neighborhood nor the dozen or more poorer families to whom she and Tom gave gifts of clothing and food and a big can of her homemade cookies and a five-pound fruit cake. The fruit cakes had long since been finished and were stored away in a cool place for "ripening." Then, too, she wanted plenty of cookies for Jeffrey!

Ellen smiled as she worked and when the grandfather clock in the living room struck eleven she was thankful that her baking was done. She felt suddenly tired. After bathing and praying, she crawled wearily between the fresh clean sheets and was soon sleeping soundly. Nor did she hear when Tom came to bed a half hour later.

It was still not fully daylight the following morning when Tom, bending over her, whispered into her ear, "A blessed Christmas to you, Ellen dearest. Let us go down to the living room together." His voice was eager. Excited.

Ellen brushed a hand over her eyes. "It's still early, Tom," she said, smiling, "but I'll go."

Wrapping a robe around her slender body, with her long blonde hair hanging in two loose braids to well below her waistline, she hurried down the stairs with her husband.

As she entered the living room a small figure, clad in a robe and a pair of slippers, rose from a chair near the picture window and ran eagerly forward. "Mother! Mother!" he exclaimed jubilantly, sobbing joyous, happy tears.

"Jeffrey! Jeffrey!" Ellen called his name in little more than a whisper as she ran to meet him and enfold him in the warm circle of her hungry mother arms. "You . . . you've come for Christmas!" she exclaimed through her tears.

"For Christmas and for always!" the boy laughed and cried. "Forever! Am I not, Dad? God answered mother's prayers. I knew He would!"

"Right you are, Son," Tom said, blowing his nose loudly. Going over to Ellen and the boy, Tom gathered both of them in his great arms. "A blessed Christmas to my family!" he exclaimed as he shoved papers into Ellen's small hand. They were very important papers!

"Thank You, dear Lord! Thank You!" she said softly, clutching the papers tightly and smiling down upon her boy and up at her wonderful husband.

Tom really did have business last night, she mused silently. Very important business!

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**THE END**