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## The Truest Friend

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the May 10, 1981 Sunday School Beacon

I stormed up the stair steps, bottling up and concealing my inmost feelings and emotions, sure that I had the most unreasonable mother in all the world. After all, what was so wrong with a sixteen year old.., almost seventeen really... taking a ride in a fellow's new car.

Undressing in the dark, I crawled between the sheets without so much as going through the form of praying even. There I lay and thought and seethed. Gary wasn't all that bad, I reasoned silently, wishing I had been endowed with some of his daring. Sure, he had had a couple of scrapes with the law, but so what? Hadn't some of the other fellows done just as many comparably bad things as he? The only difference was that they were smarter than Gary and knew better how to elude the law and pull a thing without getting caught.



I closed my eyes, trying to draw a sort of shade over the hateful things I'd thought about my parents who still believed that I was saved and sanctified wholly. I felt miserable and wretched, living a double life like this. And truthfully, I wasn't happy.

I must have fallen asleep, for I was dreaming. An odd dream it was, echoing with shouts and confused movements. There were odors, too.., odors of smoke and burning pine. The shouts grew nearer, and suddenly I was pulled from my warm bed, landing with a thump on the hard floor.

"Get up! Get up!" a voice screamed insistently in my ear. "The house is on fire!"

I opened my eyes. Was this a nightmare I was having-a sort of punishment for my fowl mood and evil thoughts? I wondered. Opening my eyes wider, I saw it was anything but a nightmare; this was reality! Orange-red flames were lapping like liquid waves along the hand-hewn pine beams of the century-old house in which we lived. Still heavy with sleep, they seemed to me like the long golden tongues of enchanted animals.

The next thing I knew I was yanked to my feet and slapped wide awake. Mom, her eyes distended with fear and terror, already had my baby sister under her arm. Mom's hair was smoldering, and for the first time I became aware of the intense, almost suffocating, heat and smoke in the house and of how hard it was to breathe without coughing.

"Hurry, Daniel!" Mom screamed above the roar of the crackling fire. "Get Jason," she ordered, heading for the room opposite mine after my thirteen-year-old sister, Brenda.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, rushing to Jason's room and slapping him awake like Mom did me, but she never heard. Already I heard her urging Brenda down the stairs. Neither Jason nor I wasted a moment's time in following her.

Mom's nightgown was smoldering around the edges, but she never stopped to beat out the fire. There were too many bigger flames, all around us now, roaring and crackling as they bit into walls and ceiling of the old house.

Like a hen covering her brood with her wings, Mom circled us all with her arms then pushed us through the smoke-filled hallway to the door. Opening it quickly, she shoved us out into the night, pushing, urging, coaxing us farther and farther away from the blazing, flaming inferno, her gown dragging the dew-laden grasses which, thankfully, extinguished the smoldering fire.

"Wh . . . where's Dad?" I asked again, between chattering teeth. Then just as quickly I remembered that tonight was the night he held a cottage prayer meeting for the families of Mill Creek Place, never getting home till well past the midnight hour.

"Thank God! Thank God!" Mom repeated over and over again and again, not stopping to answer my question. "My family is safe and unhurt; praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!" she added, looking at us with love-filled eyes.

I looked at her then and saw it; her beautiful long hair was singed all the way to the scalp in places, and she was burned on several parts of her body. Our baby sister, who was tucked like a squirming football beneath Mom's arm while she got us awake, was now cradled tightly in the strong, protective and loving arms and was none the worse for the nightmarish ordeal. The same with Brenda and Jason and me. But Mom . . .

Sudden tears filled my eyes, and all the hateful thoughts I'd harbored against my mother and her strict disciplining of us children vanished away like the house which, before our almost unbelieving eyes, was fast vanishing by the licking, crackling, hungry flames. I felt unworthy of the love which I saw reflected now through her tear-filled eyes and her smoke-blackened lips. Smiling into my face, she said softly, "We have God and each other, Daniel; what more could we desire! 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' "

She quoted the Scripture with such reverence and sincerity and I felt like I was the vilest, most wicked and wretched sinner that ever walked the earth. In the tests of life, she had a solace; when the storms came, she had an anchor. I had neither -- nothing but a cold, dead, meaningless, lifeless, unsustaining profession.

While she praised and worshipped, I pined over my worthlessness. Her life, so like the rose when it was crushed, exuded the sweetness and perfume of Canaan's blissful and blessed land. God was real to my mother; she had something genuine.., something I needed badly.

Flinging my arms around her neck, I wept. For once, I was not ashamed of my emotional display; Mom had saved my life. Love had prompted her daring.., her every move and action.., and I was not deserving of this love. I had thought her unreasonable and overly strict; Gary had been my hero . . . the daring one. But I was wrong -- call wrong. The opposite was true.

Sobbing uncontrollably now, my head buried in the singed, smoke-scented remains of her once thick, long black hair, my eyes were suddenly opened. The "scales" fell from my eyes and I saw the reason why Mom prohibited me from going out with Gary. Her motive was as pure as an angel's. She wanted to keep me from getting into trouble, like Gary did. She had done me a great favor by restricting and restraining me; she was guarding me... with godly, motherly love.., from walking with wicked companions. I owed her so much.

"Mom," I began, feeling more humble than I could ever remember having felt, "I . . . I... please forgive me. I don't have a thing in my heart; I'm not even saved !"

"Why, Daniel!" Mom exclaimed, laying a smoke-blackened hand on my arm. "Are you sure?" she asked quickly.

"Positive," I sobbed. "I've had bad thoughts about you. Tonight when you wouldn't allow me to go out with Gary, I thought you were the most unreasonable, strict, and hard-hearted mother in the world. But God has shown me your real reason for not granting me this request and I'm sorry, Mother. Oh, so sorry. I want you to forgive me. Please! And . . . and . . . Mom, I know you're hurting from where you were burned, but.., but could we have a prayer meeting here? Right now?"

"Nothing would make me happier, Daniel. My family's salvation and sanctification is the most important thing of all in my life..."

While the flames devoured our once-beautiful but old house, God's peace and love and forgiveness came back into my heart and I knew I was saved -- gloriously so. My once strong desire to emulate Gary and his ways and doings were now changed and gone; I wanted (more than anything) to be like Jesus and like my dear father and mother who were, without a doubt, my truest and most trusted friends.

Dad came across the lawn just then, looking for us. Like one great inseparable unit we moved out of the shadows and ran toward him.

"We're all here!" Mom cried happily. "Safe and unhurt, except for a few minor burns."

As Dad gathered Mom close to his heart and wept softly over her for joy that we were all alive and safe, I recognized the real hero and heroine. Suddenly I was thankful to be a part of so noble and godly a family.

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THE END