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## A Change Of Heart

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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"O Mom," I shrieked, taking the porch steps two at a time and slamming the screen door shut behind me (two things I'm never allowed to do under ordinary circumstances . . . shrieking and slamming doors, I mean). "Uncle Thad wants me to go home with him for a few days. May I Please, Mom?" I begged.

Dropping the last delicious-looking dumpling into the bubbling, boiling chicken broth, Mom turned and looked at me. "Uncle Tad? Come now, Daniel! Uncle Thad rarely makes his appearance in town anymore." She said it rather sadly, I thought. "Since Aunt Polly died he's sort of a hermit, a . . . a recluse," she added in what I thought sounded like an even sadder tone of voice.

"Well it's true, Morn," I asserted stoutly and positively. "I was delivering my papers and who hollers at me but Uncle Thad. 'Come, go home with me,' he says: 'I have a couple errands to do; then I'll come by the house and pick you up.' So may I go, Mom? Please?"

Mom looked thoughtful for a minute or more. Then she said, "Your father will be home for supper soon; we'll ask him. But what about your paper route?"



"Oh, Ben Joslin's just as good as I am on it. He knows my customers, and he's dependable, too. He's been wanting a new bike, and this would give him some extra cash to put into the bicycle fund."

Turning to the stove and to the work at hand, Morn said again, "We'll see what your father has to say, Daniel."

Drinking a glass of water, I hurried to the porch to wait for Dad.

Long before he came into our block, I spied him, and by the time he turned into our driveway I was bouncing along beside the car almost like a rubber ball. Mom often remarked that my legs went up and down like a pogo stick when I got excited, and with as much spring as one, too, she said. Be that as it may, I know that I found myself with my head sticking in the open window before Dad had fully stopped the car. "Uncle Thad wants me to go home with him for a couple of days, Dad," I exclaimed excitedly. "May I? Please?" (I'm sure, if we'd had a parrot, that creature--er, fowl -- would have wondered -- if his brain ever turned over -- if I had memorized my little speech -- questionnaire).

Dad cut the motor then faced me. "Uncle Thad did you say?" he asked, incredulity showing plainly in every angle of his face.

"Yes, Uncle Thad, Dad -- your brother. Please, may I go?"

Getting out of the car, he said softly, "Well, what do you know. What do you know! Thank God!"

"Then I may go, Dad?"

"Let's see what your mother says about it first, Daniel."

"Oh, that's easy!" I said joyously. "Mom said we'd wait till you got home. . ."

"She did!" Well, now, that's real nice of your mother."

"You're the head of the home, Dad, so . . ."

"I know, Daniel, my boy," Dad said, throwing an arm around my shoulder, "and your mother and I will discuss this together then I'll let you know. OK?"

"Great, Dad! Great!"

"Your paper route, Son? Who'll take it if you go?"

"Ben. He knows the route as well as I, and he wants to get a new bike, too. This would give him some extra cash. He really needs another bicycle, Dad; his is wore out.

And I mean wore out! He'd have to use my bike to deliver the papers, but I won't mind; Ben's super, Dad. He's a real Christian."

"I agree with you on that, Dad. Now come, I smell some wonderful is coming from the kitchen. Let's go inside and see what delicious concoctions awaits us on the table..."

We had just finished saying grace when Uncle Thad drove up in his roomy, sleek, shiny Lincoln Continental.

"Come in, Thaddeus!" Dad exclaimed, going to the door to greet his brother. You're just in time for a super-delicious feast; Mildred has chicken and dumplings and all the extras that she always puts together in a meal such as this."

"I came by after Daniel," my uncle said.

"After you've eaten supper," Mom put in sweetly, setting a fourth plate. "Oh, Thad, it's so good to see you again!" she added with tears in her pretty blue eyes.

While Uncle Thad went to the bathroom to wash his hands, Dad nodded at me and whispered near my ear that I could go, but for me to be sure to have my devotions every single day just like I was at home. So, since I got through the meal in super time, and since Uncle Thad seemed in a hurry to be moving on as soon as he had finished eating, Dad and Mom told me to go upstairs and gather my things together and to be sure and call Ben.

In a few minutes I was downstairs again, my old beat-up, brown suitcase clutched tightly in my hand.

Did I think to put my Bible in? Mom wanted to know. And what about the dark blue dress pants? Were they inside? Did I take socks? Pajamas? What about underwear?

I nodded and nodded; my head felt like a bobber going up and down in the water.

While Uncle Thad finished a second piece of Mom's freshly-baked sour cherry pie, Mom busied herself packing things in a box on the counter top . . . canned pickles and fruits, jams and jellies, a loaf of homemade bread, two pies and a big jar full of the still-steaming chicken and dumplings.

"Take this along," she told Thad as he picked up my suitcase and started for the door.

A smile twisted the corners of my uncle's mouth and I noticed how good looking he was when he smiled.

"That's sure kind of you, Mildred," he told Mom, "and Daniel and I'll make good use of everything in there. Won't we?" he asked, turning and looking at me.

"You know better than to ask," I said, smiling. "Mom's food never goes to waste around here. In fact, she sometimes wonders if I'm altogether normal, the amount of food I consume."

"Well you're far from over-weight," my uncle said quickly, "so I'm quite sure it's all a part of the growing-up process."

