Dad's Special Gift

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Dale stood looking down at his many pieces of luggage. They were all different sizes and shapes with no two pieces matching. A smile creased his lips as he recalled how he had become sole possessor of the odd-looking grouping, bought in second-hand shops, at garage sales and in pawn shops. One comfortable thing about it was the fact that it was all paid for. Yes, it may look as strange as the motley crowd in the railroad station, but at least there were no payments staring him in the face for having gone deeply into debt to buy the matching pieces from some expensive store.

He shoved the pieces along the floor, waiting his turn to have them checked through to his destination when a man nudged him on the elbow. "Hey," he said, addressing Dale in a most unbecoming manner, "d'ya' mind if I go ahead of you? I have only one piece; you.., you'll be forever getting all that checked and tagged."

Dale moved out of the way and motioned the stranger in line in front of him. The man nodded his thanks and was soon finished and moving toward the platform to wait for the soon-due train.

As he had done on so many other occasions, his mind wandered homeward now. How would the folks receive him? Would they be glad to see him? Always, the questions troubled him. But he knew he was doing the right thing; the gentle Voice within his forgiven and sanctified-wholly heart told him it was the only thing to do.
"Next!" the man in the baggage department bellowed, awaking Dale out of his deep reverie of thoughts.

Pushing the heavy luggage forward, he said, "Sorry fellow, I was far away in thought."

"Save your thoughts for the ride home," came the terse reply. "Look at that line behind you! They all want to get on the train, too. No sense making some late by senseless thinking and idle daydreaming."

Dale made no further reply. He doubted that his could be classed as "senseless" thinking. It was (to be truthful) serious thinking. Yes, at last he was settled enough to do serious thinking . . . thinking about things of lasting and enduring value.

Dale collected his claim checks then headed through the station to the platform where the train stood waiting, his heart hammering joyously inside his chest. He was going home; he was going home! After seven long years, he was going home.

Finding his car number, he climbed on board and sat down, feeling as happy and as excited as a child in anticipation of the journey. For the next many hours, he dozed and slept or read the Bible which he'd made sure to stick in his pocket before leaving the city, and when the conductor called out the little town, he jumped to his feet and grabbed the small case which he had carried on board with him.

Everything looked so familiar, he realized as he stepped out into the beautiful sunshine and hastened away from the station and the few houses that surrounded it.

Pausing, he stood for a long while at the top of the steep path that led down to the small wharf and looked out across the endless expanse of blue water. On the horizon, he could just make out the island. Home! His heart hammered wildly inside his chest. Over there, on the island, was home . . . and loved ones.

He recalled the last time he had stood at the top of the path and looked across the sound. A damp drizzle had chilled the air and the day was cold and bleak. But he hadn't minded the parting then; his one thought was to get to the city, earn his degree and set up a practice of his own. And he'd accomplished it all, every last part of it. But what he had thought would bring him lasting peace and happiness had turned out to leave him empty and full of longing. That's when he had decided to turn about-face and change his way of living and go home.

Only a few families lived on the island and fewer children even. They began their education in the small one-room schoolhouse and graduated to the consolidated school on the mainland with most of them leaving early for the big city and its numerous and varied job opportunities. Few ever returned to set up permanent residences on the island.
with its scattered crofts and primitive but peaceful way of life. And now, he was returning. Yes, with deep satisfaction and joy, he was returning.

He picked up the much-used piece of luggage and made his way to the wharf where Mr. Tilley's boat was waiting. The man made his meager living ferrying men and livestock, or what-have-you, across to the island.

A broad smile lighted the man's face. "Dale, my boy, is it really you?" he asked, the soft lilting accent sounding like the ripple of a brook to Dale's ears.

He stood looking at Dale with almost unbelieving eyes, his leathery, weather-beaten face wreathed in a broad, pleased smile of welcome and his blue eyes sparkling.

Dale reached out a hand of welcome and pumped the kind man's hand eagerly. Then he realized (with a show) how old Mr. Tilley looked. A shudder raced through his body; the man's hair was as white as the foam churned up by the waves and the hands that grasped the neatly coiled ropes were wrinkled and gnarled. Time, he realized suddenly, had brought radical changes to the man's physical person. What about the spiritual man? he wondered with urgency.

"Mr. Tilley," he cried happily, "I'm so glad to see you again. Oh, but it's good to be coming home. My luggage can wait in the station till tomorrow, the Lord willing. I'll need your services then; I've come home entirely and completely—you'll see how completely when you handle all my luggage. But say, I was just wondering how things are with your soul? Are you ready to meet God? You see, I'm now a new creature in Christ."

