Keeper Of The Boys
By Mrs. Paul E. King
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Jesse sat at the big desk in the office of Piney Ridge sawmill and toyed unconsciously with the pencil in his hand. Vainly he tried to make out the bills for the next shipping. Somehow his mind refused to concentrate. He stared for a long while into the open fireplace where a warm friendly fire was licking hungrily up and around the pine knot, emitting a soft musical tone as it was being consumed. Though it was June, the fire felt good and was a welcome thing indeed, for the sun rarely penetrated the dense woods, making the early mornings chilly and the nights cold.

The loud musical hum of the big saw brought him suddenly to attention. With eyes shining and ears attuned to the familiar sound, which to him had become a sort of melody by years of diligent labor, he glanced out the clean picture window to see the big saw. Already two trucks were nearly loaded with the sweet smelling pine and fir boards while four others waited in line.

He saw Fred as he worked skillfully between the machinery and the logs. Fred had, like himself, become an integral part of the old mill. He loved it and its work with a passion and worked diligently to see it progress and bring in substantial dividends.

He watched as the logs floated slowly down Little Snake River and came to an abrupt halt in the inlet at the bottom of the hill. A big buck, with antlers large and wide, halted momentarily for a drink then darted gracefully back into the laurel and thick underbrush.
He lay the pencil on the stack of shipping bills and walked over to the window where he had a commanding view of the tall timber. Far, far to the north he saw tiny figures moving to the tops of the towering pine and fir. Reaching for the binoculars, he brought the tiny figures within focus. Bob and Dave were high up there somewhere, he knew. He was proud of the boys, but knew the dangers involved. High climbers frequently fell to a premature death or were thrown, in some cases, by the fell tree tops and were crushed to death. He breathed a prayer as he saw Bob climb higher and higher into the tall tree. He was as sure-footed as a mountain goat and loved tree topping better than anything.

Jesse had given all four boys their choice. "You've been faithful by Morn and me," he had said several years back. "Now I'm going to let you make your own choices in life. You're now young men; Mother and I shall endeavor to help you out as much as we can in whatever pursuit you may choose and follow."

That's when Fred spoke up. "Dad," he'd said, mannish-like, "I'd like to be a mill hand. It's a great life."

He had asked for the privilege of being only a mill hand.

"Son," Jesse began that morning, "how would you boys like taking over the mill? There's enough book-work to keep me busy and I need a good foreman to run the place. I'll not be here forever."

Fred beamed. Dave and Bob asked to be tree-fellers. Ralph remained silent. After some time, he spoke. "I'm tired of this life," he had said sullenly. "I'm going somewhere and find me a good job. After all, I'd like to find my real dad."

It cut, and hurt, but Jesse spoke kindly, "Son, this has been your home since you were five and a half years old, and should you ever grow tired of your new life, remember this will always be your home. Mother and I will always love you. We shall pray for you so long as we have breath in our body and shall await the day of your return."

That was four years ago. No one heard from the boy nor knew where he had gone. The man's great heart pined for the wayward boy.

A tear rushed hotly to Jesse's eye as he watched Bob and Dave through the binoculars. He had had such high hopes for the boys, Ralph included. But Ralph had always seemed to resent everything they had ever tried to do for him. Fred, Bob, and Dave, were a real blessing to the couple and brought nothing but joy and gladness to their heart. All four boys had been adopted and were loved and wanted. Why Ralph felt as he did, the couple could not understand.
He watched the two boys until he felt sure everything was going all right. Then he focused the lens a little to the east of Dave and Bob. He watched patiently as Jack Stiles made a slow climb upward. Poor Jack! He was getting too old for tall timber. Still, he refused to do any other kind of work. He could have been making good money in some city or town. Jesse knew this. He was talented and skilled above anything the mill owner had ever seen.

"I like it here, Jess," Jack had told him once long, long ago. "Gives a fellow a sure enough great feeling to climb up high and feel like he can 'most nigh touch the clouds. Makes you feel kinda' close to . . . to... God." And he stared hard into the blazing fire in the fireplace that night.

If only I could persuade him to go with us to church. I do believe he'd get saved, Jesse thought, as he watched Jack dig his spurs deep into the side of the tree and climb slowly upward.

Strange thing about Jack... one couldn't get him to talk. He lived so much in a world all his own. If he had any living relatives, no one ever knew it. He had come to the mill nigh unto eighteen years ago--a tall, broad-shouldered handsome man in his early thirties. He was still handsome and fine looking, for the rugged life of a tree topper had agreed perfectly with him and seemed only to enhance his tall manly frame. If only he could be drawn out in conversation. At times, something heavy and distressing seemed to weigh the man down dreadfully. Not one to pry into the affairs of others, Jesse said nothing, but prayed much for the lonely man who had come to seem like one of the boys.

