

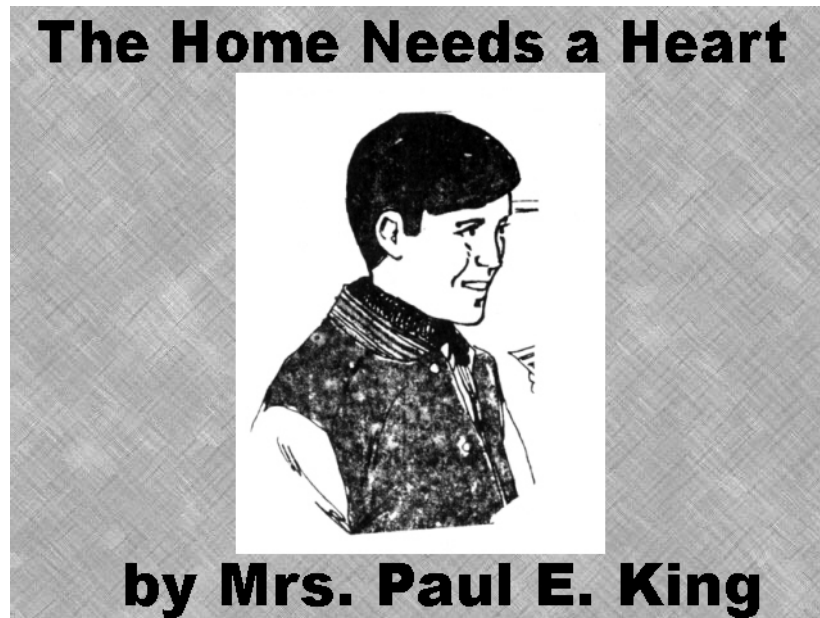
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THE HOME NEEDS A HEART
By Mrs. Paul E. King

It was one of those cloudless, crystal-clear, windless October days that often presage the first killing frost. I had my suspicions, and found they were justified: "The radio is predicting a hard frost for low-lying areas tonight," Mom said when I got inside the kitchen and put my armload of school books on the desk between the kitchen and the living room.

It was exactly 3:49 P.M. and already, Mom was out doing all the work that had to be done before the sun set and the frost came in -- cutting gladiolas and dahlias and mums and bringing them in to fill vases on all the tables -- cutting loose the melons, peppers, gourds, cucumbers, squashes and pumpkins and piling them in a large heap by the garden fence, before pulling up all the onions that remained beneath the ground.

Out in the field, I heard the noise of the tractor, and the corn blower humming and whining like a sick siren down across the road as Dad and Uncle John fed the bundles of still green field corn into it.

Changing quickly into work clothes and grabbing a quick snack of parched soy beans . . . freshly-parched by Mom. . . I donned an old jacket, slapped my ever-handy hat on my head then raced outside to bring the piled-up vegetables from their place by the garden fence into the house, to create a duplicate of the pile in the middle of the screened-in back porch, where they stayed until we could carry them down into the cellar for storing. For tonight, they would have to wear a heavy tarp covering on top of them on the porch floor. There were too many other things to be done, I was sure.

Back and forth, back and forth, between the garden and the porch I went, hauling in the armloads of squashes and pumpkins and gourds and melons, feeling the night grow darker and the air grow colder, all the while listening to the crickets up in the meadow singing their last song. There was a kind of sadness to it all, watching the red sun go down and the orange moon come up in the clear, cold, frost-killing sky and listening to the last feeble chirps of the crickets, so much slower than they had been several months ago.

But there was also a kind of feeling that was half exhilaration and half desperation, knowing that as I raced back and forth between garden and house, I was racing against a creeping, invisible force, and was likely, this year, to win the race, God helping me.

Dad and Mom and Uncle John and I were sometimes a little hollow-eyed by the end of harvest time, but the race had to be won: We are not wealthy people, monetarily, so we work the ground, till the soil, plant and await the harvest from God's beneficent hand, then gather and glean from dawn to dark.

"You've got it well under way," Mom said, plunging the corn cutter she'd been using for freeing stems from fruit and vegetables, into a juicy-red melon. "Here, Jack," she said kindly, "have a piece. Nothing better than watermelon from the garden and fresh from the vine," she added, cutting a chunk of meaty goodness out of the center and handing it to me.

"Do we have time to stop?" I asked hesitantly, feeling the penetrating cold creeping ever nearer.

"We'll take time, Son. God intended for His creatures to enjoy His bounty, and He knows I like nothing better than eating cold melons right from the patch. Here," she said, slicing another generous hunk from the melon's very heart.

"Mm-m!" I murmured in sheer ecstasy, as my teeth sank into the very first bite.

"Good, isn't it?" Mom said, stooping over at a slight angle so the juice fell to the ground and not on her ample calico apron.

"The best we've ever had, Mom!"

Mom laughed, then took another bite. "We say this almost every year," she remarked. "And I guess it does taste the very best; or either we've forgotten just how good last year's things tasted. More?" she asked.

"Thanks. No. I want every bit of these vegetables to be salvaged from the frost tonight. And Dad and Uncle John may need me, too. The milking's not done, I'm sure; not if they've been working that corn up. So I better get back to work."

"Maybe I can help with the milking, Jack. This is what families are for; to work and pull together. Wouldn't have near so many split-ups between husbands and wives if each had a bit of elasticity about them and worked together. Sure, it may mean giving up a bit of enjoyment or pleasure . . . something you planned to do and even like to do . . . but it's worth it. Your Dad's sure good at helping me when he can."

I smiled at Mom and, after thanking her for the melon, and for her kindness and thoughtfulness, I resumed the job of doing a disappearing act

to that mammoth pile of good things to eat. It must be total and complete, I decided, and not until every last thing was stacked away safely would I be satisfied.