For a brief moment, the hands trembled. Then, facing Dale honestly and squarely, the man said kindly, "I'm afraid I haven't changed one bit since you left for the city. But God knows I've wanted to. I'm not getting any younger, my boy, as you can well see; and the thought of death and dying fills me with a horrible fear. I wish I knew what to do to get peace of heart and mind and soul."

"I know the answer, Mr. Tilley: 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' . . . It's the Lord's promise to any and all who really want to know God and be saved from their sins."

"Oh, Dale, my boy, I want to be saved. I do! I do!" came the plaintive heart-cry.

"Let's get things settled now, Mr. Tilley. The Bible says, 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet; they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.' "

Mr. Tilley was weeping. "Pray for me, Dale. Oh, I want peace in my heart."
Dale was thankful that the two of them were alone. It was a beautiful sight when Mr. Tilley touched Heaven and was saved. The man's face looked like an angel's, all shiny-bright and radiant. He finally spoke, "Well, my boy, now that my heart's fixed up with God, I guess we'd better be pushing off across the water. You're anxious to get home, I'm sure."

"I certainly am, Mr. Tilley."

Mr. Tilley, with the deceptive casualness of long practice, untied the boat and started the engine, negotiating the end of the small harbor and pointing the boat out to the open sea and the distant island.

The sun, climbing to its zenith, caught the blue waves and dashed handfuls of sparkling diamonds into them. Here and there a white crest broke with a sigh and the sea gulls, flying with effortless grace and ease, rode the thermals and called greetings to each other. Everything was just as he had remembered it: the gently rocking boat, the wind and the sea spray in his face, the taste of salt on his lips and the headiness of the pure air. It was glorious and wonderful; yes, it was.

The island grew larger and took on a definite form. It was long and low, and from this angle looked like a sleeping dog. He picked out the green of the fields, dotted with the white specks which were sheep. He saw the gold of the sand on the lee side of the island and farther toward the end the craggy cliffs where the gulls nested, and his heart jumped crazily with excitement.

Mr. Tilley landed the boat on a stretch of sandy shingle that served as a landing point. The boat gently crunched its way onto land. The old man jumped out and quickly pulled the boat firmly onto the beach. Dale was out, too. At last he was home. His feet were now on home soil and he felt so very happy and relieved.

"Thank ye, Dale my boy," Mr. Tilley was saying, slapping Dale on his shoulders. "Thank ye for pointing me to God. Your folks'll be right proud to see you. Yes, right proud and happy, too. Hurry home now, my boy, and give your folks my regards." And Mr. Tilley turned quickly and hurried back to the boat and its ropes and tackle.

Dale watched the man push away into the water. Then he headed toward his home. There was no one there to meet him, but then, they hadn't known he was coming. The islanders were a solitary people, not given to much fuss and emotional demonstrations.

He walked towards the path winding upwards to the fields above the beach, the shingle crunching beneath his feet. The sun was high in the sky now and cast a warmth over the land. It was summer. Everywhere the air was filled with the lazy sound of insects and the buzz of bees as they moved and flitted among the pollen-laden flowers.
heavy with scent and nectar. The fields, lush with heavy green pastures, were dotted with sheep, fat and woolly and contented.

The croft came into view. Low and white-washed like the others, it had a turf roof. From the chimney a thin trickle of smoke rose lazily up into the sky. Always his mother had a fire burning, for the baking and cooking were dependent upon it. A tiny figure was waiting at the door . . . no, two figures . . . hands shielding their eyes against the bright sunlight.

Dale rushed forward; they emerged from the open doorway, running down the path to meet him, calling joyously, "Dale, our son. Our son! Welcome home."

In a glad rush, they were in each other's arms, crying, weeping and laughing.

"Happy Father's Day, Dad!" the boy exclaimed, holding the slightly-bent form at arm's length and smiling through his tears. "I love you and mother. I'm so glad I'm home. This time, it's for keeps. I got my bearings; you have a new son--a born-again and sanctified-wholly boy. I'll find work somewhere and..."

"I've been praying for a helper on the farm, Son . . ."

"Then your prayer is answered, Dad. Oh, but it's good to be home. Home and back in my Heavenly Father's fold and now home with the two dearest people on earth."

"Come inside, my boy, the lentils are cooked and the bread's baking."

Like a small boy finding his way home after he'd been lost, Dale followed his mother and father inside.

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THE END