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Mama's Vacation

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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The moon was just coming up over the tree tops and spreading its silvery blanket dreamily across Gull Valley as I slipped noiselessly through the screen door and walked across the porch and down the steps to sit beneath the gnarled old apple tree on the far side of our lawn.

A salty-tear -- as salty almost as the sea spray from the ocean nearby -- trickled hotly down my cheeks. Soon it was followed by another and still another until my face was thoroughly wet and washed by tears. "O God, bless Mama," I prayed aloud, "and bring her back soon."



Quickly Papa's words rolled in on me.

"Peter." It was Papa's voice. "Peter," he called again, softly, as he stepped off the porch and started down the cobblestone path toward the garden.

"I . . . I'm here, Papa. Beneath the apple tree," I answered, hoping desperately that my voice sounded big and brave like Papa's.

Papa took a leisurely stride towards me. In the magic of moonlight he looked every inch and more the giant of a man that he was. I was proud of Papa. Proud too, that I was his boy.

He stooped a bit as he stepped beneath the umbrella branches of the beloved old tree then, looking through the leafy branches to the moon, he sat down beside me.

"Beautiful night, isn't it, Peter?" he said casually, just like he used to talk when Mama was there. "The Bible says, 'And the Lord saw everything that He made, and behold, it was very good.' A night like tonight brings one close to God, doesn't it, Peter?"

I gulped and swallowed, but the insistent, persistent knot in my throat remained adamant. Unmoved. "If... if Mama were here it would be perfect, Papa," I said, as my pent-up tears exploded and showered down my face without mercy.

Papa's arm reached over and soon I was encircled tightly within its security. He let me weep until my tears were spent. I nestled trustingly close to his strong-beating heart. "Peter," he said, speaking softly and ever so gently, "you must not feel too badly: mother needs this vacation. Doctor Jenkins said unless she gets alone somewhere and rests we will not have mother at all!"

"You... you . . . mean she'll die...?"

"Not if she can rest for a full month, dear boy."

A month! It seemed like a lifetime to me. "I . . . I'm sorry I cried," I said, standing suddenly to my feet and squaring my shoulders, "and... and I'll try not to do it again. I want Mama to get well and to come back to us again." Then, ever so quickly, I added, "I miss her, Papa. Terribly!"

"I know how you feel, Peter. How well I know! But you and I must be brave men and make it easy for Susanne and Elizabeth as they clean and cook and bake, wash and iron and care for Mark and wee David. The girls have their hands full; but they're doing an excellent job. You must not cry so they see you. Be brave, Peter and ask Jesus to help you. He will, you know."

Papa got to his feet and took my hand. Together we walked to the house. The girls were waiting for us to have family worship before going to bed.

The first thin wraiths of fog were just rolling in and settling densely over the meadow when I awoke the following morning. I first sensed it rather than saw it.

I slipped quietly out of bed and sat in front of the window, watching as the gray clouds rolled in from the sea and spread themselves completely over our farm, obliterating everything from view.

I liked the fog. From as far back as I could remember, I liked it. The men who fished dreaded it for it either kept them on shore together and cut down their meager earnings, or it made their hours on the sea more dangerous than ever. Only the lobster poachers, who robbed honest men's lobster pots, or set their own out of season, liked it ... the lobster poachers and I. And with me it was more than liking... I loved it. It reminded me of Moses going up into the Mount to meet the Lord and the glory of the

Lord covering that Mount like a thick cloud. I liked to remember how Moses' face shone when he came down from the Mount . . . so bright that the people were afraid and couldn't behold it until it was covered with a veil! Yes, I loved the fog. Poor Mama had quite different feelings about it.

"I'm at my wit's end minding Peter on foggy days," Mama said to old Lars when I was very small. He had stopped on his way home from the smokehouse to leave a smoked fish and he smiled down at my bedraggled self, whom Mama had just retrieved from beyond the garden. The old man laughed at her.

