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The Christmas Bells

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Clark stomped the snow from his boots as he entered the semi-warmth of the enclosed back porch in the big stone house he and Eleanor had shared for nearly thirty-one years. He liked it here, winter or summer, spring or fall. The house was situated perfectly -- just two miles from the clean little hamlet of Wigwam -- at the edge of the big mountain range and was surrounded by drooping hemlock, towering fir and pine. It was a perfect haven for the abundant supply of cardinals, jays, tufted titmouse and chickadees.

He stood for a long while, watching the raging blizzard as it tossed the snow like downy feathers against the windows. Not a car was moving along the road today. He knew he was fortunate to have gotten home when he did, for the road would soon be completely shut with huge drifts.

The heavy weight in his arm suddenly reminded him that he had groceries. Quickly he set the weighty sack on a bench, then sat down by it and removed his galoshes. Always, he saw to it that there was plenty of food and fuel in the house, for the blizzards came frequently and lasted long, and always he and Eleanor had had plenty and were happy.



At the thought of happiness he cringed; a sinking feeling hit him in the pit of his stomach. He must forget and . . . and . . . forgive.

With set chin, determined will and resolute step he entered the spotlessly-clean, cozy kitchen.

"I'm home, dear," he called merrily, pushing aside the hurt of his heart.

"I didn't expect you so soon." Eleanor smiled, rising from the deacon's bench in the breakfast nook and coming to meet her husband. "Cold?" she asked, cupping his cold face between her warm hands and unpacking the groceries he had brought.

"Quite a blizzard out there," he said, unbuttoning his heavy red mackinaw and pushing his gloves deep into the pockets. "What have you been doing?" he teased. "It smells wonderfully 'gingery' in here."

"Oh, just the usual -- baking, cooking, and . . . and . . . planning."

"Eleanor!" Clark came close to his wife. "How oven must I tell you not to plan? It . . . it's . . . well," his voice faltered, "there's no use. Not a chance," he added hopelessly.

"Faith without works is . . ."

"Yes, I know, it's dead!" Clark exclaimed bitterly. "But Eleanor, there . . . there's not a chance."

"Hope is a wonderful thing, Clark. It's a . . . a . . . seemingly mysterious thing to the unbeliever but quite another thing to one who has faith and confidence in God."

Clark sat down on a dining room chair and buried his face in his hands. "I . . . I . . . wish I had your faith, Eleanor."

So many times he had said that.

"There must be a beginning, dear." She smiled sweetly, putting the meat in the refrigerator. "You didn't bring a turkey?" she asked, coming to the bottom of the bag.

"I . . . told you there's no . . . use"

She wanted to remind him again about the beginning of faith but remained silent instead.

Clark walked into the living room and paced restlessly back and forth, every little while glancing through the warmth of the big French windows to the raging storm outside.

"Think I'll build a fire in the fireplace," he said aloud, doubting seriously that his pretty wife heard but not really caring. He must busy himself Days like today had a very peculiar way of annoying him.

He struck a match to the chips and waited till the fire was blazing brightly. Then he walked to the big French windows again and peered into the lead gray of the outside where the blizzard seemed more ferocious than ever

"Hungry, dear?" And Eleanor walked silently up behind him, dangling a spicy gingerbread boy under his nose.

"Huh? Oh . . . say, that smells plenty tempting," and he turned swiftly away fore the windows and the raging storm. "Your gingerbread men get better every year, Eleanor. This is delicious. Thanks much."

"How about an early supper? You're home easy and the pot of freshly-made vegetable soup's still steaming on the stove. I'll toss a green salad and have ham and Swiss cheese on rye. Sound good?"

"Wonderful, dear. But why the hurry?"

"I . . . I . . . have more things to do before tomorrow."

"Eleanor, please." But words refused to come. Every year it had been the same. Why torture her with unbelief? Let her enjoy her simple faith.

As she set the table Clark heard her son, sweet voice: "Only believe; All things are possible, only believe," floated through the house. Believe? How Eleanor could believe -- after twelve years -- was a deep mystery to him. "Faith without works . . ." How full of hope her tone of voice was when she said it. And she believed -- actually believed that it would yet work out for God's glory! Her simple, childlike faith stunned him. Inwardly he was glad she hadn't lost it. It was that which had kept her going and . . .

"Supper's ready dear," she called softly, invading the privacy of his thoughts which at the moment were as dismal as the sky outside.

"What's this?" Clark asked as he passed the kitchen sink.

"A goose. Thought I'd better put it out for defrosting since you didn't get a turkey."

"It . . . it's going to be too much for just you and me." And Clark seated himself across the table from his wife.

"Maybe there'll be more. One never can tell. I like to have plenty. What's left can be made into casseroles and frozen for future use.

Because of the storm, darkness laid a heavy shroud over the valley early.

"I'll put another log in the fireplace, Eleanor; then I'll do the supper dishes so you can finish what you wanted to get done."

Eleanor started to protest but decided against it. Instead, she laughed softly, saying, "How sweet of you, Clark!"