Gathering the harvest meant we could go on living, God willing. It meant having a chance to feel the warm gentle breezes of another May, another June. Much of our sustenance was standing in row upon shining row on mom's jar cupboard shelves, to be sure; but these things were every bit as much a part, and equally as important, as were those delicious, delectable canned things on the shelves in the cellar.

Feeling the cold, frosty air nip my nose and prick my ears, I quickly pulled the ear lappers of the overworn hat down and hurried for all that was within me.

Finished at last, I called to Mom through a crack of the partially-opened kitchen door, that I was going to check on Dad and Uncle John and if they didn't need me I'd get straight to the milking.

"I'll help you milk, Jack," she said again, "as soon as I have supper underway."

"You don't need to, Mom; I can take care of it."

"Twenty cows, Jack!"

"It's too much on you," I answered, closing the door on Mom's, "Nonsense, Son. Pure nonsense!"

Whistling, I started down the dirt road toward the cornfield, seeing the dim outline of the corn blower in the pale moonlight.

The temperature was taking a quick and rapid downward plunge: I felt it as surely and as unmistakably as I knew my nose was on my face between my two green-gray eyes.

For all its nippy, biting coldness, the whole spectrum and setting before me did something for me. I felt my steps quicken . . . my pulses, too . . . and I began, unconsciously, to inhale long, deep draughts of the deliciously-clean,

pure-smelling air. My entire being seemed to come suddenly very much alive; my senses acutely revitalized and keen.

"Need any help?" I asked Dad, pulling myself up to where he was busily feeding the corn into the blower, shouting to make myself heard.

"The milking all done?" Dad shouted back, wiping a dust-begrimed hand across his perspiring forehead.

"Not yet. Mom and I just finished gathering in the good things from the garden. Thought maybe you needed me down here before I got at the milking, Dad."

Jumping down off the piece of machinery, Dad said, "Better get at the milking, Jack. It's not good if we wait too long. Hard on the cows."

"OK, Dad, will do," I said, dropping quickly to the ground and heading up the road toward the barn.

The cows let me know, the minute I rattled the handle on the door, that they were greatly displeased with me for making them wait so long for their supper and not ridding them of their heavy burden of milk. They mooed and bellowed and made such a noise that I could hardly hear myself speak as I said soothingly, "Here I come. Supper's on the way."

I jumped across the partition of an empty stall into the corridor that ran parallel with the two long rows of cow stanchions and started dumping grain from the big grain box into each feedbox, finishing by filling each manger full of fragrant smelling alfalfa hay. Then, I began to milk.

I had just finished the fourth cow and emptied the milk into the stainless steel tank in the milk house, when I heard the low chink of mom's milk pail against the concrete floor. It gave me a good feeling.

"Where do I begin?" she questioned, looking down the long rows of beautiful guernseys as they munched contentedly on their hay.

"Whippet's next on this side," I told her, pointing to cow number five. "I'll take Starbright, if you take Whippet. Or if you'd rather have Starbright . . ."

"Makes me no difference, Jack. Each must be milked, so Whippet's mine."

The cows were all named, and though, to some people they either all looked alike or bore close resemblance to each other, to those of us who knew them their personalities and mannerisms were as diverse and distinctly different as were those of humans. Starbright, for instance, had a way of swishing her tail when she became impatient and thought you should have finished milking her long ago, until you felt the sting of the violent swish. Whippet was as docile and gentle as a dove . . . that's why I wanted Mom to milk her.

"Mom," I said, when I was half finished with Starbright, "I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead, Son."

It was always this way at our home. Neither Dad nor Mom was ever too busy or too preoccupied to listen to me, and almost eighteen though I was, I never felt it above nor beneath my young manhood to consult one or the other -- or both -- of them when anything crucial popped up in my life. While the thing I wanted to tell to mom about wasn't exactly crucial, I felt it could lead to something of that nature and degree if I became too involved and wasn't positively sure of God's will in it.

"You know Julia Blankenship?"

"Course I do, Jack. She's a fine girl, from all the things I hear."

"I've been thinking of asking her to go steady. Do you approve?"

"She'll make you a fine girl, Jack, and yes, I approve. But why did you ask me?"

"Because I trust Dad's and your wise judgment and counsel. Think Dad'll approve?"

"I'm sure he will. But I think it'd be nice if you asked him, the way you did me. A boy needs to talk these things over with his father."

"I was planning on asking him, Mom. But I guess I thought I'd ask you first, 'cause you seem to understand and know and 'see through' women better than we men do."

"Have you done any praying over it, Son?"

"For weeks."

"And how do you feel?"

"Clear."

"Well . . ."

I finished milking Starbright and stood facing Mom. "I feel 'clear as a bell,' Mom. But I just wanted your opinion, too. You and Dad have often said that a body can want a thing so badly until he allows his emotions to lead and dictate the way, thinking it's the will of God when it's definitely not the will of God . . . just all his emotions. I wanted to make sure it's not my emotions."

"God will never lead you wrongly, Jack, always remember this. So keep the prayer lines clear and pray with an open heart and mind. Then, in your dating, never let or you will lose all resistance to righteousness and purity. I realize, in this loose-living age and society, that your classmates will make sport of you and laugh you to scorn. Pay them no heed, Son. Keep your mind and thoughts clean, your heart pure and holy, your morals spotless and unspotted and someday, when you marry the girl of God's choosing for you, yours will be a happy home."

"Like the one I was born into!" I exclaimed, hurrying away to empty the pails of frothy-white milk into the stainless steel cooler and thanking God that my home had a "heart." A heart, with God at its center and two of the finest parents any boy could ever wish to have as God's earthly helpers in leading that soul toward Heaven.