The rustic, knotty pine log cabin which Jesse had built for Jack was furnished simply but kept spotlessly clean. Jack had made drapes for the windows and even hooked a rug to lay before the open fireplace. He possessed both knowledge and talent. Why he chose to "bury" himself in the beautiful but isolated place no one could figure out.

Jesse watched as Jack took the stout rope and threw it toward the top-most limb. It sailed with perfect precision through the air and caught hold of the top-most branch. Jesse heaved a sigh of relief. Suddenly he noticed the right foot slip. Jack reached to encircle the tree trunk with his strong arms, but too late! The axe he was holding swung suddenly hard against the rope while his body swung loose from the tree trunk. The misguided axe had cut the rope, leaving only a few brittle strands holding the big man suspended in mid-air.

Jesse watched no longer. Running to the mill, he turned the big saw off as a thick log was singing its way through the sharp blade.

"It's Jack," he called to Fred. "He's in serious trouble."

Fred ran for spurs; Jesse started the jeep. The truckers jumped in with the two men and the jeep raced rapidly down the rough mountain trail. Every second counted!
They went as far as the trail and parked the jeep. Climbing gear thrown over stout shoulders, they ran through the dense forest.

"Where is he, Dad?" Fred asked breathlessly.

"He's to the northeast a good piece yet. Let's hurry!" and they quickened their pace.

"But Bob and Dave! Won't they see him?"

"Not a chance, Fred," Jesse said. "The boys are over north. Jack's northeast with Carl and Wilson. We've got to reach him before the rope breaks. We've got to!" and the man's jaws set and his muscles tightened as he hastened forward.

"Can't be much farther now," he panted as he paused to make sure of his directions.

"Jack!" he called. "Ho, Jack! Hang on. We're coming, Jack! Can you hear me?" They paused, listening intently and looking.

"I see it," Jesse shouted. "I see the tree." He rushed forward. "There!" he said, pointing to a giant fir. "That's the tree."

Pushing forward, they stood suddenly beneath its outstretched limbs. Glancing through the needly branches, they saw the dangling figure of the man. Immediately, Fred donned the climbing gear and was soon high up the mammoth tree, on equal par with Jack.

"Jack," he called softly, comfortably. "Can you hear me, Jack?"

A weak voice said, "I... I... hear."

"Good!" Fred called cheerfully, "Hang on tight. I'll soon have you safe and sound again. Dad's here, and so are a lot of the truckers. Pray, Jack. God's interested and concerned."

Fred climbed higher and higher until he reached the rope at the height of the tree. Slowly, gradually, carefully and prayerfully, he handled the rope as he made a slow descent. Would his shoulders be strong enough to descend the straight tall tree with the additional two hundred pounds on them? he wondered.

Silently, earnestly, he prayed for supernatural strength and wisdom as he placed the now unconscious man lovingly over his right shoulder and began the slow descent. It seemed like hours since he had left the mill and had seen Dad. Oh! If he could only see
his face and know that he was watching, how much lighter it would make his added heavy load feel and seem!

As though in answer to his heart musings and thoughts, the soft, patient and steady voice of Jesse floated heavenward until it reached Fred's ears.

"Good boy, Fred! Steady, son. You're doing a wonderful job. Thank God! You've got it made," and he encouraged until Fred's feet touched the good earth.

"I'm right proud of you, Son." He beamed through the rapidly falling tears as the truckers laid the unconscious form of Jack on the folding stretcher and started for the jeep. Sometime during the night Jack opened his eyes. "Everything's all right," Jesse said softly, keeping constant vigil over the sick man. "Doc Peckert was here and told Morn what to do. She went to bed 'long about midnight but I'll stay with you the rest of the night. Doc says you'll be all right, Jack. Have to rest for a spell, though."

"Ralph! Where's Ralph, Jesse? Has anybody heard?"

"Not a soul, Jack. But one of these days, he'll wander home. Wait and see!" The kind man's eyes filled with tears.

"I... I've got something to... tell... you," Jack choked back a sudden deep sob.

"Relax, Jack. Rest. Doc says you're going to need a lot of it. Guess your tree climbing days are over. But there'll always be a job for you here at the mill. Look at that stack of papers on my desk, would you? I'll need lots of help, Jack; desk help."

"I must..., confess, Jess. Let me talk." The big form raised upright in bed. "I am Ralph's father," he said hoarsely.

"You... you, why Jack! Are you..., sure?" and the mill owner stood suddenly erect over the towering sick man's bed. "You can't be! Morn and I got him down to the orphans' home. He had no mother or father." Jess paced the floor.

"I'm not worthy to bear the wonderful title of 'father,' Jesse; and I'm not the kind of man a boy would be proud to own as his father, but Ralph is my son--my own flesh and blood, and..., and... I love. ò .. him," and Jack fell back in bed sobbing deep hard sobs.