The log was blazing warmly on the hearth and the biggest star shone brightly out through the enormous French windows in the living room by the time Clark had finished the dishes. Leisurely he strolled toward the warmth of it all.

"Clark! Clark! I . . . I'm sure I heard bells." Eleanor's face was flushed with eager excitement.

"You must have imagined it, dear," and he joined his wife near the big windows where the light of the star penetrated through the raging of the storm and spread itself in a coverlet of rainbow shadows among the snow-laden evergreens outside.

"Hear it?" and Eleanor pressed her face eagerly up against the window. "It's the sound of distant bells, Clark."

"I wouldn't discourage those bright hopes, dear Eleanor. But no one would be so foolish as to venture out in a blizzard like this. It's the moaning of the wind you hear."

"It's bells, Clark. Really and truly, bells. And I know who it is." And the neat, trim little wife hurried to the kitchen.

"Eleanor! Eleanor!" Clark exclaimed, thinking his wife had become suddenly irrational. "Are you . . . all right?"

"Feeling fine, dear. But here, help me. The bells are getting closer. Put the vegetable soup in a pan while I start some hot chocolate and prepare the table."

"Eleanor! Eleanor!" Clark exclaimed again, suddenly folding his wife in his big arms and tilting her face to meet his eyes. "No one would dare venture out on a night like this. Please Eleanor, be reasonable and . . ."

"Oh, Clark! Have you forgotten? He left on a night such as this." And she started quickly back to the stove and the preparation of food. "He's coming! I know it. It's Earl, Clark. Please do something. The bells are coming closer. Turn the pole light on outside and flood the place with light. The front and back porch lights, too, and . . ."

The noise was near now, and Clark, too dumbfounded to say more, sped throughout the house, turning every light switch on. He added another log in the fireplace before he rushed to the back door where the noise was almost deafeningly-sweet now. Horses and riders were five snowmen and their voices were full of laughter and joyousness.

"Dad! Mother! Oh, Mom and Dad!" and Earl bounded off the sleigh and folded the pair in his big strong arms, his tears mingling warmly with the snowflakes and melting them like his heart was melted.

"Mom! Dad! I . . . I've come home. Will you be able to forgive me? I'm so sorry I caused you so much worry. I got saved and felt I'd have to be home for Christmas."

"Come in, Son. Come in," Clark said hoarsely. "Bring the family in. Mom's prepared every year and . . ."

"This is my wife -- Eleanor," Earl introduced, casting a fond glance at his mother. "I . . . searched till I . . . I found a wonderful Eleanor, too," he said softly, seeing the tears of joy and light of happiness in the eyes of his parents. "And Dad, our oldest is Clark. Heidi's next and Eleanor's the smallest."

"Supper's waiting for you," Eleanor said softly, leading the way to the warmth of the kitchen and dining room.

"Smells like you've been baking, Mom."

"The Christmas dinner's almost finished; except, of course, to stuff and bake the goose, cook the vegetables and such like. I've been expecting you, Earl, for twelve years. And now you have fulfilled my dream and my faith. I say the Lord be praised. You have returned; and in returning you have brought with you much happiness for your father and me -- our beloved daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

"Everything looks the same as when . . . I . . . I left that night," Earl said, going from room to room.

"We tried to keep it that way, knowing some day the Lord would bring you home again."

"This time I'm clothed -- spiritually, in Christ -- Mom. I was a rebellious young man. That's what drove me away from home that night of the big blizzard. But I learned the hard way. The Lord had His hand on me or I'd never have survived the storm that night. I got work in the city, and after Eleanor and I were married we started attending a small fundamental holiness church. I got saved only a few days ago. Eleanor's been saved for nearly seven years, but my stubbornness kept me out so long. I felt I'd have to get home

this Christmas and rectify as much as I could with you both. I know I never can replace this silver hair with dark, nor erase all the heartaches. But the debt of love I owe and..."

"That is already done, Son," Clark stood tearfully by. "Let us forget the past and look to the future. The lost is found -- the dead has come to life again. You must eat! My grandchildren undoubtedly are hungry and cold, and their dear Mother, also"

Toward the wee hours of the morning the last light was turned off and the goose was stuffed, seasoned and put in a slow oven for roasting. With the son, steady breathing of children making a pleasing, relaxing sound to their ears, Clark and Eleanor retired to their bedroom.

"Eleanor," the husband said huskily, taking his slender wife by her shoulders. "I want the faith like a child. Will you help me to find it? I've grieved my Father's heart a long time, too. This would be a perfect night for me to come home."

They knelt side by side in the good warmth of the bedroom. The snow, driven with intense force by the wind against the window panes, made a softly pleasing sound as Clark, with the storm rapidly abating in his soul, prayed his way back into his Father's embrace and approval.

"A Christ-centered Christmas, dear," Eleanor said softly ere she fell asleep.

"A Christ-centered Christmas this time, dear," Clark said reverently, lying still, listening to the raging storm outside which seemed now to be heralding good tidings of great joy to his peaceful soul.

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