TIME TO FORGIVE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Dorothy Singleton brushed a stray wisp of hair from her forehead, then stood for a moment watching the children across the street. How happy and carefree they were, she thought, trying to push the nagging thought that she really should go to see her father, out of her mind. But the thought remained, stubbornly so.
She walked to a nearby chair and sat down. Her world had been so tranquil . . . so peaceful . . . until four days ago, when Helene Sprauls had called her and told her she had seen Dorothy's father.

"It . . . it can't be, Helene," she remembered having answered in shocked voice "Dad disappeared fourteen years ago. No one has seen him since. I mean, no one from around here."

"But I saw him, Dorothy. It's a fact. He looked tired and . . . and old. I followed him in the car . . . he didn't know this, of course . . . and I got his address. I did it for you; thought you'd be glad to know . . ."

Dorothy studied the address now as it stared at her from the end table beside the chair. Suppose she went and discovered Helene was mistaken; that the man only looked like her father but wasn't her father after all. What would she say; "Pardon me, Sir, I thought you were my father?" No. No. That would never do. A child may be able to get by with that sort of thing, but not an adult.

Smelling the spicy goodness of her fruitcakes as they baked inside the oven, she rushed into the kitchen, no nearer the solution to her problem than when it first became a problem.

She removed one of the smaller fruitcakes and turning it upside down . . . out of the pan . . . she set it to cooling on a cake rack. The cakes were her father's favorite, she recalled, wondering why the thought should have projected itself in her already muddled mind.

Until her mother's death, she and her father had always had good rapport and fellowship. But things changed after that.

Dorothy sighed. She should have gone home when Dad called, saying mother was sick, she reasoned and remonstrated. But time, and her budding position with Clarke and Howell, forbade her taking time off to do so. There was so much typing to do; so many contracts to prepare. If only she had known the seriousness of the illness, she thought tearfully now, she would have gone. Mr. Clarke would have granted her an emergency leave of absence. But Dad hadn't told her; all he said was, "Dottie, come home please, your mother's ill and wants to see you."
Tears rolled freely down her cheeks now. She loved her parents. How she loved them! It was through her father's efforts that she had gotten in at Clarke and Howell's. He'd had a friend who was employed there, and knowing there was a vacancy, her dad had mentioned her capabilities to the man, who related the facts to Mr. Clarke. The very next day, she was asked to come in for an interview and the following week, she began working.

Her father was such a good moral man, she reasoned. If he'd have surrendered his heart and life to Jesus, he'd have been the ideal father in the highest sense and meaning of the word. But this is where their closeness and warmness ceased, at, and over, the Christian life: The totally yielded and fully-surrendered life. Her father wanted to hear nothing about it, declaring it was not for "real men"; sissies and women, yes; but men, no!

Now, as on so many other occasions, Dorothy wondered what had embittered her father so; why he seemed almost to loathe anything spiritual and religious. She had asked her mother (several times) about it but her mother knew nothing more than she herself knew, since neither one was a Christian when they had married and religious matters were never discussed. It was after her mother's marvelous conversion and subsequent heart cleansing that her father's bitter attitude was manifested and became a widely known thing.

She slid the cake pan into the hot, sudsy dish water along with the dirty bowls and measuring cups, and as she washed them, they were slowly rinsed by her rapidly falling tears. Remembering an article she had read sometime and somewhere on the cleansing power of tears, she began to laugh. She would be storing away the cleanest dishes in town, she soliloquized with a smile.

She looked at the clock. A few minutes more and the other fruitcakes would be ready to be removed from the oven and set on cake racks for cooling. If she wanted to, she could easily run over to the small seaside town and talk with her father. Better still, she could invite him home for Thanksgiving.

The thought was stimulating and exciting for Dorothy until she remembered that after the funeral service for her mother, her father had declared emphatically, "I don't ever want to see you again. Not ever!"
The words, so cold, so driving and full of bitterness, stung and lashed her now as then. If the man was her father, would he receive her? she wondered. Or was the bitterness still there? Well, there was only one way to find out.

She checked the fruitcakes and removed them from the oven. Washing the few remaining pans, she made her decision -- she would run into Gull's Cove and satisfy her mind. After all, it was the Christian who was admonished to go the "second mile." And while she hadn't done anything willfully nor maliciously to make her father the way he was, she, as God's child, must take the initiative.

Hurrying to the bedroom, she changed her clothes and got the car keys off the dresser. Then she locked the house and headed the car out of town. Bill wouldn't be home from work till five so she should have plenty of time to accomplish her mission, and the two children were with Bill's parents for the day.

The road along the coast was natty and in need of repairs as usual, the much freezing and thawing making it thus. Dorothy drove carefully and cautiously, avoiding as many ruts and holes as possible, conjuring visions of warm sunny days instead of the sub-zero temperature and the wall of snow on either side of the narrow road.

In spite of the bad stretch of road, she made good time and arrived in Gull's Cove safe and sound, but not without butterflies in her stomach. Checking the address on the slip of paper Helene had given her, she was soon parked in front of the house. It was a neat, little cottage, the kind she would have expected her father to choose, with a low, white picket fence keeping a snow-blanketed yard inside.

She walked to the gate, then hurried along the cleanly-shoveled sidewalk to the front door and knocked, listening and waiting. Then she heard someone coming. The door opened and there he stood in his shirt sleeves, holding a half-empty cup of tea in his hand.

"So it's you!" he exclaimed. "What do you want? I thought I told you I didn't want to see you again. Not ever!"
Ignoring the sharp words, Dorothy stepped inside the door without being invited, tears brimming out of her eyes. "Dad!" she exclaimed in glad surprise. "Oh, I'm so happy I found you! I wanted to see you. Do you mind? Do you, Dad? Here, I brought you a fruitcake. Your favorite."