"But why didn't you tell me this before?" Jesse asked, troubled and confused. "The boy told me he wanted to find his tea/daddy when he left." And he sat down and buried his face in his hands.

"I... can you... forgive me, Jesse? Can... can... God... forgive me? I'm slowly dying inwardly all because my heart is starving for peace. I've been nothing but a big coward. A coward, Jesse! Afraid to face up to reality."
"Sure, Jack! Sure! God can forgive you. In fact, He's waiting to save and forgive you."

"But how? When . . .?" and the confused man sat there as one in a daze.

"It happened a long, long time ago," Jack continued. "I grew restless and tired of the dear folks at home. I decided to roam--and roam I did. I fell in love with the sweetest and most beautiful woman God ever created. We were married and I settled down like a respectable citizen. We were happy and content only to be together. I was prospering in a thriving, legitimate business until that day." He faltered as sobs rent his manly form.

"What day, Jack? Tell it all. It will help heal your wound more than anything," and Jesse stroked the big man's hand like a mother soothing a wounded child.

"When Ralph was born, she died." Jack buried his face in the soft pillow and wept unashamed. "I tried to . . . to . . . care for the boy for awhile, but after a year, I felt I couldn't stand to see his face. He... he... was the image of his mother and I guess I accused him of taking her life. But I'm sorry, Jesse. I'm truly sorry. I abandoned him on the orphanage steps as he lay sleeping one night and I became a roamer. After four and a half years of restless roaming, I longed for the boy. Through some friends, I found out you had adopted him and that's when I decided I'd be a tree topper. I wanted to be near my boy. I've watched him grow from childhood's laughing, carefree ways to young adolescent's problem days and then up into young manhood. I want him, Jesse. I need him! He's all that's left in life for me. He's the very image of Jenny. Body and soul, he's her out and out. I want to tell him how sorry I am and how unfit I was to be a father. But I'm changin', Jesse. Oh, yes! Here and now! Maybe you can point the way a little clearer for me to see how to go about it."

"If we confess our sins," Jesse began, "He, the Lord Jesus Christ, is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That's the Word of God, Jack." And the kind man was on his knees by the bed of the big tree topper, praying to God for mercy for a sinner come home.

"It's all settled, Jesse," Jack said, suddenly jumping to the floor as his big voice shouted for joy. "I have peace, peace, peace! The first time ever! In my heart, I have found peace! Praise the Lord!"

"Better get back to bed and rest a spell, Jack," Jesse said after the man's shouts had subsided. "Doc wants you to rest at least a couple of days."

"Rest!" Jack exclaimed, "Why Jesse, I'm the happiest man God ever made, and I'm fitter'n I've ever been. I'm just now ready to go tree toppin'. Ralph an' I'll be toppin' together for you one of these days; just you wait and see."
The following Sunday morning dawned clear, cool, and bright in the dense forest as Jesse walked down the hill to the Little Snake River to meditate before going to church. This was Father's Day and he longed for Ralph. The boys were always considerate with loving remembrances, on this day particularly.

He had just settled on a fallen log and was surveying the beauties of the surroundings when a rustle in the leaves caught his attention. Coming into the clearing toward him was a tall, husky, handsome young man.

"Dad! Dad!" he called excitedly. "I've come home! That is, if you will permit me. I'm sorry! Forgive me! I've learned my lesson and I'll be your servant. This is Father's Day; I just had to see you again."

Tears of gratitude ran copiously down the kind face. Jesse faltered; then, "Ralph! Ralph, my boy. You've come back! I knew you would. Thank God, you're home and you're safe. But come; I have a wonderful surprise for you." And he led the way to the rustic cabin below the big mill. Lightly he tapped on the door.

"Come in," Jack called. "I'm almost ready for church, Jesse." As he opened the door, he saw Ralph. He recognized him immediately and began weeping.

"Ralph," Jessie said, "Meet your real father. He's a wonderful man."

"But Dad," the baffled boy stuttered, "I . . . I . . . don't understand."

"No. No, you wouldn't, Ralph." Jack said, rushing suddenly to him and relating the whole story, bit by bit, to the astonished young man. "You've got a new father, Ralph. I found the Saviour a few nights ago and if you can ever forgive me and just live near me I'll be the happiest man on earth."

"Forgive you!" Ralph exclaimed joyfully. "Why, I've got the best real father and dad the world ever produced. I'm proud of you both." And he rushed to Jack's side and embraced the weeping man soundly. Then with the other arm, he drew Jesse into the circle. "I love you, Father and Dad, and I'll be happy to go tree topping with my real flesh and blood father or to run errands, scrub floors, cut wood or anything for you, Dad. Happy Father's Day, Father of mine and wonderful Dad."

"The lost is found. Bless the Lord forever and ever," Jesse said, raising his hands heavenward as the church bells began ringing in the village far, far away and echoed through the dense forest to the listening trio of men.

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