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SEVENTEEN

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the April 10, 1983 Sunday School Beacon

Roxane awoke and sat up in bed, her heart seeming to leap inside her chest. Today... yes, today! . . . was her big day: She was seventeen !

She slid out from beneath the silken feeling sheets and granted her bare feet the privilege and the exquisite luxury of sinking deliciously and delightfully into the deep, snugly pile of thick shag carpet that spread itself like a glorious sea of palest-pale pink peppermint stick candy from one freshlypainted wall to the other in her bedroom. Then she sat down and ran

her fingers caressingly over the lovely floor covering, feeling for all the world like another Cinderella. A twentieth century Cinderella, still not over the glad surprise of her transformed bedroom.

Mrs. Wingate and her mother were professional conspirators, she reasoned with a pleased smile, marveling over the fact of her own naiveness . . . that she hadn't the slightest inkling or idea of the gift. But this made the gift all the sweeter and more cherished and priceless. She had expected nothing more than the usual birthday cake, prepared, baked and decorated by her dear mother, and a new blouse and skirt, which she knew she was getting because her mother had told her so and because she had had to try it on several times while her mother was making it.

Bright tears stood in Roxane's eyes. They were tears of joy, deep thankfulness and happiness.

Things had had a total reversal pattern for them since her father was killed in an accident when she was barely twelve. Her mother, to make ends meet, had taken in any kind of domestic labor she could acquire in order to stay home with Roxane. She sewed for neighbors, did their mending and darning, baked pies, bread and doughnuts and went from door to door peddling her delicious wares; washed and ironed for all who needed it and cleaned house two days a week, (while Roxane was at school) being home to greet her at the door upon her return from school.

When she was fourteen, her mother learned that a Mrs. Wingate was looking for a cleaning woman to come into her home each Saturday. Roxane, hearing about it, made a personal, private and secret visit and call upon the woman, declaring that, though she was only past fourteen years old by three months, she was perfectly capable of handling the cleaning.

"I help my mother all the time," she remembered having told the smiling Mrs. Wingate, "and I'd like to have the job, if you haven't gotten someone else."

"But fourteen! Isn't this terribly young to begin working? I may be called into court, Roxane," she said sadly, "for using.., or abusing . . . a child. Child labor, you know."

Pulling herself up to her full height, Roxane had pleaded, "Please, Mrs. Wingate, I need this job. My father died when I was twelve and I need the work so I can help to support Mother. She works dreadfully hard, trying to keep the bills paid and enough food on the table. Please, Mrs. Wingate, I need the job!" By now, her sincere tears had been flowing freely and she was hired immediately.

It was sheer joy working for the elderly woman, Roxane thought, jumping to her feet and making the bed before dressing and combing her beautiful, long hair. Mrs. Wingate was kind and compassionate and saw to it that Roxane was paid well. It was through her kindness and generosity that the bedroom had its beautiful floor covering. She must have learned from her mother that pink was Roxane's favorite color.

Kneeling by the bed, she had her private devotions, being careful to thank God for the soft, warm gift of love upon which her knees were resting, not forgetting to ask that special blessing be poured out upon Mrs. Wingate for her thoughtfulness and her kindness.

Roxane ate a hearty breakfast, washed the dishes and put them away; then, locking the door behind her, she headed down the street toward school, thinking of her dear mother and how tired she must be already, with two hours of house-cleaning already under way in the Lemoyne's two-story, five-bedroom brick on Mocking Bird Boulevard.

She heard loud laughing and silly jesting when she entered the doors of Pierceton High and shrank in disgust. Who was being "taken apart" or being made sport of now? she wondered, knowing full well that some innocent, timid soul was the "goat."

She cringed, wondering how long it would be before these unkind, heartless and cruel classmates would get their eyes open and realize what they were doing, psychologically, to several students of poor circumstances and ill fortune in the school.

Tears brimmed in Roxane's dark brown eyes as she hurried to her homeroom.

It was when Mr. Peters was called from the room that the ball started rolling, "We have been studying proper business procedures," he stated

before leaving the room, "and in my absence, I want you to pretend you are conducting an important meeting in a large city. Something important must be decided; the situation is a critical one. Where do you begin? What will you do to win your case in court? Frank, you are in charge of this 'important' meeting, and Jan, you act as secretary. I want everything written down. I'll check it upon my return to the classroom."

Frank walked to the front. Strutted would have been a more fitting word. In mock pretense, he tugged first at the left lapel of his sport jacket then at the right.