"Some are moon-struck, they say, and some are sun-struck," he said, laughing. "Maybe Peter is fog-struck. Don't worry about him," he admonished Mama. "It's good for a child to know the world he lives in in all kinds of weather." He ran his big hands lightly through my damp hair. "I can't see it does this little mess o' seaweed any harm to be well wetted down. But you might try mooring him to the clothes-line and save yourself the running after him... seeing as how one can't see very far in this fog."

So it was, that as a toddler, I came to be moored to the clothesline like an idle dory on every warm day when the gray wisps of fog came drifting in.

Watching the fog roll in now, I tingled with excitement as once familiar objects and landmarks took on strange, mysterious, and grotesque but intensely intriguing shapes and semblances.

I was seven or eight when I began to sense the true magic of fog. I had gone walking alone in the rolling masses of gray one early morning. That day I was sure that I knew in a small measure how Moses must have felt going up into the Mount to meet God; for, standing on one of the many rocks that jutted high into the low-flung fog cloud, the Lord spoke to my heart. It was every bit as real as if Mama or Papa had spoken. "Peter," He said, "Give me your heart." Right then and there I dropped to my knees and surrendered my heart and life to Jesus. I was gloriously converted. O I was so happy. I sang for joy and gladness all the way home.

Gull Valley lay on the narrow neck of land between two great arms of the sea. Like a lazy giant, Gull Mountain lay sprawled the full length of the peninsula until, at the very end, it sat up in a startled precipice at the sight of the open sea. Years before, a number of villages had dotted the shore on either side. Now, only a few were left and those dwindling in size as the men despaired of making a living by fishing. At the foot of the mountain and following the line of its base ran the highway. Along this road came the mailman, making his daily round with the mail to the few remaining inhabitants of Gull Valley; and old Mr. Minnich the huckster, whose rattly old truck was loaded with groceries, meats, penny candies and even odds and ends of clothing; and occasional one-time home-owners of the valley whose love for peace and quiet and whose homesickness drove them back to the place of their birth and upbringing.

As I sat by the window now I heard the fog-horn blowing raucously at Gooseneck Point and I knew the fog was rolling in in great smoky billows across the water. I only hoped that ships plying through the fog-shrouded waters would hear and take heed.

As I sat there, hands cupping my face, a gray, shadowy, blurred and indistinct figure glided gracefully across the cobblestone walk. It disappeared as quickly as it had emerged.

"Mama! Mama!" I cried joyfully, jumping to my feet and running down the stair-steps to the outside where, only minutes before, I was sure I had seen her beloved form crossing the walk.

The fog rolled in through the clearing like monstrous gray smoke mountains and nothing was visible beyond my outstretched empty arms not even the cow barn, pig-sty, nor hen-house. I felt suddenly stupid and like crying. Quickly Papa's words rolled in on me, just like the fog was rolling in, only more clear and not blurred: "You must not cry, Peter. You and I must be brave men..."

I stifled the cry that rose up within me and headed full speed for the woods. Here, among the thick spruce trees, one didn't notice the fog. Lifting my head, I prayed. O it was easy to talk to the Lord. As easy..., or easier, even..., as talking to Papa.

Young though I was, I had had a deep heart hunger for communion with God ever since my conversion on the fog-enshrouded rock that day so long ago and I had nurtured and cultivated that spiritual hunger and desire ever since that glorious and eventful day. Of course, the day I was wholly sanctified only enhanced and deepened my prayer life.

So I stayed beneath the beloved, familiar trees and poured my homesickness out to One who understood and when I made my way back to the kitchen and Susanne's waiting breakfast, it was with a singing heart. I was growing spiritually. I felt it. Mama's vacation was driving me more and more to my place of prayer.

Every morning I arose early and made my way to the woods and the sighing spruce trees. There I received strength and courage for my day. As I prayed for Mama, I knew that she was getting stronger and would soon be home with us again. I knew it! I knew it! And with that inner assurance I almost ran back to the kitchen each morning.

It was the day before Mama's vacation was to end. The house was astir with excitement and eager anticipation. Susanne had everything planned for Mama's homecoming. The table was to be set with the best china and each child was to have a part in doing something special for Mama. Susanne's special cake was cooling on wire racks on the counter top, ready for the mounds of creamy-white frosting I knew she'd pile on it; while Elizabeth was baking pies suited to mother's taste and liking.