Clearing his throat and closing the door, he said, "Well, since you're here, you may as well have a cup of tea with me. Wait till I turn the burner on under the tea kettle."

"Let me do it, please, Daddy."

Again, he cleared his throat. "If you insist," he half grunted, leading the way into the kitchen.

Dorothy noticed the spotlessly-clean floor and well-kept rooms as she followed, but she also noticed a slight limp to her father's walk. "How have you been?" she asked, standing beside him and touching his arm ever so gently. "Everything O.K.?"

He grunted, then replied, "I had a bit of a fall two weeks ago. But I'm better; don't limp nearly so badly as I did."

Turning to face him, Dorothy said, "Dad, I've come to tell you that I love you and that I'm so-o sorry I didn't make it down to see mother before she passed away. I told you this once before; but I want you to hear it again. Forgive me, will you please? I am sorry. I want us to be like we used to be before this happened."

"Well, I still think you should have come when I called you, Dot," he growled, looking away.

"That's just it, Dad, I should have; but I didn't realize it was anything serious. You never told me. And Mr. Clarke said we had to have those contracts ready within ten days. But please forgive me. It's so difficult to forgive myself; but it would help so much if I knew I had your forgiveness."

"Sit down," he said hoarsely.
She sat on one of the kitchen chairs. He took a chair across the table from her. "I guess it's the only right thing to do," he said in a low tone of voice. "Your mother would be pleased. All right, Dot, I'll forgive you."

Rushing to where he sat, Dorothy flung her arms around his neck and cried. "Thanks, Daddy. Thanks much," she said brokenly. "You've lifted a weight off my heart. Now, I want us to be a family again; please come to Bill's and my home for Thanksgiving." "Bill . . .?"

"Yes, Bill. You know, Bill Wise. We've been married seven years."

Suddenly Dorothy's father was laughing. "I used to chase him out of my garden when he was small. Always wanted to pull my onions and radishes before they were half grown. So he got you, did he? I guess his boast to me came true, then. He often told me that someday he was going to marry you. Well, you have my blessing. It's a bit late, I know, but Bill's a fine fellow. Any children?"

"Two. A boy and a girl. William John . . . named after Bill and his father, William, and John, after you. Then there's Esther Ruth, named after Mother and Bill's mom."

"You don't mean it, Dot!" By now the man's eyes were shining. "Then I'm a grandfather and I never knew it. Well, what do you know! How old?" "Johnny's four and Esther's two." "Johnny? Is that what you call him?"

"Right. Bill insisted upon it. Said he wanted to keep your name alive; wanted your grandchildren to know that they had another grandfather."

"Di . . . did they ask about me, Dot? Wonder where I was?" The cup trembled in his hand.

"Many times, Daddy. And always, Bill and I would tell them that someday we'd find you; that Jesus would send you back to us. And He did. They prayed; we prayed."

Silence filled the room. It was almost as if an angel slipped down on silent wings and was hovering nearby.

"Dot . . ."
"Yes, Father?"

"Do you still believe the way you used to about God and . . . and Heaven and . . . Hell?" "Yes, with all my heart."

"Then . . . well, maybe you can help me to find the way, too. I've longed to see you; to go to you and ask you to help me find the peace and joy your mother demonstrated after she had her personal encounter with the Lord; but I was too proud. I've changed, Dot. I feel humbled and broken and so dissatisfied with my life. Show me what to do to have peace. I don't want to go to those two grandchildren without it." "Yes, Father. Gladly."

Not until he had prayed clear through and touched God, did the praying cease. Then prayer turned to praise and glad hallelujahs.

"Now I understand some things about your mother and you that I never could figure out before," he said, weeping joyfully.

"I know you do, Daddy. And I was just now thinking how wonderful it would be for two little grandchildren to come home tonight . . . they're with Bill's folks today . . . and discover an answer to their prayers sitting in our living room. How about it; will you come home with me?"

"That's an easy question to answer, Dot: Yes! But first, tell me how you found me."

"I didn't; Helene Sprauls did. She was over here for something and just happened to see you. No, I'll not say "just happened"; God allowed her to see you in your car. So she followed you here and got the address and gave it to me. She was so excited. I was worried that maybe it wasn't you at all, just someone who resembled you. But I'm glad I was wrong and that it really was you."

"I'm glad, too, Dottie girl. And now if you'll excuse me, I'll change into something a bit more 'grandfatherly conservative' and then we can go."

"Why not pack some extra clothes and spend a couple days, Dad? Or even until next week, when we'll have the turkey and all the trimmings? I'm so happy I found you that I don't want to let you go. Never!"
Kissing her lightly on the cheek, he said, "No need for worry there, dear girl, I'll never disappear again. I'm found and I'm happy. As for staying through Thanksgiving, I believe I'd better come home tomorrow so I can keep check on the water pipes. These cottages aren't insulated like our old home place was. But I'll be over often. Perhaps every day, God willing, and if the blizzards don't hinder me. I want to get acquainted with those name-sakes of ours. Now excuse me, please."

Standing by the kitchen window, Dorothy watched the gulls swoop and dive for food, their wings set hard into the stiff sea breeze. Tears filled her eyes and splashed down her cheeks. The Bible had said, "For everything there is a season," and this was the "season"... the time... for forgiveness. Everything was timed with His time-clock. Yes, everything. Lifting her arms upward, she praised. This would be one of her happiest Thanksgiving Days ever, if not the happiest.

"Ready?" her father asked, coming into the kitchen and taking her by surprise.

"Ready, Dad," she answered, falling in step beside him.