The class exploded into laughter.

Cocking his head, he made some foolish remark and again received an explosion of laughter.

Roxane sat unmoved. Frank Clarke was a ringleader at making sport of other people. Those especially who were beneath his affluent and overindulged-in upbringing.

Clearing his throat in mock business style, Frank said, "And now, my good friends, we have gathered together today to decide the fate.., or the good fortune, depending upon who buys and how thoroughly they are destroyed.., of a row of tar paper shacks on Dead Man's Row. The senior class of Pierceton High having changed the name of the street . . . Captain Street . . . on which stand these despicable, unsightly and positively obnoxious shacks, to Dead Man's Row."

A roar of applause and raucous laughter followed. Roxane looked across the aisle to where Debbie Meredith sat. Debbie was chewing a ragged fingernail nervously and her face was flushed scarlet in embarrassment.

Did Debbie perhaps live in one of the poorer houses? Roxane wondered, chiding herself for not having learned more about the shy, timid girl who had so suddenly come into Pierceton's halls less than two months ago.

The girls' amused smiles indicated that they had observed Debbie's dowdy, hand-me-down looking clothes and battered shoes.

Roxane felt tears bubbling in her eyes. Was Debbie to be the "goat" . . . the butt of laughter... this morning? she wondered, feeling immediately empathy and sympathy well up inside her for Deb.

She caught Debbie's attention and smiled at her, noticing the lovely blue-green of her eyes and the copper-red hair, shining in the sun's glow as though it had gold splinters woven through it. Then she opened her history book and tried to read.

"Hey, we have an assignment before us!"

Frank's booming voice jerked her back into the motion of things.

"We're to conduct an important business meeting," he reminded Roxane, frowning. "You are a part of the class."

"A part of the class, yes, Frank; but not a part of the group of 'little-minded' snobs who find supreme delight and joy in caricaturing people whom they deem beneath them."

"So-o! We have run into opposition already. So soon. Shall we proceed with the business?" Frank asked in exaggerated tones, raising and lowering his eyebrows as he looked away from Roxane. Skip Brandon raised his hand.

"Yes, Brandon," Frank said by way of recognition and acknowledgement.

"We will need a coordinator, or whatever it's called, to rally the public around this project, this great city clean-up venture. I nominate Debbie Meredith. She knows the place better than any of us."

"I second the nomination," Jack Owens said in mock pretense of sincerity and leading the group in another outburst of laughter.

Debbie sat, pale and silent now, leafing through her notebook and stacking and re-stacking the books on her desk.

Getting to her feet, Roxane said, "I protest. I object to all this nonsense. This sarcasm and laughter at another's expense. I'm from a poor

family, too, and I'm not one bit ashamed of it. My father was killed when I was barely twelve years old, leaving my mother virtually penniless. But we've been making our contribution to this town: We're honest, law-abiding citizens who never give anyone one bit of trouble. We're Godfearing people, too, my mother and I, as was my father. Yes, I said God-fearing..."

Silence reigned. Frank's face flushed then turned pale. "Sit down, Roxane," he ordered.

"This is a business meeting, Frank. 'Important' issues are to be decided, Mr. Peters said. You've spoken your part.., to the belittling and minimizing of one of our classmates . . . now it's my turn. As to your remark about the 'tar paper shacks' on Captain Street, not everyone of us can afford to live in mansions and ivory towers or castles. Some of us, like myself, must live in inexpensive houses. This, out of necessity• I find it grossly unfair and most unkind and uncharitable.., extremely rude even and bespeaking of ill upbringing.., to laugh at, belittle, or make fun of another's circumstances, of whatever kind of nature. I am a Christian, yes; as such, my heart is filled with love and compassion for all. But for the down-and-out ones, especially. Yes, especially those!

"The 'shacks' which you have so unkindly and sarcastically alluded to are not shacks at all. You know this. They're a cheaper-built house than some but they're still Home Sweet Home to dozens of happy people.

"Frankly, I think you owe an apology to the one who has been the brunt of your brutal assault--of your sport at her expense."

A hearty applause came from the doorway. Turning, Roxane saw Mr. Peters and the principal standing just inside the room. Tears shimmered in the teacher's eyes.

Roxane sat down, wondering how long the two men had been standing there and how much they had heard. Then Mr. Peters spoke.

"Sit down, Frank," he said. "And, Jan, give me the notes you've written and taken down."

"They're a mess," Jan confessed. "I mean, what was 'proposed' is a mess."