"You're right on that, Thad," Dad replied. "And now, before you leave, let's have a word of prayer together."

For once my uncle didn't "chew" Dad out verbally, and to my happy amazement he got down on his knees while Dad prayed. When it was time to have, I was sure that God had a purpose in my going and that good would come out of the stay.

I felt like royalty, riding in Uncle Thad's beautiful car -- kind of like I was floating down the road instead of riding on it. Ah, such comfort and luxury, I thought, pushing my shoulders and back into the softly-cushioned seat and, at the same time comparing this ride with my bicycle. Coming to think of it, though, I mused silently, my mode of transportation wasn't bad at all; not for what was it and on it, and considering the fact that it was a second-hand bike to begin with -a second-hand vehicle with better than eight years of wear on it!

In that instant, my esteem and respect rose for my bicycle.

Arriving at Uncle Thad's house well after dark, I was amazed to see the place looking so run down.

As though reading my thoughts, my uncle said in what sounded like an apologetic tone of voice, "Sorry about the place, Daniel; I just sort of lost hope and grew bitter when Pol died."

Without thinking, I said quickly, "Why would you do that? Aunt Polly would be distressed if she saw the way you let the place go down. I'm sure it didn't ease your bitterness one bit, Uncle Thad. In fact, I know it would help your morale tremendously if you'd begin to set things in order once again. And while I'm here, that's exactly what I'm going to help you to do."

My uncle smiled; then he said, "You know, Daniel, that's not a bad idea; that's just what we'll do, set things in order around here, you and I."

Early the following morning I was up and dressed and out of the house before Uncle Thad was awake. With my Bible tucked safely beneath my arm, I meandered

down what once was a beautiful, narrow path, but which was now nothing more than a miserable tangle of thistles and brambles and briars. My heart ached inside my chest. How like my uncle's heart the little path had become . . . through no fault of its own, however . . . the path, I mean.

Finding a shady spot some distance further, I sat down on a rotting tree stump and read my Bible, chapter after chapter. Then I knelt down and prayed. God was near and praying was easy; so I continued on my knees until my entire being was saturated with a fresh out-pouring from Heaven. Then I walked on, viewing with an aching heart the things that once were treasures but which were now in bad dis-repair. To my left the small barn, once beautiful and upright, now leaned heavily to the south and east, firmly establishing the pattern of many years of prevailing northwest winds.

The windmill that rose from the undergrowth near by had for years failed in its responsibility. A bucket dropped through the rotting platform produced water -- brackish -- that was usable for only the most elementary purposes.

I stood and wept. Then I picked my way down the steep incline and across the pasture to where the old hand pump stood. It lay at the bottom of a valley that wound tenaciously through the pasture. Effort was required to reach the water; the pump had failed years before. But, when it was in proper working order, cold, almost icy, water came up from some underground river or spring. Often I had heard my father talk about the well and its wonderful gift of water. "Long after one had left that well," Dad would frequently say, "he returned in memory to its exhilarating waters."

From the well I picked my way through briars and thistles to where my grandmother and grandfather had rived and reared their two sons -- my dad and Uncle Thad. The house a reminder of nearly a century ago, was made up of two small rooms stacked upon two other rooms with narrow steps reaching through their cavity to the ugliness of peeled paint and faded wallpaper upstairs. This should not be! I thought sadly. This house, the well and the windmill should all still be in use.

Suddenly, in spite of my mere seventeen and one-half years of age, I felt old with grief. Uncle Thad's heart, like the buildings, the windmill and the pump, needed a thoroughly new job done on it, and only God could do that work. The buildings, however, with hard labor and diligent effort, could be made beautiful again.

Thus thinking and pondering, I fell on my knees inside the house, pleading for God to have mercy on my uncle's soul and to get him back into the fold at any cost.

I heard a noise and, opening my eyes, I saw Uncle Thad standing in the doorway.

"Keep praying, Daniel," he said softly, his voice breaking. "I've had enough of my own way; I'm sick and tired of living like I've been living . . ."

Long after my uncle had prayed through and gotten saved, we sat beside the pump, talking.

"All I ever loved was money," he confessed, chewing on a blade of grass. "That is, since Polly went Home and I backslid. Seems like everything I touched 'turned to gold,' too. But I've never been satisfied nor happy, Daniel. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. That's why I went to town yesterday . . . to put some things in order. Among them, asking your dear father and mother to forgive me and to please come out and see me . . . I had once told them to never set foot on the place. I thought your folks were religious fanatics. Imagine! I who once knew God's saving grace and sanctifying power saying such as that! But one never knows how far he'll go nor what he'll do when he allows the grace of God to slip from his heart. But say, let's do something about these dilapidated, run-down buildings, and these weeds, too. Care to run into town with me again? We'll need lots of paint and nails, and there'll be no sparing. I have the cash on hand . . ."

Rising to the situation, I jumped to my feet. Uncle's heart was satisfied once more -- all new in Christ. It was quite natural then that he should want the place cleaned up and looking new, too.

"Let's go!" I exclaimed, hurrying up the hill toward Uncle Thad's newer, more modern house which also needed work done on it. I would be there most of the summer, I knew; and Ben Joslin's bicycle was as good as bought, I thought happily, singing the Doxology and looking ahead to the day when my uncle would once again be wholly sanctified.

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THE END