I was to see that mother was seated graciously at the table (after I had been "certain-sure", in Susanne's words, that my face and ears were washed shiny-bright)! Mark was to say a "Thank You God, for Mama" prayer which had been written by the girls themselves and wee David would undoubtedly just smile and make sweet and pleasant baby prattle.

The fog was rolling in in tiny, wreath-like wisps this morning as I returned from the spruce trees. My feet seemed hardly to touch the ground, so happy was I in knowing what this day portended and foreshadowed.

As I crossed the meadow and started for the lawn and the cobblestone walk, something bright dangled from the attic window near the very roof of our house. Curious, I ran in through the kitchen and bounded up the stair steps, through the bedrooms to the far end of the house where the attic steps were.

I flung the door open and started up the stairs. Suddenly I hesitated as fear seized my heart. The attic was so big and so different from the rest of our house and could be quite dark, especially on cloudy or foggy days. I paused on the fourth step, debating whether or not I should go on when I remembered the bright object dangling from the open attic window.

Our attic was an intriguing place, if a bit frightening to my little heart at times. Here it was that odds and ends of most everything were stored and kept . . . summer teas and herbs were bundled together and tied by their roots and hung upside-down from the rafters for drying, for winter's use and medicinal purposes. Here, too, brown crocks of fragrant, spicy apple butter were stored and brought down as needed; winter's clothing was stored through summer in boxes, trunks, and on covered hangers, and summer's clothes were stored through winter; odds and ends of worn and much-used furniture stood at tired, exhausted angles while the entire place had a pungent woody smell about it. Not the least of my fears was the occasional wasp that got in somehow and always managed at least one nest a summer. Twice I had experienced the penetrating sting of such a foe. I paused momentarily then, throwing back my shoulders, I ventured up. On the next to the last step, a slight motion caught my eye. Suddenly, I felt like an intruder. Should I retreat? I tried it; but no...

"Peter!" Mama's sweet voice exclaimed in glad surprise. Laughing softly, she came eagerly toward me and caught me up in her arms. "Peter!" she said again, holding me at arms length to look full into my happy, surprised face. "My precious little man!"

"Mama! Mama, you.., you weren't supposed to be back till tomorrow!" I exclaimed, snuggling my head deep into her arms. O how good it was to see her!

"I'll be 'home' for dinner tomorrow, Peter, Lord willing. Just as soon as my vacation is up; you can be sure of that!"

"But... but..." I stammered. It all dawned on me when I saw the neatly-made roll-away bed near the open window and one of the cast-off tables nearby the bed. "O Mama!" I exclaimed, laughing joyfully. "You... you took a vacation where you could watch and hear us all the time. O Mama, I love you so much!"

"Keep my little secret, Peter; until tomorrow, at least. I feel so much stronger; and I relaxed too, looking out of the window, watching each of my darlings and knowing you were all well."

A beautiful thought struck me. I voiced it to Mama. "You were watching over us all the time just as the dear Lord Jesus watches over us! Isn't it wonderful, Mama!"

"Indeed it is, Peter! And you are growing, little man! I have watched you go to the woods early each morning . . ."

"You... have?"

Bright tears filled Mama's eyes. "Yes, I have, Peter. Now run along or the girls will begin to wonder what caused you to run up the stairs with such haste and will follow you." Kissing me tenderly she pushed me gently away. "Until tomorrow, Peter, God bless you!"

I all but tip-toed down the stairs then went whistling through the kitchen to the apple tree where I sat down, weak with happiness, against the stout old trunk. What a precious lesson I had learned: my Heavenly Father, like Mama, was always near at hand, watching, listening, hearing, caring and helping. He didn't have to be seen; all I needed to do was simply to believe and trust!

I sighed happily with utter contentment. The sun broke suddenly through the wispy, low-flung fog. I watched it as it dispelled the fog. Getting to my feet, I said a loud "Praise the Lord." Tomorrow held promise of a bright day too.

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THE END