"I heard most of it," the teacher said, looking greatly displeased. "Proper business procedure indeed!"

Clearing his throat, he said, "Well, what do you plan to do?"

"About what?" Skip asked quickly.

"About Roxane's statement that you make an apology for what you did? Rather, for what was said? It's a great suggestion, one I wanted acted upon and carried out."

Debbie got up from her seat and darted through the door, tears splashing down her cheeks.

Mr. Peters started after her, calling her name. Then, quite abruptly, he turned and stood before the class.

"Roxane's right," he said. "You're rude, uncharitable, uncouth and unkind, to name but a few descriptive adjectives, and I will have no more of this sort of thing in my classes. Not ever!"

"Debbie may be poor, but she's neither dumb nor indolent. Her grades prove this. One doesn't make straight A's without diligent work. Someday, you who have been making sport of her, will sit up and take note of her. She wrote a thesis before coming to Pierceton High, which is soon to be printed and published in many renowned and globe-circling publications. This was my reason for leaving. Mr. Satterlee, our principal, and I had some things to discuss."

Roxane raised her hand and asked if she might leave the room. Mr. Peters nodded. With shoulders erect and head high, she walked through the door.

She knew she'd find Debbie crying in the restroom. Now, if ever, Debbie needed her. Her broken heart was open soil for witnessing, tender enough for listening and sorrowful enough for receiving. Today . . . right now . . . was the time to pray with Debbie and ask her to open her heart to the dearest and best Friend she could ever have.

With tears in her eyes, Roxane pushed at the door. "Debbie," she said, finding the girl in a little heap on the floor in the corner of the restroom. "I love you, Debbie. I do. You have a real friend in me."

"Please, Roxane, don't bother yourself about me," she sobbed. "Honestly, sometimes I wish I'd die."

"No, Debbie! No! You aren't ready to die! Your sins aren't forgiven!" Roxane exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Debbie's shoulders and sobbing with the broken-hearted girl.

"I'm so miserable, Roxane. Everywhere we move, I'm ostracized. Sort of like I have the black plague or something. And I can't help it that we're poor. My dad's a cripple and can't find just any kind of work. But we're honest people."

"Debbie, listen to me, please. I know a wonderful Man who, like you, was ostracized by people, too. Many of them, people with whom He was raised! He cares for you and about you. In fact, if you'll allow Him, He'll come into your heart and save you and be an ever-present guest in your soul."

Debbie blew her nose and stopped crying. "Roxane," she said softly and sincerely, "you'll hardly believe this, but I've longed to talk to you. To ask you why you were so wonderful and so . . . so unruffled in spirit and so always-the-same. But you always disappeared immediately after school."

"I have to get home to help mother, Debbie. We're poor people, too, and do many odd jobs to help pay for our heat and food and lights, not to mention the note on the house. But God is good to us. Every month, each and every bill is paid and we always have enough to eat, too. I'm sorry I haven't gotten acquainted with you the way I'd liked to have done."

"Why are you so different, Roxane? I know you said you're a Christian . . ."

"That's the reason, Debbie. A Christian is someone who is like Jesus in every way., living, talking, walking, giving, doing, or whatever. To be a Christian, one must first realize that he (or she~ is a sinner and then confess those sins to Jesus Christ and ask Him to

"Please, Roxane, you don't have to go into detail; I've realized for years that I needed something, or Someone. So, please, show me the way."

"I was trying to, Debbie. But maybe you'd rather have me pray for you..."

"Will you, please?"

Debbie's eyes were great, deep pools of tearful desire and longing.

"Gladly," came Roxane's broken reply as Debbie turned and was on her knees.

It was a sacred moment--a time of repentance and confession for Debbie, all spontaneous and broken, and a time of glorious and blessed victory, too.

Hugging her soundly after her genuine heart change, Roxane said, "Debbie! It just dawned on me; we'll both have a birthday on the same day. Today, I'm seventeen. So when I'm eighteen next year, if the Lord spares my life that long, you'll be exactly one year old in the Lord!"

"That's great, Roxane. But the greatest thing of all is that my heart is satisfied and peaceful and happy. At last! Thanks for letting your light shine. This is the greatest day of my life. Believe me, it is!"

"Mine, too," Roxane said between tears and seeing the glorious prospects that were in store for her friend.

She thought of the pink carpet then and knew that, Lord willing, Debbie would appreciate it as much as she. Her mother's home would be Debbie's, too, whenever she wanted to come. And Mrs. Wingate may even be able to find work for her!